ABBA!

THE DADDY RELATIONSHIP GOD WANTS WITH YOU

By

SUSAN MAAKESTAD

A Thesis Submitted to the Honors College
In Partial Fulfillment of the Bachelor’s Degree
With Honors in
Creative Writing/English

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
MAY 2013

Approved by:

Dr. Peter E. Medine
Department of English
The University of Arizona Electronic Theses and Dissertations
Reproduction and Distribution Rights Form

The UA Campus Repository supports the dissemination and preservation of scholarship produced by University of Arizona faculty, researchers, and students. The University Library, in collaboration with the Honors College, has established a collection in the UA Campus Repository to share, archive, and preserve undergraduate Honors theses.

Theses that are submitted to the UA Campus Repository are available for public view. Submission of your thesis to the Repository provides an opportunity for you to showcase your work to graduate schools and future employers. It also allows for your work to be accessed by others in your discipline, enabling you to contribute to the knowledge base in your field. Your signature on this consent form will determine whether your thesis is included in the repository.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (Last, First, Middle)</th>
<th>MAKKESTAD, SUSAN ABIGAIL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Degree title (eg BA, BS, BSE, BSB, BFA):</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honors area (eg Molecular and Cellular Biology, English, Studio Art):</td>
<td>CREATIVE WRITING/ ENGLISH</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Date thesis submitted to Honors College:

Title of Honors thesis: ABBA: The Daddy Relationship God Wants With You

The University of Arizona Library Release Agreement

I hereby grant to the University of Arizona Library the nonexclusive worldwide right to reproduce and distribute my dissertation or thesis and abstract (herein, the "licensed materials"), in whole or in part, in any and all media of distribution and in any format in existence now or developed in the future. I represent and warrant to the University of Arizona that the licensed materials are my original work, that I am the sole owner of all rights in and to the licensed materials, and that none of the licensed materials infringe or violate the rights of others. I further represent that I have obtained all necessary rights to permit the University of Arizona Library to reproduce and distribute any nonpublic third party software necessary to access, display, run or print my dissertation or thesis. I acknowledge that University of Arizona Library may elect not to distribute my dissertation or thesis in digital format if, in its reasonable judgment, it believes all such rights have not been secured.

☐ Yes, make my thesis available in the UA Campus Repository!

Student signature: [Signature] Date: 18 April 2013

Thesis advisor signature: [Signature] Date: 18 April 2013

☐ No, do not release my thesis to the UA Campus Repository.

Student signature: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________
Abba! The Daddy Relationship God Wants with You

This project is part of a longer book manuscript presenting an in-depth exploration of God’s expressed desire for a Daddy relationship with man. His desire for intimacy in his role as man’s heavenly father is presented in layman’s terms, illuminated with biblical texts and the writings of classical and contemporary authors. These texts reflect God’s desire to call him Abba, and this is a highly specialized term:

Abba is not Hebrew, the language of liturgy, but Aramaic, the language of home and everyday life … Abba is the intimate word of a family circle.

– Thomas A. Smail, The Forgotten Father

A contextual base in the introductory chapter explores God’s covenant relationship with mankind while analyzing institutional obstacles that may impede the intimate parent-child relationship. The more informal tone in the remaining chapters draws parallels between earthly parents’ interaction with, training of and devotion to their own children, as the foundational claim that man is created in the image of God is applied to this setting and the argument for a similar interaction, training and devotion in a relationship between God the Father and his children is advanced and supported.
Chapter One

Understanding *Abba*

*Nondum enim quisquam suum parentem ipse cognovit.*

*It is a wise child that knows his own father.* (Odyssey, 1.216)

**Who is *Abba***?

What is the significance of the term *Abba*? How is it that we find this colloquial Aramaic term dropped casually into the Greek New Testament in connection with no less a personage than God Himself? The most notable factor to recall in coming to terms with Jesus’ use of the word is that *Abba* is a term of decided familial intimacy. In the Greco-Roman period as well as in those preceding it, the term *Abba* was never used by the Jewish community as a form of address for God the Father, since it was perceived as bordering on the blasphemous. The word appears only three times in the New Testament Gospels and Epistles (Mark 14:36; Romans 8:15; and Galatians 4:6). It does not occur at all in either the Hebrew Old Testament or the Septuagint. There is a very simple reason for this: “The use of *Abba* in approaching God greatly transcended Old Testament concepts” (Tenney).

Morphological analyses have established that *Abba* arose as other similar “nursery words” have across the linguistic span, that is, through infants’ syllabic repetition in forming
their first words, most often *mama* and *papa* (Maxey). Yigal Levin gives us an indication of how *Abba* continues to be used up to the present by children in their intimate family setting:

Since Talmudic times, Jews have been using *Abba* as something like "Dad," and still do today. The same for *Em* (Mother) and *Ima* (Mom/Mommy), *Sav* and *Sabba* (Grandfather vs. Granddad). *Savta* (Grandmother) is pronounced the same in Hebrew and Aramaic and so is used for both "Grandmother" and “Grandma.” It's hard to trace when the "Dad" usage began. My guess would be 1-2 centuries CE.

Steeped in centuries of rabbinic liturgy, the concept of Almighty God as Daddy would definitely come as something of a shock to a first century Jew, and this religious distancing of his people from their father God is something for which Jesus took the contemporary religious leaders to task: “For they bind heavy burdens hard to bear, and lay them on men’s shoulders… for you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in” (Matthew 23:4,13).

In this same instance of teaching and warning, he reminds his disciples that the only one who really deserves to be called by the title *Rabbi* is Christ, the Messiah (Matthew 23:8), because in the cultural usage of the day, “rabbis in the Babylonian period were often referred to as ‘Rabbah’ or Rava’… in modern days [this terminology] survives as ‘Abbot’” (Napier). Jesus then went a step further and reminded his followers that the only one who really deserves to be called by the title father is the heavenly father, the one whom Jesus personally knew as *Abba* (Matthew 23:9).
When the disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray he gives them in Matthew 6:9-13 the famous model which opens the Lord’s Prayer: “Our Father who art in heaven,” and he continues on to assure them that “your Father in heaven knows what you need before you ask” (Matthew 6:32). But the usage of the term *Abba* was an obvious indication of an even closer relationship to God than the Jewish people had ever before been familiar with. In the *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, J.D.G. Dunn declares that Jesus was the first Jew to address God in prayer almost exclusively by use of the Aramaic term *Abba*, as he did in his Gethsemane vigil prayer found in Mark 14:36: “And he said, *Abba*, Father, all things (are) possible unto thee; take away this cup from me: nevertheless not what I will, but what thou wilt.”

By far the most pervasive form of address in the Jewish prayers of Jesus’ time was the more formal Hebrew term *Abi* (*my father*). *Abba* was considered far too intimate, and to many its usage was irreverent. Dunn notes that “subsequent scholarship has been unable to contradict the claim that this prayer language of *Abba* was original with Jesus.” This unique usage by Christ of so intimate a term is a strong indication of the hereditary privilege that was granted to its initiator. That Jesus the son has access to his father in the throne room cannot be construed as irreverence, but rather as a foregone conclusion; a family given.

The Orthodox Research Institute calls Jesus’ *Abba* usage “a unique instance in 1st Century Jewish piety,” a usage that profoundly impacted his disciples:

It was an exclusive use to the extent that the early Church was aware that only through Jesus and in His Spirit one could utter that word. That is, she was aware that its use was ultimately reserved to Christ Himself.

Rich Robinson confirms the fact that Jesus went far beyond any other common usage of the time in yet another way. “He never spoke of the Father [to his disciples] as ‘Our Father’ but
rather as ‘My Father and your Father’ (John 20:17). Whereas the Jewish people customarily addressed God as Avi, ‘my father,’ Jesus called Him Abba, ‘Daddy’.”

But the question remains as to whether this usage on his part and the disciples’ is a matter of presumption or entitlement. As a royal subject, U.K. evangelist Glen Scrivener throws light on the royal implications (or lack thereof) drawn from familiar terms of address. Those outside the castle walls may choose to dishonor the Queen by calling her Liz, he says, but they neither have the right to that intimacy nor the access to the privileges that taking such liberties may at first glance imply:

“Liz” is intimate but it doesn’t set me in a particular relationship to her. But if I claim to be family, that’s something else entirely. If the Queen were not only Ma’am but also Mum, that would put me in a very privileged position. As family I am in on what she is in on. As family I can inherit.

Such, in fact, is the privileged position that the Biblical scriptures declare that Jesus offers his believers as God’s adoptive children through the acceptance of his work of substitutionary sacrifice on the cross. This work of the cross is the miracle that liberates the human spirit from bondage to sin and brings the Christian into the family of God by means of adoption: “For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry Abba, Father” (Romans 8:15).

The believer is declared God’s son and heir, a joint heir with Christ, and as God’s beloved child, he partakes of God’s own spirit, which has been passed down from the heavenly father: “And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father” (Galatians 4:6). The Apostle John marvels at this work of grace in his first
epistle: “Behold what manner of love the father hath bestowed on us, that we should be called the children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him” (I John 3:1). John’s epistles are replete with reminders that “our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ” (I John 1:3). The rift is mended and the believer is restored to close relationship with God the father through the adoption of sons and the work of the Holy Spirit:

By his union with Jesus Christ, the believer enters into the same intimacy with the Father. Instead of the fear of bondage, the believer receives “the Spirit of adoption” (Romans 8:15) and enters into “the adoption of sons” (Galatians 4:5). By reason of this sonship, “God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying Abba, Father” (Galatians 4:6). The legal relationship is created by adoption; the intimacy is assured by the entrance of Jesus Christ into our hearts. We then cry, “Abba, Father,” with the Spirit of the Son, as stated in 1 John 1:3 (Vine).

Why Abba Father?

As subjects of the Roman Empire in the district of Galilee, Jesus and his disciples most likely spoke Aramaic with a Galilean dialect, in addition to Hebrew and Koine Greek, and were familiar with all the uses of the Aramaic Abba and the Greek pater (father). As the new Jewish-Christian believers united and the early church emerged, they sought a way to preserve the new intimacy they were promised through their status as joint heirs with Christ, alongside a terminology that would still preserve their reverence and awe of the paternal authority of Almighty God, the father they were now able to approach as his dear children. The early Greek Christians preserved Jesus’ Aramaic Abba intact, representing it as a transliteration in Greek,
Maakestad

αββα, followed by the Greek *pater* πατέρ (Napier). This transformed the double title borrowed from Jesus’ own prayer language, *Abba* Father, into one of simultaneous intimacy and dignity.

'Abba' is the word framed by the lips of infants, and betokens unreasoning trust; 'father' expresses an intelligent apprehension of the relationship. The two together express the love and intelligent confidence of the child. In the *Gamara* (a Rabbinical commentary on the *Mishna*, the traditional teaching of the Jews) it is stated that *slaves* were forbidden to address the head of the family by this title (Shedd).

The further implications of freedom in Christ as opposed to the former slavery by virtue of the bondage of sin gave the early believers even more joy in the use of the intimate term that was forbidden on the lips of slaves. This language of freedom from slavery is used throughout the Pauline epistles:

For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh.

Romans 8:3

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 of sons. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out *Abba*, Father!
Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ.

Galatians 4:4-7

The Apostle Paul emphasizes the fact that sin is the curse of the law and that the Mosaic Law was instituted by God in order to remind the Jews that it was impossible for them to keep it without the grace of God intervening to break the legalistic chain and free the soul from the bondage of sin:

For until the law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come. Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more, so that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Romans 5:13,14,20,21

In that Paul represents the salvation of the believer through Jesus Christ as adoption, he inherently depicts it as an act of grace. In Romans 8:29 he describes Jesus as the firstborn of many brethren, and in Ephesians 1:5-6 he reminds the believer that he is adopted as a son to the praise of the glory of God’s grace, by which God has made the believer accepted in the Beloved (Jesus Christ). Peter goes a step further, reminding believers that God has “begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved for you in heaven” (1 Peter 1:3-4), and
making the declaration that the grace of God has transformed the believers into God’s children in his royal household:

\[
\text{But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own } \\
\text{special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you } \\
\text{out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but } \\
\text{are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have } \\
\text{obtained mercy.} \\
\text{2 Peter 2:9}
\]

As one fortunate little girl was told, adoption means that you grow in your mommy’s heart instead of in her tummy. So do these epistolary writers describe the heart of God the father sending the spirit of adoption to choose to make men children of his kingdom by the work of grace that he ordains through his son Jesus Christ. The spirit of adoption entails acceptance, and it works in the Christian believer to counteract the spirit of rejection, which glowered over the Old Testament Jews like an implacable parent as they toiled under the law, prodding them into following the rule book while knowing they could never measure up to its standards. The Apostle Paul explains that the function of the Mosaic Law was not to be an end in itself, but the means to the end of bringing fallen man back into his right relationship with creator, \textit{Abba:}

\[
\text{But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the } \\
\text{faith which would afterward be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor to } \\
\text{bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has } \\
\text{come, we are no longer under a tutor. For you are all sons of God through } \\
\text{faith in Christ Jesus.} \\
\text{Galatians 3:23-26}
\]
Paul declares that Jesus the son is both the bearer and bestower of God the father’s family name on his earthly sons as they enter into his inheritance by the process of divine adoption: “For this cause I bow my knee to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named” (Ephesians 3:15).

This scripture reveals the father’s acceptance of the believer in Jesus Christ as an integral and living part of the very same family as the Old Testament patriarchs who have already gone before them in the faith, and who now comprise the “great cloud of witnesses” that Hebrews 12:1 describes, from which vantage point they watch to see the family name continued:

These all died in faith [the Old Testament patriarchs], not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland.

Hebrews 11:13-14

How Can the Old Testament God be Abba?

How can we reconcile the loving father who seeks to reach out in tenderness and rescue by adoption with the God who caused Israel to tremble as he thundered out the Law on Mt. Sinai, many may ask. The God of the Old Testament is often depicted as an unapproachable, perpetually angry, implacable tyrant. But even in the Old Testament, God’s frequent judgments were tempered with manifold mercies, and the theme running in the background was his constant
desire to create and adopt a special people, to give that people parental guidance and care, and to
ultimately bring them to himself by means of the grace and redemption he would effectuate.
Consider these Old Testament verses that speak of a father who delights in his offspring:

Proverbs 15:8 says the prayer of the upright is God’s delight, and Zephaniah 3:17 says:
“The Lord your God in your midst, the Mighty One, will save; He will rejoice over you with
gladness. He will quiet you with His love. He will rejoice over you with singing.” Through the
prophet Isaiah God promises personal as well as surrogate fatherly care:

Behold, I will lift My hand in an oath to the nations, and set up My standard
for the peoples; they shall bring your sons in their arms, ad your daughters
shall be carried on their shoulders; Kings shall be your foster fathers, and
their queens your nursing mothers; they shall bow down to you with their
faces to the earth, and lick up the dust of your feet. Then you will know that
I am the Lord, for they shall not be ashamed who wait for me. All flesh
shall know that I, the Lord, am your Savior, and your Redeemer, the Mighty
One of Jacob.

Isaiah 49:22,23,26

A good father brings rebuke and imposes consequences for unhealthy behavior in order
to bring his children into new levels of maturity. As they grow and learn to a certain degree and
begin to spread their wings – perhaps a bit prematurely – the father may frequently find the need
to put them in their place as their self-perception outstrips the reality of their remaining
unperceived deficiencies. Or, to put it in the words of Mark Twain: “When I was a boy of 14, my
father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have him around. But when I got to be 21, I was
astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years.” In the Old Testament, Job stands as the quintessential example of God’s dealings with man as father, revealed in his commitment to man’s maturity.

Job was living the life of a self-satisfied spiritual adolescent. He had achieved a level of spiritual maturity in that he understood enough to respect and obey and love and honor God, and in that he understood that the character of God was one of goodness no matter what appearances might be to the contrary. But he was still immature enough to believe that his measure of godliness made him his own shining light; that with his little bit of understanding and a firm position of self-righteousness he had arrived at a position from which he could challenge God’s authority and judgment. Surely, Job thought, he had arrived.

Undeniably, Job knew a great deal about God. “Your hands have made me and fashioned me, an intricate unity… and knit me together with bones and sinews,” he says in chapter 10:8, 11, demonstrating a grasp of the design of the human body that we are still exploring in the 21st century. He knows that even “those who provoke God are secure in what God has provided by his hand” (12:6), but he is now among that number as he loses it all and clamors for justice. Now he accuses God. God has been unjust. If God were only a man, Job says, I’d take him to court right now and settle the whole matter (9:32).

After listening to Job’s complaints God at last brings the universal parental rebuke to bear on his adolescent son: How did I ever manage before you came along? After asking Job to refresh his memory regarding what part it was, exactly, that he had in the creation of the world, God reminds Job that the Lord himself is the one who puts wisdom into man’s mind (38:36). He points out that Job has taken that wisdom to the point where he thinks so much of himself that he’s become arrogant and self-righteous; that he has arrived to the point where he is ready to
condemn God in order to justify himself (40:8). As Job repents, he admits he’s been babbling on about things he knows nothing about. He has spent all his time holding forth in what he perceived to be great wisdom, but now he’s remembered man’s position of humility by virtue of a momentary glimpse of God’s majesty:

Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes.

Job 42:3,5,6

The kernel of truth at the heart of Job’s story is that whatever it takes (and at times it may take a good deal) God does care enough about man to deal with him as a loving father would his dearly beloved son. As Job’s one true friend Elihu reminded him:

Man is also chastened with pain on his bed, and with strong pain in many of his bones, so that his life abhors bread, and his soul succulent food; his flesh wastes away from sight, and his bones stick out which once were not seen.
Yes, his soul draws near the Pit, and his life to the executioners. But if there is a messenger for him, a mediator, one among a thousand, to show man His uprightness, then He is gracious to him, and says, ‘Deliver him from going down to the Pit; I have found a ransom.’

Job 33:19-24
Job, too, recognizes the need for a mediator and a ransom to be found for man’s condition. “Oh, that one might plead for a man with God, as a man pleads for his neighbor!” he says (16:21); “Nor is there any mediator between us” (9:33).

The Hebrew Old Testament account relates that God created man in order to enjoy a family relationship with him, and that when man broke off this relationship through disobedience and rebellion, a rift occurred that necessitated repair. This is the situation that the early Christian believers found remedied by putting their faith in Jesus Christ as the ransom for their souls, the mediator between God and man, and the firstborn of many brethren who brought them back into right relationship with Abba.

For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.

1 Timothy 2:5-6

For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings, for both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren.

Hebrews 2:10-11

My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.

1 John 2:1-2
Moreover, until this ransom and mediation could be achieved by means of the New Testament or Covenant, God continually sought throughout the time of the Old Covenant to separate his children out for teaching by any means, whether by conditional promises and correlative rewards, nudges and rebukes via the prophets, or full-on disciplinary measures such as removing them *temporarily* from a position of dominance among the nations, and even from the Promised Land. But since God had included the Promised Land as part of the legal description of property contained in his covenant oath with his chosen people, such a removal could never be permanent. Although several hundred years might pass, the land must ultimately be restored to the people who were bound to him by the covenant, and therefore the use of the sanctified real estate engaged in such disciplinary measures could not stand indefinitely:

> Yet for all that [their sins of disobedience], when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away, nor shall I abhor them, to utterly destroy them and break My covenant with them, for I am the Lord their God. But for their sake I will remember the covenant of their ancestors.

*Leviticus 26:44-45*

Thus says the Lord, who gives the sun for a light by day, the ordinances of the moon and the stars for a light by night, who disturbs the sea, ad its waves roar (The Lord of hosts is His name): if those ordinances depart from before Me, says the Lord, then the seed of Israel shall also cease from being a nation before Me forever.

*Jeremiah 31:35-36*
The fact that the Jews of the Diaspora remain an identifiable nation despite being scattered throughout the world – and that a portion of that unique people has chosen in the modern reckoning of years to repopulate the biblical land of promise after centuries of exile – stands as stark, modern-day evidence that God continues even in the twenty-first century to uphold his most ancient covenant on record with man. When the Apostle Paul references the Law, he is speaking of the Mosaic Covenant; but God’s original covenant was with Abraham.

**What is the Abrahamic Covenant?**

According to the Jewish Encyclopedia, the Hebrew word for covenant, *berit* or *b’rit*, derives from *barah*, a root meaning to cut. Herodotus and other historians of the time record that the covenanters most often cut their arms and mingled and drank their blood, thus declaring themselves blood brothers for life (a custom still practiced in certain parts of the United States and in other countries). As the drinking of human blood became increasingly objectionable to the Hebrews, they transferred the cutting of the covenant from humans to animals:

A rite expressive of the same idea is (see Jer. xxxiv. 18; compare Gen. xv. *et seq.*) the cutting of a sacrificial animal into two parts, between which the contracting parties pass, showing thereby that they are bound to each other; the eating together of the meat, which usually follows, reiterating the same idea... The eating and drinking together became in itself the means of covenanting, while the act was solemnized by the invocation of the Deity in an oath, or by the presence of representative symbols of the Deity, such as seven animals, or seven stones or wells, indicative of the seven astral
deities; whence "to be bound by the holy seven" as an equivalent for "swearing" in pre-Mosaic times (see Gen. xxi. 27, xxvi. 28, xxxi. 54; Herodotus, iii. 8; Josh. ix. 14; II Sam. iii. 12-20; W. R. Smith, l.c. pp. 252 et seq.) (Jewish Encyclopedia).

When Abram left his home in Ur of the Chaldees, he renounced the idol worship of his father Terah’s house in favor of his pursuit of and obedience to the invisible God. As Abram honored God, God chose to honor Abram and of him make that special nation of his choosing to be his “peculiar treasure above all people of the earth” (Exodus 19:5; Psalm 135:4). Hence Abram’s new name, Abraham (father of many). Abraham was not a Jew, since the term Jew derives from the name of his great-grandson, Judah, the son of Jacob (Israel). Neither was he a Gentile, since without Jews there cannot be Gentiles: a Gentile is simply someone who is not Jewish. But Abraham became the first Hebrew patriarch of God’s chosen family which would later be known as the children of Israel and the Jewish nation, and with him God made an unconditional and irrevocable covenant known as the Abrahamic Covenant. Rabbi Mottel Baleston explains:

The set of scriptures in Genesis [12:1-3, 15:1-21, 17:1-21] where God speaks His eternal promises to Abraham, Isaac & Jacob, bringing into existence the Jewish people, form what we might think of as a 'legal incorporation' of the Nation of Israel. The Covenant was 'unconditional', in that no conditions of obedience were required from the Jewish people for it to continue in full force. This Covenant continues to be cited throughout the entire Bible as the basis for God's relationship with Israel. While Abraham had a number of children, the Covenant line ran through Isaac alone. In the
same way, the line was through only one of Isaac's sons, Jacob, and not through Esau (Gen 28:13-15). Jacob had 12 sons, and the biblical definition of a Jew is a person who is a biological descendant of one of those 12 sons.

Baleston further clarifies that the Abrahamic Covenant is the “written form of the statement and promise of God whereby he creates the nation of Israel, the Jewish people, starting with Avraham Avinu (Abraham our father).”

God deliberately sets out to make this an unconditional covenant by making the oath in force in the covenant entirely one-sided. Abraham presents the animals for the sacrifice and divides them in half, laying the halves out as prescribed for both the covenanters to walk between, but God makes arrangements to assure all the promises proceed from him:

Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror and great darkness fell upon him. Then He said to Abram:

‘Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years. And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions…. But in the fourth generation they shall return here.’ And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces. On the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying: ‘To your descendants I have given this land.’

Genesis 15: 12-14, 16,18
Before Abraham has any children, God has already planned to bring about the judgment of Egypt through them, and then establish them as a mighty nation in the land of promise. In Genesis chapter 17 the Lord God reaffirms his covenant with Abraham, and institutes the circumcision, the sign of the covenant that represents the cutting of blood on man’s side of the covenant. The Jewish Encyclopedia notes that along with the keeping of the Sabbath, the circumcision represented the foremost factor in the unification of the Jews in exile:

Special stress was laid on circumcision and the Sabbath during the Exile as the signs of the Israelitish covenant (Ps. lvi. 4-6), and they were regarded as the bulwarks of the faith in the Maccabean era (I Macc. i. 15, 45-48). In the first place stands circumcision (Shak. 135a; Mek., Yitro, ed. Weiss, 71), also designated "berito shel Abraham abina" (the covenant with our father Abraham) (Abot iii. 17); and in the liturgy, in a passage dating from tannaitic times, "berit kodesh" (holy covenant).

In addition to granting ownership of the Land of Israel to Abraham’s descendants, the Abrahamic Covenant establishes God’s protection for the Nation of Israel in that he promises to bless those that bless Israel and curse those who curse Israel. As for Israel’s own obedience, God establishes a unique bond with them that will endure regardless of their faithfulness to the covenant or to the subsequent Mosaic Law. “God does promise to bless them,” says Baleston, “not because of any obedience to the Mosaic Covenant, but rather because of His relationship to them through the Abrahamic Covenant.”

An interesting side note is that God also makes promises to Abraham’s descendants through his son Ishmael. “God does have a concern for the descendants of Abraham through
Hagar, Ishmael and his Arab offspring,” notes Baleston. “To them God gives the land east of the land he gives to the Nation of Israel, as is clearly seen in Genesis 16:7-16.”

The Abrahamic Covenant has served from generation to generation as the glue that binds together and preserves the nation of Israel, guaranteeing its physical survival and its mission to revere and preserve the word of God and bring forth his Messiah, who would reinstate God’s relationship with his children. In fact, Baleston says, the covenant is the legal basis for the sending of the Messiah Yeshua, as evidenced by Luke 1:67-73:

In the New Covenant narrative of the birth of Messiah Yeshua, His uncle Zechariah, serving as a Jewish Priest in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, declared that the birth of Yeshua was a fulfillment of the promise that was stated in the Abrahamic Covenant: 

... for through you all the nations of the world will be blessed” (Gen 12:3). It was through the descendant of Abraham, Yeshua, that the nations (Gentiles) were blessed with the ability to have sin atoned for and to enter the Kingdom of God.

The Apostle Paul, looking back over the intervening centuries and speaking from his base of scriptural study at the feet of Rabbi Gamaliel and as a Pharisee who thoroughly knows the law, concurs:

Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, ‘And to seeds,’ as of many, but as of one, “And to your Seed,” who is Christ. And this I say, that the law, which was four hundred and thirty years later, cannot annul the covenant that was confirmed before by God in Christ, that it should make the promise of no effect. For if the inheritance is
of the law, it is no longer of promise, but God gave it to Abraham by promise.

Galatians 3:16-18

Why a New Covenant?

As Paul indicates, the Mosaic Law could not annul the covenant. The law, as noted previously, was God’s highest standard carved in stone, to which man could never attain, and was given to man that he might realize his deficiencies. As the Apostle James observes, to be guilty in one point of the Law is to be guilty of all (James 2:9-11), and we should rejoice in that under the new law of adoption we may become part of God’s family where “mercy triumphs over judgment” (2:13). The Abrahamic Covenant was reconfirmed with Israel several times. When God brought Israel up out of Egypt after four hundred years as he had promised, he renewed his covenant with Abraham’s descendants when he gave them the law on Mount Sinai. The tablets of the law became the Word of the Covenant, and were kept in the Ark of the Covenant:

This Abrahamitic covenant, expressive of the religious character of the descendants of Abraham as the people of Yhwh, the one and only God, was renewed on Mount Sinai when, before the giving of the Law, Israel as a people pledged itself to keep His covenant (Ex. xix. 8). After the giving of the Law Moses sprinkled "the blood of the covenant sacrifice" half upon the people and half upon the altar of the Lord (Ex. xxiv. 6-8), to signify the mystical union of Israel and its God. Of this "everlasting" Sinaitic covenant
between God and Israel the Sabbath is declared to be the sign forever (Ex. xxxi. 13-17). (Jewish Encyclopedia).

Subsequent renewals of the covenant were initiated on the earthly side of the pact by men who rededicated themselves and their nation to a refocused keeping of the law in an effort to reinstate severed relationships due to disobedience and departure from God:

Four times in the history of Israel this covenant of Sinai was renewed: by Moses in the plains of Moab (Deut. xxix. 1, 9); by Joshua before his death (Josh. xxiv. 25); by the high priest Jehoiada after the idolatrous Queen Athaliah had been deposed and young Jehoash proclaimed king (II Kings xi. 17); and finally by King Josiah after the book of the Law had been found in the Temple and "all the words of the book of the covenant" had been read before all the people (II Kings xxiii. 2, 3). (Jewish Encyclopedia).

Rabbi Baleston says that the Abrahamic Covenant remains in effect even though the Mosaic Covenant (the Law) has been broken: “Because of its unconditional nature, the Abrahamic Covenant cannot be broken by any disobedience on the part of the Jewish people. But the Jewish prophet Jeremiah presents the Mosaic Covenant as being so broken as to necessitate a New Covenant being given (Jeremiah 31:31-33).”

The verses referred to in Jeremiah describe Father God’s fix for man’s broken end of the agreement; the remedy that will bring his people back to him through the proper channels of family relationship:
Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah— not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

Jeremiah 31:31-33

In the New Covenant, there are no rule books on stone tablets. God’s holy DNA now resides in the believer, giving spiritual information with no effort on man’s part, and so the new creation is achieved at last in man’s spirit as he is growing into spiritual maturity and becoming like Abba. Consider for a moment the effortless similarity inherent in sonship. You can’t alter family resemblance because it’s pre-programmed inside you. The Abba relationship can only be repaired by giving the people a new heart and a new mind and new DNA that matches God’s.

Man is made in the image of his father just as children bearing a father’s DNA resemble him. This is a unique gift to mankind that elevates him beyond the scope of animal life. Nowhere on the face of the Earth does there exist an animal that possesses the instinctive creative urge to paint, sculpt, write, or invent. No animal drives itself to the point of exhaustion to solve the dilemmas facing its species. No animal reflects on its existence and determines to use its lifespan to benefit others. No animal lives to leave a legacy or to impact the future. No animal seeks a relationship with its Creator.
Moreover, humans are the only beings that ponder life beyond the grave, because as Solomon tells us in Ecclesiastes 3:11, God has put “eternity in their hearts.” This is what has been described as the God-shaped hole in the heart of man; the magnetic force that relentlessly attracts him to reunite with Abba. It is through the spirit of adoption in Jesus Christ, the firstborn of many brethren, that the spiritual identity is to be established in the family of God. True spiritual sonship in God’s family is only achieved through the Holy Spirit, the Apostle Paul says:

The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God, and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ,

if indeed we suffer with him, that we may also be glorified together.

Romans 8:14-17

Abraham believed God, says the covenant account, and it was counted to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6). Yet man may feel he doesn’t need God because he believes he has made his own way and has achieved everything important in his life on his own, without God. So whatever man has he may perceive as nothing more than a paid debt: I did it all, I deserve it all, and if there even is a God, he owes me. But the God-shaped hole is there because the New Covenant has written God’s law on man’s heart. The Apostle Paul makes the point that if Abraham had been justified by his own works, he would have had something to boast about. But Abraham knew that his righteousness came up short, and that he needed God’s grace. He needed Abba to bend down and meet him more than halfway, like the loving father he wants to be for man, and fix what’s broken:
Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace, but as
debt. But to him who does not work, but believes on him who justifies
the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness.

Romans 4:4-5

This same grace he extends to the believer. While we were yet sinners (Romans 5:8),
while we were yet afar off (Ephesians 2:13), aliens and enemies of God (Colossians 1:21),
without hope and strangers from the covenant of promise (Ephesians 2:12), that’s when he put in
our adoption papers and gave us a full inheritance as his royal children, presenting the believer in
Christ blameless and above reproach:

That at the time you were without Christ, being aliens from the
commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise,
having no hope and without God in the world, but now in Christ Jesus you
who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. Now
therefore you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens
with the saints and members of the household of God.

Ephesians 2:12,13,19

Paul says in I Corinthians 13:11-12: “When I was a child I thought as a child and spoke
as a child and understood as a child.” This assertion is thrown right into the mix in the great
Corinthian Love Chapter, and at first glance seems incongruous with the context. But on close
analysis it becomes apparent that Paul is talking about his growing perception of Abba’s love.
An infant benefits from its father’s love, care and embrace without the foundation of a reciprocal recognition and relationship; a toddler and even a teenager enjoys a relationship based on only a limited understanding of the parent’s character and love. Paul compares the growth of the child’s awareness of a parent’s love with incomplete understanding of the believer who grows and matures in his relationship with God until he discovers its full impact for himself.

That Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height – and to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Ephesians 3:17-19

Only an adult who has matured and become a parent can fully understand a parent’s love. By the same token, we must grow and mature in our relationship with God along with our siblings in the household of faith in order to finally arrive at a point where we may fully understand the love of God, which passes all human understanding. Then the immediate response of endearment will erupt from our innermost beings as we, too, cry out: Abba!
Chapter Two

He Loves Me This Big

I was saved in 1967 – just a few short months after my bat mitzvah and my parents’ divorce – and have experienced firsthand the spiritual Band-Aids that well-meaning people tend to slap on our soul’s deepest gashes. Somehow they never quite heal the wounds. They wind up dangling from one anchor point and sooner or later they fall off, leaving us to run the risk of infection. That gives us a choice.

We can choose to dwell on our mess – wallowing in disappointment and disillusionment and concluding that we’ve been dropped yet again in the quagmire – and thus emerge with a dose of gangrene and some really ugly scars. For my part, I decided the cost of cosmetic surgery really wasn’t worth it, so I quit hoping in people and took my chances trusting my Daddy God. To my unbounded surprise and joy I found he’s just waiting to show himself strong for me and that he’ll never let me down! Discovering just how awesome your Daddy really is and how comforting his great, big arms can feel around you will see you through many times of sorrow and will drag you out of the deepest pit – if you’ll just let him.

Having been a parent myself now – a mom and a grandma, even yet! – I can say that from the other side of the fence it’s easier to see how it’s just not right to hold a parent’s mistakes against them: we’re all gonna make plenty of them somewhere. James Dobson said, “Parenting is a guilty affair, as not one of us knows how to accomplish the task perfectly.” Since there’s no Parenting 101 where you go in clueless and come out the other end doing everything
perfectly (I wish!), we all wind up learning on our kids – poor kids. But God’s grace is sufficient to fill in all our gaps, cracks and bottomless crevasses. I really do thank him for being there for us and for our kids and for helping us all to survive each other.

When I grow up I want to be King David. I’m an avid reader of the Psalms. David had some pretty hairy times, too, and as you read through, you find out how totally human and real he is. Here’s a guy who’s almost as schizophrenic as I am. Jumping from one song to the next you find him either up on the highest peak or down in the deepest ditch. He grabs his hankie and bawls his eyes out; then all at once he rallies, wipes his nose and beats himself up over it: “Why are you cast down, O my soul? Hope in God, for I will yet praise Him; Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits, who redeems your soul from hell and heals all your diseases; the Lord is my light and my salvation: whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life: of whom shall I be afraid?”

Boy, there’s a guy who knew who he knew. Over the years, as I’ve grown to know my daddy in heaven a little better myself – a process which I expect will take the rest of my natural life as he’s beyond the scope of what I can ever comprehend – I’ve been set totally free by finding out that he’s the one who knows me best and yet he still loves me more than anyone. That’s a really redeeming thought! This isn’t just some casual passer-by observing the outward veneer of civilization and sanity I try to portray in my most glowing moments with my 5-watt bulb, but the one who sees straight through it with his X-ray vision – down to the hairiest goriest truths of my innards: the naked exposed reality of who I don’t even know that I am.

He sees it all, and still he says, “I love you! Come to Daddy!”

I try to connect: I toddle over, trip over my own toes and get a split lip and a runny nose. I cry. But I drag myself up and climb bawling into his lap and let him cuddle me when I’m down.
I don’t look to humans because they can never comfort me as he can. I connect to his Holy 
Spirit, because he’s the one true Comforter.

    And there’s Jesus, my big brother, the firstborn of many brethren, Romans 8:29 says. 
He’s the guy you call in when you’re getting bullied by the devil, because he can take the bully 
out where you can’t. And it’s just within the last few years – after all these years! (boy, you can 
really tell a hard-headed Jew) – that I’ve come to accept the fact that whether I’m worthy of it or 
not – and I’ll *never* be worthy – He loves me just as I am, and still wants to be my daddy. 

    Why? I dunno. I don’t ask! I just accept it and rejoice in it, and thank God for his love. 

It’s for all the hurting people like you and me who need to dive in and find the 
incomprehensible depth and comfort of God’s love, hugs and kisses, that I write this book.

**Dying for Dad’s approval**

    We’re rooted and grounded in God’s love, Ephesians 3:17 says. But a seed can’t get 
rooted and grounded without the ground. And the ground is always there. Waiting. Fertile. 
Receptive. 

    The blissfully ignorant little seed, meantime, is busy reveling in its independence and has 
no concept of potting soil. Or of its own potential. Then all at once it’s transported to a new place 
and dropped into the spot it was meant to occupy. As it hits the ground, it sinks into all that soft 
acceptance and receptive fertility and gets totally happy. It finds a new identity and gets strong. It 
shoots roots downward to get anchored and grounded, and sends green stalks upward to rejoice 
in the sunlight.
All at once, it’s found home sweet home. If you ask it to move, it says no way. If you try to dig it up, it goes into shock. It’s no longer happy without the ground that gave it a new life of green productivity.

The psalms say that we’re like trees planted by rivers of water (1:3); that we’re like green olive trees in the house of our God (52:8). And that fertile ground that’s been there all along, just waiting for us to dive in, is God’s love. We didn’t orchestrate it or earn it. We didn’t work for it or prepare it. We didn’t even plant ourselves there. The grace of God lifted us up, transported us from our dusty existence as a dry seed and dropped us into his loving embrace. Now all we have to do is get happy, take root and grow.

My all-time favorite passage of scripture is Romans 8:31-39:

What shall we say then to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? Who shall bring a charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

As it is written: For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities
nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

So, how does my daddy love me? Let me count the ways…

**How low can he go?**

God is the ultimate fisherman. Peter and his partners were on the right track when Jesus got in their boat and showed them how to use it as a pulpit. Fish are great for starters, he told them, but have you ever caught a man? What a rush.

To catch a big fish you need a little fish – a bait fish. Something lower on the food chain. But when God went sewer fishing for us lower life forms below the bottom of the food chain, he changed the rules. He gave his best. He gave his only Son.

Not in some antiseptic half-hearted trolling effort; not fishing off the dock or with a toe in at the water’s edge. No, sir. Our dad rolled up his sleeves, put on his chest-high waders and plunged right in. He got wet, down and dirty, but he kept his eyes on the prize – us! – and used the finest of bait.

Mel Gibson’s movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, was a wonderful dramatic portrayal of the agony that Jesus endured for us in his physical body. But it wasn’t the cross that killed God’s son. The weight of all the sin of all the world – past, present and future – hit him like a targeted smart bomb as he took it all and became sin, so that sin would die once and for all. “For He made Him to be sin for us who knew no sin that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” (II Corinthians 5:21). Then the most excruciating moment of agony came as his Father – who is
holy and cannot tolerate sin in his presence – was forced to turn his back on him as he made the ultimate sacrifice; as he cried out, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Matthew 27:46).

Why did he do it? Hebrews 12:2 says it was for the joy that was set before him – the joy of bringing us unworthy bottom feeders into a place of blood-washed honor beside him as his princely brothers. This is what caused our big brother Jesus to endure the cross, despising the shame, and so he earned himself a seat at the right hand of the Father, bringing with him a fabulous catch – so big that the net threatens to break.

Have you jumped into that net he’s pulling into glory before our daddy’s throne?

God did all this for you just so you could become his child. Jesus is the firstborn of many brethren, it says in Romans 8:29, and Ephesians 1:5-6 says we’re adopted as sons to the praise of the glory of God’s grace, by which he made us accepted in the Beloved. In other words, it’s not about us. It’s about God’s awesome forgiveness and acceptance – that he knows where we are and doesn’t mind reaching all the way to the bottom of the slime pit to grab us and haul us up and clean us off – transforming us into princes and princesses by a power far beyond ourselves: his fantastic grace.

Romans 5:8 says this is God doing a free demonstration of how much he loves us: He sends Jesus to die for us while we’re still sinners. Not when we have it all together. Because, let’s be honest: when do we? We’ll never get it together enough to be worthy before him. It’s totally beyond us. It’s like asking your two-year-old to tie her own shoes. You watch as she bends over in supreme concentration, catches her braids and ribbons up in the laces and strangles a thumb. At the end of her effort she glances up from her inextricably knotted mess with tears
welling up. “Here,” you say with a smile, “Let me get that for you.” That’s exactly what God in his love said to us.

And the best part is… it’s a gift. A present. Something we don’t pay for. Because no payment could ever cover it. Only the costliest payment of the precious blood of his beloved son will do. Costly to him, but free to us. All we have to do is say, “God be merciful to me, a sinner” (Luke 18:13). Call out to God, believe Jesus died and rose again to pay the price for your sins, and ask him to be your daddy (Romans 10:9, 13). Become part of the family, part of the “many brethren” Jesus became the firstborn for. God loves you so much that even if you were the only person in the world he would have put all this together just for you. He’s waiting for you. Do it now!

The great escape

Our daddy God himself stormed the orphanage and signed the adoption papers for each of us, calling us back to himself from the ends of the earth to remind us that we carry the family name. He continually reminds us we have a future and a hope in his love as his kids.

Fear not, for I am with you. I will bring your descendants from the east, and gather you from the west. I will say to the north, ‘Give them up!’ and to the south, ‘Do not keep them back!’ Bring My sons from afar, and My daughters from the ends of the earth – Everyone who is called by My name, whom I have created for My glory; I have formed him, yes, I have made him. Isaiah 43:5-7
Expectant parents begin early to plan how they’ll relate to the kid who’s about to make the scene. Will he call you Daddy and Mommy? Papa and Mama? Sir and Ma’am? In our fondest prenatal conjectures, we rarely plan for the inevitable “Hey, Ma!” But as relationships build, as they grow and change with each of our kids, we see many layers of each other and experience different people within the people as each wave of life hits, alternately drawing us closer and sending us further apart emotionally or physically.

Our hope is that our children will grow into adults who are not only our peers but our friends. Because apart from God and your spouse they’re the ones who have the most intimate firsthand knowledge of who you really are – and the option of approaching you accordingly. God wants us to know him in this most intimate firsthand way as his children. So he sent Jesus to show us who he really is up close and personal, and to tell us his game plan to take sin out of the way so we can get close to him. And to demonstrate the total coolness that comes of being his son and his heir:

God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they.

Hebrews 1:1-4
That excellent name through inheritance is the family name God places on all his kids, so we’re more excellent than the angels. As Peter said, you’re enjoying all the good stuff the angels want a peek at and don’t get to have: the glorious Gospel of salvation through Jesus, and his Holy Spirit sent to you special delivery direct from heaven (I Peter 1:12)! Not that we’re special or spoiled or anything. It’s just how Daddy likes his kids treated: better than everyone else. Don’t you want the best for your kids? God always sends his best. And still we don’t get it.

“How long have I been hanging out with you guys and still you don’t know who I am?!” Can you detect just a hint of exasperation when Philip asks Jesus to show him the Father in John 14:8-9? Duh! You’ve had a front row seat for three-years-plus and all I’ve done is show you the Father. Now pay attention, Jesus says: I’m leaving for a little while, but while I’m gone you don’t get thrown back in the orphanage. You’re part of the family now and already have pull around the house and borrowing power against your inheritance. The Holy Ghost is the first little taste of all the goodies Dad has in store for you when I get back, so just sit tight (John 14:16-18; Ephesians 1:13-14)!

**Dad the Builder**

So what’s he doing in the meantime? Can you picture God swinging a hammer just for you? This isn’t a little shack on the backside of glory or a mansion over the hilltop. It’s your own royal suite, the dwelling place where you reside inside the palace with a magnificent view of the throne room. Jesus said “In my Father’s house are many mansions,” not on the wrong side of the tracks at the last pit stop to Paradise; not just a holler down and around Angel Bend; not even just across the golden street. We’re talking about a major expansion project in the King’s own castle. This is God drawing up plans, rolling up his sleeves, and calling in the wrecking ball to
knock down some walls and put in whole new wings of ivory and marble splendor in the royal
abode just for his kids. Because there’s a pretty major family reunion in the works, and the clock
is ticking.

Recently we moved into the first real house we’d ever occupied in 33 years of married
life. It’s a strange new sensation to see real drywall and tile after years of dreary wood paneling
and bowed particle board in our endless string of mobile homes. “Oh, so now you build the big
house!” our kids gripe. Hey, look: There’s a reason you don’t raise eight kids and build the big
house at the same time. It’s called finances. Or rather, the lack thereof. So why build a big house
now, when the kids are already busy adorning their homes with their own curtain climbers?
Because those major family reunions are coming. The holidays are a scene here already, and
somehow we doubt we’ll wind up with just the current twelve grandkids.

In Mama’s and Papa’s house there must be many mansions.

It was a blessing to be hooked up for this project right here in our own church. From our
building supervisor to our foundation and concrete guys, to our plumber and electrician to our
stucco and tile guys, a wonderful group of brothers put their time and talents in there for us. But
now imagine this is God himself, painstakingly and willingly spending his unlimited time and
talents to make the awesomest place by his side just for you.

Do you matter to him that much? Is he interested in what interests you? Does he care
about making mind-blowing things so special just for you? He does indeed, and he told you so.
He is thoroughly devoted to you, as any parent is to the child he loves. Just as you take joy in
putting together extra special surprises and gifts, and just the right princess themes and team
colors for your kids’ rooms, even so does your daddy dote on you, and then some. He spares no
expense in time, effort, or materials to do his utmost for your enjoyment.
This of course begs the question: *What in the world is he thinking? If he really knew who I am*... But you must remember, he’s the guy who really *does* know who you are – better than you do. And he still loves you. Now that’s what I call unconditional parental acceptance.

As Ruth asked Boaz, “Why should you take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?” Here’s the pagan outcast who signed up to go home with mom-in-law so she could be stared at by casual gapers on Main Street and dissected over tea and gefilte fish by every gossip at the Bethlehem Starbucks. Finally, she runs into the one solitary guy who goes out of his way to be nice to her. It’s really no wonder she has to pick her jaw up off the floor. Why me? “Because you have left your father and your mother and the land of your birth and have come to a people whom you did not know before,” Boaz tells her. “May the Lord repay your work, and a full reward be given you by the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge” (Ruth 2:10-12).

Rahab the harlot was another pagan foreigner who trusted Israel’s God as she made her bold move to hide Israeli spies on her roof. This is the gal that Boaz knew as Mom (Matthew 1:5). The awesome grace of God is shown through these two alien women who came out of left field into Israel’s messianic lineage: Rahab the prostitute and Ruth the pagan. Both were given that full reward Boaz spoke of, living out their lives as honorable women of Israel and finding God’s love and acceptance in spite of their past.

In point of fact, the whole idea of adopting us as sons is described in Ephesians 1:3-9 as God’s glorious premeditated scheme to buy us back, forgive us and make us accepted in the Beloved – that is, in our big brother Jesus – so we can enjoy “every spiritual blessing in heavenly places.” The most important construction project God undertook in building our dwelling place was the bridge he built over the gaping chasm between himself and man. He subcontracted his
beloved son Jesus to buckle on his tool belt, rip that lumber and build that path into the holiest of holies so his little brothers and sisters could come boldly before the throne of grace.

Why? For “His good pleasure which he purposed in himself.” Translation: to make himself supremely happy by carrying out his own brilliantly concocted plan to bring his kids home where they belong, so they can jump up in his lap and he can love on them.

**Daddy’s brag book**

Our battles here are only for a season, and while we’re out on the field, Dad’s glued to the evening news on the TV, radio and web. He knows exactly what’s going on in your personal theater of confrontation, he knows how many ribbons you’ve earned and how many battle buddies you’ve rescued. He’s equally all over it when things look good and when things look bad. As David said in Psalm 66:8-12:

> Oh, bless our God, you peoples! And make the voice of His praise to be heard, Who keeps our soul among the living, and does not allow our feet to be moved. For You, O God, have tested us; you have refined us as silver is refined. You brought us into the net: you laid affliction on our backs. You have caused men to ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water; but You brought us out to rich fulfillment.

You think you’re forgotten? That God hung you out to dry and walked off? Not a chance. On the contrary, he’s got an accurate count of exactly how many bullets have whizzed past your ears and how many times you’ve hollered, *Incoming!*
You number my wanderings; put my tears into Your bottle; are they not in your book? When I cry out to You, then my enemies will turn back; This I know, because God is for me.

Psalm 56:8-9

“Your prayers and alms have come up as a memorial before God,” Peter told Cornelius (Acts 10:31). John saw God’s collection of golden bowls before the heavenly altar filled with the prayers of the saints – your prayers and mine (Revelation 5:8). Every time you yell, “Dad, help!” it goes into one of those 14-karat knick-knacks in that cool place of honor. It’s what God keeps on his collectibles shelf and posts on the fridge just like you post those brown and purple finger-painted treasures of your toddlers. He remembers them. He records them. The ultimate meaning of human life is that God is busy watching, tallying, keeping accurate books and storing up rewards for you, his treasure.

Dad and big brother are slaving away preparing your homecoming – stringing up the crepe paper, blowing up the balloons, painting the banners, and cooking up the goodies. The doorbell keeps ringing and he keeps whipping out his brag book and showing off his pride and joy, you.

“So, what do you think of my boy?” he says.

“What’s so great about him?” comes the challenge.

“Oh, you wanna see what’s so great?”

“Yeah!”

“Well, go ahead: bring it!” Dad says, “And I’ll show you.”
That’s the exact conversation God had with Satan about his son, Job… as it would have gone down in today’s lingo. And notice that God’s the one who brings up the subject of how fantastic his kid is (Job 1:7-8). He’s bursting with pride and ready to lay odds.

On what? That Job is sinless? Ha! Not likely. There ain’t no such animal (Romans 3:23). Job had his faults just like you do and just like I do. The question wasn’t whether Job could be trusted, but whether Job trusted God. When his world fell apart, Job passed the test because he had enough on the ball to realize his daddy loved him and had his best interest at heart whether or not he could get his head around all the craziness going on in his life at the moment. Covered with ashes, boils and scabs; mourning his dead children and abandoned by his wife; his business prospects decimated and his nest egg gone, Job remembered what really mattered:

For I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth; and after my skin is destroyed this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!

Job 19:25-27

The cry of Job’s heart was to see his daddy face to face. Come what may, we can have the ultimate joy as we live in the hope of seeing him in his glory, being welcomed into his arms at the end of our long and dusty journey, smothered with kisses of joy, celebrated, feasted and paraded through the golden streets in triumph by our Daddy the King as he bestows on us all his love and his glory. Granted, that will be the ultimate moment of triumph. We have a lot to look forward to in the sweet by and by. But in the ugly here and now he keeps the letters, phone
calls and text messages coming to uplift our spirits and remind us of his care, and of the glory and authority and love he’s provided to meet every circumstance.

Do you realize that we have the same love and glory as Jesus had, and that God’s Word, who is Jesus in us, makes us holy right here and right now? Listen to what your big brother asked your daddy for, and get happy!

I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me.

And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me. Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me.

For You loved Me before the foundation of the world.

O righteous Father! The world has not known You, but I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me. And I have declared to them Your name, and will declare it, that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them.

John 17:20-26
So Jesus the Word, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:1, 14) is inside us, filling our being – and Daddy God is in Him; therefore he’s in us, too. And the very same love with which he loves Jesus is the love with which he loves us! And the same glory that he gave Jesus he has given to us because Jesus is living in us. Wow. That means Daddy doesn’t play favorites. He loves you every bit as much as he loves your big brother Jesus, and in him you have every last bit of that same glory.

The righteous will be remembered forever, it says in Psalm 112:6. True human value is never found in having the eyes of the world upon us, but in the unshakable certainty of our amazing position and undeserved worth in the eyes of God, our loving dad.

Pizza, planes and puppies

Nobody knows a kid’s hot button like a loving parent. As each of our curtain climbers sprouts and flourishes we learn what makes them tick and how to make them smile. Something as simple as having a pizza night on the spur of the moment instead of the quintessentially boring well-rounded meal can magically turn dinnertime into party time. We’re still providing nutrition – sort of – and, hey: parents need pizza, too. Not to mention a break in routine.

As our kids grew up their individuality developed and they each assembled their unique assortment of prized possessions. Our girls gravitated toward the warm fuzzies: kitties, horses droopy-eared basset hound puppies and the occasional turtle. The guys sought out knives, planes, rockets, gizmos and all things explosive. Helping expand these collections according to each owner’s preference was a blast, not just for the kids but for Mama and Papa. We grew to know each other better as individuals and this was reflected in the gifts we gave. The kids in turn
discovered what we like as well. “I saw this and just knew it was a Mama,” they’ll say, indicating the present that fits our individual taste.

In his book, *What a Difference a Daddy Makes*, Christian psychologist Kevin Leman says, “Sometimes, I’ll come across something on the road that fits one of my children unusually well. Maybe it’s something they’ve been looking for, or it’s a present that when I see it I think, *That would be perfect for so-and-so*. In these cases, I will go ahead and buy it, because it’s a present that is based on relationship, not guilt or obligation. When my daughter receives that present, she’ll know I got it because I know her. Nobody else could have picked out that present, and because of that, the gift reinforces our relationship.”

God the awesomest of fathers not only clothes and feeds the lilies of the field and the smallest of baby sparrows, but he also takes special pride in finding the perfect present for each of his kids. “If you then, being evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him” (Matthew 7:11). Just as we enjoy playing “which hand has the prize in it” with our kids – keeping them guessing till we give in and they get the goodies we had for them all along – God says to ask, to seek, to knock and keep on knocking till he opens the door and showers us with presents he’s set aside just for us.

He’s always dumping cool stuff all over us: every good and perfect gift (James 1:17), but just as you lovingly wrap and carefully label each Christmas present, he’s very specific about who gets what. That’s why “he gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers” (Ephesians 4:11). And just as we encourage our own kids to enjoy their presents with others, he expects us to share our gifts “for the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ,” to help the rest of the family.
How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation.

Let all things be done for edification. I Corinthians 14:26

Here’s real family harmony. As we stay close to him, our loving daddy gives out the unique individual goodies, then sits back and enjoys watching his kids share them around and have a great time together.

Proverbs 14:14-16 says the backslider in heart will be filled with his own ways [and that’s always nothing but trouble!] but a good man will be satisfied from above. Receiving the perfect gift is always a source of great satisfaction, and only someone who loves you and knows you very well can give you the perfect gift – and knows how to save it for the perfect occasion.

Here’s Mary and Martha and Lazarus, who have known Jesus for years and have a close personal relationship with him. Whenever he’s in the neighborhood it’s pizza night at Laz’s place, a block party and a Bible study. Then Lazarus gets sick. Really sick. This isn’t just a ho-hum case of that thing that’s going around right now. It’s more like the pale clammy skin, burning fever and gray eye sockets thing. Still, no problem, the girls figure. It’s no big deal for Jesus. We’ll call him and he’ll be right over. We’re always there for him and he’s always there for us.

And he was there – right on time.

“Why didn’t you come sooner?” Martha said. “We’ve been texting you all week!”

“If you’d showed up Friday he wouldn’t be dead right now,” Mary added (John 11:22; 39-40). Now notice this doesn’t show a lack of faith in these gals. On the contrary: it shows a rock-solid certainty of their faith in a loving and all-powerful Savior whom they knew very well.
They knew what he could do, and they knew he loved them enough to do it. It was just the timing thing they were calling into question. Why would their hero make them wait around like that? Why didn’t he show up in the nick of time and save the day?

Just as you pile up presents in the living room and slap on tantalizing Do not open till Christmas labels – just as you hold the bike with the huge red ribbon behind closed curtains in the backyard, then produce it with overplayed flourish as the grand finale – just as you turn out the lights and hide till the doorknob turns and then scream, “Surprise!” for the perfectly planned party – just so does your daddy find the grandest pleasure in seeing the expression of shock, delight and total joy on your face when he moves in and orchestrates the way-beyond-perfect moment for you that you’ll treasure forever – just when you’re sure he’s forgotten what day it is.

It was so much more spectacular to raise Lazarus the guy who was dead for four days than to simply heal him of the flu. When the girls and Laz figured that out, they knew at once how special they were to their daddy – and how much joy he derived just from seeing them say Wow! He’s got something just as spectacular up his sleeve for each of us – and he usually waits to pull it out till we’ve just about convinced ourselves his mind is on more important stuff.

Hey, listen: you are the more important stuff. To a parent nothing’s more important than their kids. And your heavenly dad’s no different. His eyes run to and fro seeking to show off for his kids, it says in II Chronicles 16:9. He’s kicking back tinkering with the car, watching out of the corner of his eye. But he’s not just watching to see which kid needs his help. Truth is, all those kids do! He’s waiting to see who’s the one who gets tired of stubbing his toe and scraping his knee and getting mud and grass stains all over his nose and chin from falling on his face; who finally figures out that if he runs over and tugs on his sleeve, Dad will come and help him. That’s
the kid he’s watching for; that’s the one he’s ready to drop everything for, and to charge out
there and do wonderful things for, whether it takes up the rest of the day or the rest of the week.

He does it for the one who knows his dad can do anything. The one who gets happy and
jumps up and down when Dad fixes it for him, and thanks him fifty times, and runs off and tells
all his friends that his dad so rocks.

Pastor Alvin Smith puts it this way:

The Gospel is God rolling up his sleeves and taking care of his
business: buying back his kids and getting the victory for himself.
Jesus comes down to fight Satan hand-to-hand and to wrestle
away the keys from him, and to have his victory and his
testimony. He heals, he saves, and he is consistent and faithful. He
never gives up. He says, “I’ll take care of that for you because I’m
your God and I’m there for you.”

Romans 8:32 reminds us: “He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us
all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?”

It’s not like Jesus didn’t ask. It’s not like he wasn’t beyond stressed out, sweating bullets and
blood in the garden. But it wasn’t your daddy’s will to let the cup pass from your older brother
because remember He loves you, too – just as much as He loves Jesus. And your older brother
loves you enough to say “Okay, Dad. Even though it’s the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do –
let’s get it done for the family.”

Speaking of family, Psalm 116:15 shows us that Dad simply adores family reunions:
“Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.” This isn’t to say that God enjoys
watching people die. It’s just that you’re his kid and – while he certainly enjoys all those calls and knee mails – he’s counting the days till you come home from school and can finally be closer to him so you both can totally enjoy each other.

**Ice cream, baseball and pennies from heaven**

We lived in four different apartments during my first thirteen years, but they were all within two miles of each other. As a matter of fact, they were all on the same street that formed an impressively long, unbroken hill in the neat little Jewish district of High Bridge in the Bronx. As our family grew, we left our smallest apartment for a larger one in its sister building; then we slid down the hill apiece and into the upper apartment of a two-family home where the hill leveled off for a long block or so. About two blocks shy of where the hill picked back up again and descended steeply and steadily all the way down to the Yankee Stadium area, we settled at last into a nice 3-bedroom on the uppermost floor of an eight-story building.

It’s a good thing nobody had invented super-sensitive car alarms back then. None of us had a yard and the nearest park was a fair piece away, so we congregated most often on the sidewalks and sat on the hoods of parked cars. That the street and sidewalk were our playground was pretty much a given. Neighborhood drivers would come to a halt while our game of stick-ball was moved off the blacktop, or while our entourage of bikes, soap box racers and roller skaters crossed. We, in turn, were always careful to allow for foot traffic on the sidewalk, momentarily stopping our championship competitions in wooden tops or yo-yos; or our game of marbles, bottle caps or jump rope; or our handball tournament against the wall of a designated apartment building.
Winter blizzards literally buried the entire line of cars parked on both sides of the narrow street all the way up and down the long hill. While this scenario frustrated drivers who didn’t remember where they’d parked the night before, it also made the perfect setting for a snow fort battle, complete with prefab foxholes for the armies on either side. Scooping ammo off each vehicle and forming our grenades, we armed ourselves and the war began – till our bunker was hijacked and driven away, and we had to relocate to a new battleground. Or declare a truce, grab a sled and head for the top of the hill. The hilltop made a great starting line. All summer long we’d take off from up there on skates or scooters or bikes, bells ringing, flags fluttering and kids hollering and running behind just for the sheer joy of the noise.

But in the suffocating blanket of humidity we called a New York summer, nothing was so welcome a sound on that hill as the jingle of the long-awaited ice cream truck. Running off childhood steam is hot and sweaty work and by mid-afternoon we were all primed for an ice cream sandwich, a cone or a sundae. Multiple vendors found no end of clientele daily lining those sidewalks, and we knew the driver of each mobile oasis by name.

But at times disaster would strike: as the van of chilled deliverance came in view many a weekend, I’d find my limited resources evaporated. Immediately, my field math and physics skills awoke and came into play. Jumping off the car hood, I’d stand on the sidewalk midway to the apartment entrance, eyeball the distance between me and the truck, and calculate the time left to punch the elevator button and speed to the eighth floor and back, allowing a differential of a few seconds to wring some change from a parent.

Then I’d give in and join several other kids hollering up at open apartment windows on both sides of the street. “Ma… Oh, Mom! Motherrr!” You can tell we were all planners-ahead by nature. Never mind that the ice cream truck made its appearance at the very same moment
every afternoon: The times when I actually had the change ready in my pocket were heavily outweighed by the times when I didn’t.

In retrospect what’s truly amazing to me is that Mom could always pick out my voice from the rest of the chorus bombarding the side of the building. Now I daresay that stemmed in part from the fact that she knew her kid’s lack of foresight and suspected she might get “the call.” But having been Ma myself now, I understand that God gifts parents with ears uniquely attuned to their own child’s lilting yell. And Mom could hear mine readily enough to rubber-band a tissue with thirty-five cents in a coin weight she calculated precisely to toss from an eighth-floor window and have it land in my hand at the same instant the truck pulled up.

You could make a fair guess as to where I got my field math and physics skills.

Now I’d say that in the great scheme of a mom’s daily concerns and problems thirty-five cents for an ice cream cone would rank pretty small. But even to a busy parent, if this is her kid calling, it’s worth the time, the attention and the utmost of care in delivering it.

Many of us have bought the lie that God is too far away, too old and hard of hearing, and certainly way too busy up there in heaven to listen to our little problems. After all, hasn’t he got a great, big universe to run? Who do you think you are?

I’ll tell you who you are. You’re his kid that needs thirty-five cents for a sidewalk sundae, and in the great scheme of our daddy’s concerns and problems, that’s worthy of his time and attention, and of his utmost care.

In his book, What a Difference a Daddy Makes, Dr. Kevin Leman tells of just such a request made by one of God’s half-pints, and puts his amazing love in perspective for us:
I was trying to teach Kevin II how to play baseball and on one occasion, he confessed that sometimes he got a bit nervous walking up to the plate.

“What did you do when you had to face Norm Hankinson?” Kevin asked me.

“Listen, Kevin. The plate is where I learned to pray.”

The next time I saw Kevin II approaching the plate, I couldn’t help but notice how he paused, scrunched his eyes closed for a few brief seconds then took his place in the batter’s box. He was praying.

That’s what devotion is all about. God cares about baseball – if a nine-year-old boy who loves Him is nervous about it.

As God sits on his throne in the temple of his heavens, a barrage of voices assail him, but out of them he picks the cries of his own children and attends to them first. “In my distress I called upon the Lord, and cried out to my God;” David says in Psalm 18:6, “He heard my voice from His temple, and my cry came before Him, even to His ears.” Jesus asked his disciples, “Shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily” (Luke 18:7-8).

John 10:2-3 says the sheep know the voice of their good shepherd. He in turn knows each of them by name, and calls them out of the fold from among all the others: “Hey, Snowball! Cotton Candy! Pillow Pockets! Wooley Bully! Murph the Nerf! C’mon, let’s move out! Go, go, hustle, hustle, hustle!”
The sheep prick up their ears. It’s him! He’s calling their names. Up they bound, prancing and shoving their way past all the other sheep in their hurry to get out to the Door of the sheepfold and follow him. Because they know and hear and love his voice.

We’ve had our share of jokes from people who ask whether we actually named our eight children or just assigned them each a number. While there’s a comical element that tickles the funny bone of outsiders who don’t recognize one kid from another, the truth is that a parent will never forget the last personal detail about each and every one of them, much less forget their names. Okay, yes: due to brain decay we may go through every one of the other seven names before hitting it right, but knowing and loving each of these guys as an individual is the very essence of a close personal family relationship – the same relationship God wants with you.

Mary is weeping in the garden when Jesus appears to her in John 20:14-16. At first glance she thinks he’s the gardener. In fact, they have a fair bit of conversation during the time she supposes that’s who she’s talking to. But when Jesus calls her by name, she instantly knows who he is. Then, notice what she calls him: not just Rabbi (teacher), but Rabboni (my teacher). There’s that personal name thing again. There’s that personal level of connection and relationship that God wants with his kids. And this time Jesus doesn’t just tell her, “Okay, look: gotta go now, I’m ascending to my Father” – even though all throughout the Gospel accounts he’s referred to God as his Father. But now he says to her, “I’m going to my Father and to your Father; to my God and your God.” Because now the work of the Cross is complete, instantly making us accepted as part of the family! Praise God! Hey, if that doesn’t excite you, maybe you want to go check and see if you still have a pulse!

What? You doubt that all this applies to you personally? Permit me to refer you to Revelation 22:4, which says of God’s servants (that would be you and me), “They shall see His
face and His name shall be on their foreheads.” Or Revelation 2:17: “To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it.” And also Revelation 3:12: “He who overcomes I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name.”

Just to remove all doubt, God made sure it’s literally written all over you, so that everyone – including you! – knows beyond question who’s your daddy.

**Jailhouse Rock**

The fact is that we allow things to fall out of perspective. We forget to attribute to our heavenly dad the same love, affection, and capacity for joy and excitement that we get from helping our own kids out of tough spots. Think about it: God’s the perfect parent! He’s the one who can truly get the ultimate mileage out of that sort of thing.

Here’s his kid, Peter, chained to the wall between two guards in The Hole at Jerusalem Jailhouse. Fourteen other soldiers stand guard at various intervals from cell to outer gate. What a crummy way to spend Passover! He’s already missed the opening *seder* dinner at John Mark’s house when Mary decides she’s had it, grabs her cell phone and sets the prayer chain in motion. Emails, text messages and voice mails fly; prayers go up for Peter ’round the clock. By the time the midweek prayer meeting assembles at Mary’s place, a special request goes out: If Peter’s not released by morning Herod will kill him just as he’s already killed James. It’s time to seriously bombard heaven for his immediate release. They join hands, bow their heads, and have just
kicked it into high gear when Rhoda makes out the doorbell through the uplifted voices. She jumps up and opens the door.

“Praise God, Sister!” says Peter.

“Omigosh!” Rhoda says, slams the door in his face and runs to the living room. “You guys! It’s Peter!”

“Peter? Peter who? Peter where?”

“Peter who-do-you-think? Simon Peter! Right here at the door!”

“Uh-huh. What did you put in that coffee, Mary? Rhoda’s had a wee bit too much.”

“It’s him, you guys; he’s at the door! Uh-oh: waitaminute… did I even let him in?”

“Hey, relax: ghosts don’t need doors. They just float right in through the walls.”

Mary hollers from the kitchen:

“Mark! Will you get that door already? My hands are wet!”

“So that’s what I’m hearing. I thought it was my migraine. Hey, wow! Look at what the camel dragged in!”

“I see it but I don’t believe it!”

“Praise God!”

“Man, Peter, how’d you get out? I thought they had a zillion guards all over you.”

“Well, you guys were praying for me, right?”

“Well, yeah, but…”

“So God answers prayer, right? So here I am! Praise God!”

“But the guards…?”

“Still sleeping like babies.”

“But the chains…?”
“Opened up and fell right off. I prayed and had the most awesome peace. The angel had to kick me, I was so sound asleep.”

“You got an angel? Cool!”

“Yeah! He walked me out to the street. The cell door opened up all by itself. The front gate, too. When we got out the gate, he disappeared. Then I knew I was awake – and just in time for testimony service. So… here I am.”

God’s always right on time. But since your watch is rarely synchronized with his, it may appear that your desperate plight may have slipped by him unnoticed. Why did Peter wind up in prison? Couldn’t God just have prevented his arrest? Was his back turned when they threw him in that black inner cell? Was he busy at the other end of the universe? How about when you’re smack in the middle of the day from hell, your husband calls to say he got fired, and the four-year-old just stepped on a rusty nail? Is this not God failing to notice his kid’s in big trouble?

Not a chance.

Malachi 3:3 says he sits as a refiner of silver. In order to purify the silver, the silversmith must turn up the heat so that the impurities will float to the surface and he can skim them off the top. But he must constantly watch so that the silver doesn’t become overheated, or it will be ruined. He can’t turn his back for a second. The exact moment will come when it’s purified and ready but not fried and destroyed, and he must sit and watch for that moment and be ready to remove the silver from the heat at its point of greatest value.

Even when it feels like he’s a zillion miles away, remember: Daddy has not forgotten you. He’s sitting right there, turning up the fire just a tad more, skimming and watching and waiting. And you can be very sure that he’ll step in and be there for you at the precise split
second when he’ll get the greatest glory, and the spectacular wow! factor will be unmissable, and he’ll show you yet another wonderful side of himself that you’ve never seen before.

Because he wants you to know him even better, and get even closer to him.

**Face it: God’s crazy about you**

“I have called you by your name and you are Mine,” God says in Isaiah 43. “Since you were precious in My sight, you have been honored, and I have loved you.” Now here’s a Bible trivia question for you: why on earth would he want to own up to owning us? Consider how embarrassing that must get when all the angels and elders are sitting around the throne and all of a sudden God says, “Guys, guys: c’mere! Hurry! Come on over here and watch this! …Okay, well: just … give him a minute. – Okay, okay, so give him another minute. He’s right on the verge of something brilliant. After all he’s my kid, right?”

Jesus said men will see your good works and glorify your father in heaven (Matthew 5:16). That’s not because we’re any great shakes, but because we’re made in the spittin’ image of Dad. When we tell our own rug rats “You are so like your dad,” it could either be a good thing or a bad thing. But when we’re speaking about our heavenly daddy, Paul says we are his glory reflected as in a mirror (II Corinthians 3:18). Why he’d want us running around looking like him I can’t begin to imagine. There are definitely times when I’d give the secretarial disavowal to my own (“I don’t know this kid, okay?”) or ask Chris the recurring question: “Would you like to know what your kid pulled today?” But on the other hand, who can melt a parent’s heart like his kids? You can’t stay mad at the little ankle biters when you look at them and see you (Lord help them!) and realize that at the end of the day, it’s not their fault they are their parents’ kids.
But now God goes a step further: Paul says he calls us, justifies us and glorifies us just so we can be made into the image of his beloved son (Romans 8:29-30) – so if God’s for us who can be against us? Knowing how much he loves you, and seeing that he claims you even when you’re out there being yourself at your most embarrassingly human, really does empower you to realize you can overcome anything with his love and help.

Who loves you best? A parent? A lover? Best friend? Confidant? God says he’s all that to you and then some. Paul says in I Corinthians 13:11-12, “When I was a child I thought as a child and spoke as a child and understood as a child.” This assertion is thrown right into the mix in the Great Love Chapter, and sort of comes at us out of left field. It seems incongruous to the rest of the chapter – till we realize he’s talking about our growing perception of the Father’s love.

When an infant is born it totally basks in daddy’s love, care and embrace without even knowing him; a toddler and even a teenager can enjoy Dad’s love without a full understanding of who he is and how much he really loves him. Paul explains that we understand God’s love as a child understands the love of his parents. It’s a very incomplete understanding but it’s growing day by day till we finally get it – and that only happens when we’re all grown up and sitting in the throne room.

I’ve said it to my own kids many times: You’ll never fully understand a parent’s love till you’re a parent. By the same token, we can never fully understand the love of God, which passes understanding. Only with all the saints may we someday arrive at some faint bit of comprehension as to the height and the depth and the width and the breadth of the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Ephesians 3:17-19).
And I still wouldn’t give a son of mine up for people who hated my guts!! Let alone for people whom I like even just a smidgeon. The love of God is beyond us. We’ll never totally figure it out. We just have to accept it and bask in it and say, “Thank God for God!”
Like Father like Sons:

Striving to be a picture of our heavenly Dad

“I’m a mommy now,” my tow-headed granddaughter confided in a conspiratorial tone.

“Look: I have a purse, and on the inside it has jewelry and a brush in it.”

“Wow! I only wish I’d known it was that easy!” I told my daughter. “Imagine all the trouble I could have saved!”

Our initial perception of parenthood generally approaches that of the disarmingly charming three-year-old. But as we grow up in God we come to realize: the older we get, the less we know. Yet he trusts us to be the mirror of his daddyhood to our kids.

Go figure.

It’s like all the assignments we receive from his loving hand. We’ll be fine as long as we remember to let him do all the heavy lifting. But he still asks us to pick up our end because we need to flex a few muscles and stimulate some much-needed growth.

Your assignment, therefore – whether or not you decide to accept it – is to direct your children’s path upward toward your heavenly daddy and theirs, while modeling for them down here who he is, how much he loves them and how much you love him.

Pastor Harold Warner said:

Don’t drop the torch. As you live life with a passion to love and serve God you are establishing memorials for your children and grandchildren. They must know and see your passion for God and the great things He’s done in your life so their testimony won’t be ‘another generation arose that didn’t know the Lord.’ If they
receive the message that God is ho-hum and not worthy of your
time, they’ll look for something that is. What you leave behind will
bless you or haunt you for all eternity.

As we seek to establish memorials – touchstones that serve as points of reference for our children – we must make a conscious effort at it. Because as the clock ticks today’s moments away, we are actively establishing a memorial of some kind whether we realize it or not. Will your kids remember family prayer or family fights? Yes, we do mess up. But King David tells us how to turn the tide:

For He established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in
Israel, which He commanded our fathers, that they should make
them known to their children; that the generation to come might
know them, the children who would be born, that they may arise
and declare them to their children, that they may set their hope in
God, and not forget the works of God, but keep His
commandments; and may not be like their fathers, a stubborn and
rebellious generation, a generation that did not set its heart aright,
and whose spirit was not faithful to God. Psalm 78:5-8

And never forget that God’s on your side and will be there for you and the kids as you seek your inheritance together:

Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to
give you the kingdom. Luke 12:32
Chapter Three

Of course God loves me, but…

Brain damage

“God smiles every time he thinks about me. Why is that so hard to believe? Because we’ve been dropped on our heads – but not by God. He doesn’t just love us in some kind of generic default kind of way. He adores us. He thinks we’re wonderful. The same level of fascination that a parent has with a child God has with us.” So says Pastor Francis Anfuso of the Rock of Roseville Church in Roseville, California. But he also says he was saved for two full years before he could pray to God as his Father.

Born the year before his dad was elected to Congress, he and his twin brother were sent off to camp every two months. Francis sent home tearful self-portraits with captions reading: ‘Please visit me!’ but the visits never came. At age 11 the twins were sent to boarding school, never to live at home again. “When my dad died tragically at a political dinner when I was 17 years old it was a relief for me that it was over,” he said.

No wonder Pastor Anfuso considered the term “Father God” an oxymoron. He found himself envying the wonderful relationship his wife had with her parents. She called her father Daddy all his life. Francis determined to follow suit. With great effort he succeeded in calling his father-in-law Dad, and built with him the close relationship he never had with his own father. It took longer years to build that close daddy relationship with God, as he gained new perception of
what a father really is. Now he says, “Every problem in my past before or after I met Jesus was a result of abandonment and rejection, and I superimposed this on God the Father and made him into a frail human that wasn’t there for me. But I have been healed and am still being healed.”

A casual survey reveals that only 61% of Christian believers feel their life actually makes God smile, and 12% believe He only likes them “sometimes.” Why do we feel this way? Because our brains say, *Of course I know God loves me*, but our brains can be extremely messed up and tweaked little organs. Based on past experience, human ignorance, clichés, or the latest product of Hollywood, we can perceive love as a frighteningly wide array of imagery ranging from the comical to the tragically erroneous.

Pastor Anfuso tells of the years he spent sitting looking out at the ocean, reflecting in tears on how his life fell short of what God expected, and apologizing to him. “What an abject waste of my time!” he finally realized. “The truth is that God is pleased with me. He doesn’t love me more when I’m good or less when I’m bad. He’s not some flippant, semi-neurotic person who goes in and out of love. His love is constant. His love never changes. God’s advice now is to stop focusing on what you did and focus on what he did: He’s separated you from your sin as far as the East is from the West.

“When Peter stumbled, was he still clean?” Pastor Anfuso asks. “We stumble regularly but that doesn’t mean we’ve fallen away from God. He doesn’t love us because we’re lovable, but because he IS love. Whatever your child does, it’s cute. Even puke and poop makes parents smile. Even after all you did you’re still God’s favorite. If you accept being his favorite you get spoiled forever. Psalm 16:11 says ‘You’ll show me the paths of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore.’”
Realizing how much God loves us is the challenge. We can feel that God’s love is a
given, as though he must grudgingly acknowledge us with a nod of his head and say, “Okay,
yeah, sure: that’s my kid so obviously I must love him.” Or we can kind of hope he loves us
since he made us, right? – so evidence points to the fact that he may like us just a little bit. But
God the loving father, the dad who wrestles with his little boys and spoils his little girls? Who
tousles their hair and grabs them up, squeezes them in a bear hug and smothers them in kisses?
Who brags about the funny things they say and do and how they’re getting to be just like him?
Who gives them awesome presents just to see them smile and be excited, and pulls off neat tricks
just to hear them say, “Wow, how’d you do that?”

It’s the rare child of God who knows him as Daddy.

**Bats need love, too**

I was driving alone but the bumper sticker in front of me still evoked an audible laugh:
*Murciélagos necesitan amor.* That is, *Bats need love, too.* Hey, who knows? I daresay millions of
dollars in grant moneys have gone to at least one several-year-long study proving the benefit of
petting your bat and speaking to it once a day.

According to the animal rights group PETA, “Cows are people, too, and drinking their milk is a denigration of their creaturehood.”

“Pigs are as intelligent as mentally retarded children,” said Zaida Catalan, spokeswoman
of Sweden’s Green Party youth organization. “This is not about degrading mentally handicapped
people,” she explained to Reuters news service, “it's about upgrading animals to the level of
humans.”
There it is: we’ve arrived at the logical conclusion to the years of evolutionistic assertion that we’re products of random chance. Taking it all from our beginnings in the deep taproot of the great trunk of the evolutionary tree, we might as well have evolved into a pig, a cow or a bat as into a human, and frankly nobody would have missed us. Least of all God.

Former president Ronald Reagan said a state is nothing more than a reflection of its citizens; therefore the more decent the citizens, the more decent the state. By the same token we could say the more clueless the citizens the more clueless the state.

Remember: God says you’re worth more than a whole bunch of sparrows. Never mind whether we’re elevating pigs to human status or vice versa. The Creator of the Universe says you have enough value to merit his love even when you’re in the basic pathetic human state, however pig-like. His word says that he first loved us. That means it wasn’t our own brilliant idea or an over-inflated self image that caused us to love him; it was the natural response to his awesome love, and it’s his awesome love that validates us as stellar human beings regardless of what a mess we’ve made at any given moment. As the brilliant humans have finally learned, there is no such thing as junk DNA, and with God there is no average or below average. To him you’re just a lovable human (talk about oxymorons)! That’s what your heavenly daddy thinks, so who cares what anyone else has to say?

Fried eggs and finches

The fact is that our perception of God as Dad is often mangled and tweaked by our own experiences with earthly dads, whether our own or those of our friends and acquaintances. So many of us grew up with dads who had the tendency to have tempers that ran hot and cold, or to give an ironclad front of implacability, producing the impression that nothing we could do would
ever be right, or would ever garner us that perpetually sought after prize: their pleasure. So many grew up with distant, workaholic and/or absentee fathers who took little or no interest in them, or who felt love need only be expressed by killing themselves to provide. In turn we may have come to believe we had to earn these dads’ love by some action on our part.

Zebra finches are the most prolific birds on the planet. While the kids were small we made the mistake of buying a male and a female once, and became foster parents to literally an endless supply of finch babies over a period that spanned several years. The jellybean-size eggs incubate for just three weeks and in another four or five the birds mature, affording repeated observation of the tiny finchies’ life cycle. Both mom and dad zebra sit on the eggs round the clock and both exhaust themselves feeding their loud, insatiable offspring.

Watching an egg hatch is the funniest thing. As the thin shell gives way, out comes a tiny, white, miserable-looking creature about an inch long. It’s fitted with bulging round dark eyelids sealed tightly shut and absolutely no feathers, but exactly three little hairs standing straight up on the top of its head. We’d try to hide our belly laughs from mom and dad finch, as they were obviously as proud and excited as any parent was ever warranted to be. Hence the term: a face only a mother – and a father – could love.

Now I daresay we may look far more comical and way more pathetic to God than a newborn zebra finch. It’ll be quite a while before those pin feathers start to come in and we’re always crabbing at him to feed us and keep us warm and cozy, and to teach us how to fly. But he doesn’t mind a bit. He revels in it. He loves us just the way we are, even in that awkward cute ugly white naked stage with our bulging eyes tight shut, our three little hairs standing straight up on top of our heads, and our big mouths perpetually open.
And the priceless part is we don’t have to do anything to earn that love. He’ll never love us any more or any less than he does right now. He loved us even while we were yet sinners, it tells us in Romans 5:8. That means we’re already tops on God’s list. We don’t have to earn the account that Jesus has built for us. We don’t have to qualify by having it all together. There is no special heritage, mindset or action that causes God to accept us. He knows we’re just miserable ugly little baby birds, but he has the perfect solution: he meets us beyond halfway and chooses to transport us from the miry clay to the solid rock, bringing us up to his level of purity so we are fit to dwell with him.

Who is like the Lord our God, Who dwells on high, Who humbles Himself to behold the things that are in the heavens and in the earth? He raises the poor out of the dust, and lifts the needy out of the ash heap, that He may seat him with princes – with the princes of His people. Psalm 113:5-8

Let me reiterate: there are no “average” Christians. How can you feel average when you see that gleam of pride in Daddy’s eyes? Even if you feel like you’ve messed up and you don’t deserve it… it’s there! You can’t take it away from him because he loves you so much. In his book, What a Difference a Daddy Makes, Dr. Kevin Leman says:

Wanting to become a “better” Christian is a little bit like wanting to become “better” pregnant. You’re either pregnant or you’re not; you’re either a Christian or you’re not. God doesn’t give out letter grades, with some below-average Christians walking around with a D- on their report card, while a few superlative saints carry exams
with an A+ written on the top. The way our faith is set up, it’s pass/fail. You’re in or you’re out.

So many people tell themselves, “Someday my faith will be strong enough that I can be the kind of person God would have me to be.” This is one of the unquestioned lies we tell ourselves, and it keeps us from really enjoying a relationship with almighty God… It’s one thing when others write us off, but it’s even worse when we write ourselves off.

It breaks my heart to see young women doing this at an alarming rate. They never quite made it in their daddy’s eyes. They looked in his face and saw judgment, disappointment, and criticism, and they internalized the thought that they have nothing to offer the world. They might have many fine qualities, but they know there’s always someone who is just a little bit prettier, a bit more athletic, a half-grade smarter, and since they’re not the best at anything, they think they’re abject failures.

Humans have the appalling tendency to engage in odious comparisons. But Paul reminds us that comparing ourselves to each other isn’t wise (II Corinthians 10:12). Now, there’s an understatement! I can find a whole slew of people close at hand at a moment’s notice who I’m certain are infinitely more stellar than I am. So can you. But to believe God thinks we’re pathetic just because we believe we’re pathetic is a big mistake.
Religions only serve to make our self-image problem worse. You’d think practicing a religion would bring you into a closer relationship with your heavenly dad, but sadly it serves instead to keep God at arm’s length. If only I light enough candles, pay enough money, go on this pilgrimage, say this prayer enough times, knock on enough doors and hand out enough literature… maybe, just maybe I’ll earn Dad’s approval.

Hey, look: hasn’t it occurred to you yet that maybe you’ve had his approval all along? Why else would he send his own son to die for you? I’ll tell you why: Because he wanted to be close to you; to walk with you and to have sweet fellowship with you just as he had with Adam and Eve had at the beginning when they walked and talked with Dad in the nice cool evening breezes of the garden and all was right with the world.

Yeah, okay, I know: that was before they gummed up the works.

But the problem is religions stop right there and leave you cowering in a corner just waiting to get zapped by a lightning bolt because you’re unworthy. Hey, here’s a news flash: nothing you can do religiously will ever make you worthy. The God of the Universe knows you’re unworthy, but he still loves you and wants you to wake up and realize what he’s done for you in spite of you, and to realize who you now are in him, so he can let the spoiling begin!

Can you imagine your child coming to you in tears every morning to say, “I know I have no right to ask, but would you please give me breakfast because I’m starving?” Jesus himself ridiculed this very idea as it relates to God and his children:

If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish will he give him a serpent instead of a fish?

Or if he asks for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? If you then, being
evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will
your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him.

Luke 11:11-13

Sure, yes: Adam and Eve messed up everything by disobeying God. True. But he solved
the problem at the outset by providing himself with his own sacrifice for sin. Notice: Adam and
Eve don’t have to do anything to regain their right standing with God. On the contrary: the two
of them just stand there pointing fingers at each other and the snake and showing off their fig
leaves. “Uh-huh. Yeah, right: whatever,” says their dad, whipping out his tape measure. He
inaugurates substitutionary sacrifice, kills the animal, tailors them each a designer fur suit and
tosses the fig leaf solution in the trash where it belongs.

Those fig leaves were Adam and Eve’s religion: their attempt at making it all better. Our
own attempts are just as flimsy, and just as unnecessary to God, and just as worthy of a place in
the round file. All we need in order to get back where we belong with him has already been set in
place, brilliantly concocted and executed by our loving daddy who is devoted to removing all
obstacles between himself and the kids he loves. His first kids knew all wasn’t well, fig leaves
notwithstanding. When Dad hit the door yelling, “Hey guys, I’m home!” – instead of running
and jumping into his arms as they used to, they hid under the bed – because they knew they were
in trouble. Hiding is never the answer. Trying to put the vase back together with spitballs and
chewing gum isn’t, either. When God talks about entering into his rest in Hebrews chapter 4, he
says we can only enter into that rest through the work of Jesus, because that way we cease from
our own works as God did from his. Jesus told us he had to go away so that he could send the
Comforter, the Holy Spirit, who is our helper and blesser.
So the answer is to quit trying so hard. Just ask for the egg. You won’t get fried. It’s no surprise to God that we’ll never fix it ourselves, so all the elaborate rituals and religious exercises do nothing but put more and more distance between us and Daddy’s lap. His arms are still reaching out to help us get up there and get loved on. Just toss the fig leaves and grab on!

Somehow we feel that the King James rendition of *Our Father Who Art in Heaven* must carry with it some intrinsic deep, hollow religious overtones that convey the utmost in inapproachability. But you must remember that our father in heaven sent his son with the express purpose of showing us a picture of himself, and reminding us that while he’s certainly the King of the realm, to his little princes and princesses he’s still always gonna be Daddy who loves it when we tug on his robe and play with his crown. How inapproachable is that?

So, when will you gain Dad’s approval? You had it way before you knew he existed. You didn’t have to earn it or deserve it. He proved it to you by sending you Jesus. His approval was always there. How much more will you enjoy it when you finally break down and just accept it so you can bask in his love and enjoy each other’s company on a regular basis, walking with him in the cool of the evening, in the right here and now? That’s the closeness he immediately worked to reestablish at the beginning, and it’s the closeness he wants with each of his kids.

It’s the closeness he wants with you.

John, the Beloved Disciple who knew how to embrace that acceptance and closeness, reminds us that we are God’s kids *right now*, and we have no idea how incredible that really is, because we can’t even begin to imagine what it will be like when we get to see him face to face (I John 3:1, 2).

Hey, that’s pretty exciting stuff!
It’s who you know

In Mark Twain’s classic *The Prince and the Pauper*, Miles Hendon takes on the role of personal champion to the displaced Prince of Wales despite mental reservations about the urchin’s claims to the throne. His care and defense of the royal person win the favor of the prince-turned-king, and while still in rags the monarch in a moment of benevolent gratitude grants him whatever request he might make. Seeing they may be in each other’s company for quite some time, and not wanting to insult what he thinks are the child’s delusions of royalty, Hendon seizes the opportunity to request and receive the peculiar privilege of sitting in the king’s presence.

As the tale nears its close they are separated and, while Hendon is detained by the palace guard, young Edward VI reclaims his throne. When Hendon is brought before the king on charges of loitering by the palace gate, he beholds as in a waking dream his erstwhile charge sitting on the throne of England, absorbed in side conversation with a noble. Can this be his pauper? To remove all doubt, he promptly grabs up a chair and sits in it.

A buzz of indignation broke out, a rough hand was laid upon him, and a voice exclaimed: “Up, thou mannerless clown! – wouldst sit in the presence of the king?”

“Touch him not, it is his right!”

The throng fell back, stupefied. The king went on:

“Learn ye all, ladies, lords and gentlemen, that this is my trusty and well-beloved servant, Miles Hendon, who imposed his good sword and saved his prince from bodily harm and possible death – and for this he is a knight, by the king’s voice. Also learn, that for a
higher service, in that he saved his sovereign stripes and shame, taking these upon himself, he is a peer of England, Earl of Kent, and shall have gold and lands meet for the dignity.

“More – the privilege which he hath just exercised is his by royal grant; for we have ordained that the chiefs of his line shall have and hold the right to sit in the presence of the majesty of England henceforth, age after age, so long as the crown shall endure. Molest him not.”

Regaining his wits after the truth of the king’s identity fully sinks in, Hendon falls to his knees, does homage for his lands and titles, and then stands respectfully aside, “a mark still for all eyes – and much envy, too.”

Special relationship brings special privilege. It was Hendon’s special relationship with the king that gave him the right to sit in his presence, just as it was Jonathan’s special relationship with King David that gave his lame son Mephibosheth the right to sit at the king’s table and partake of his bounty all the days of his life (II Samuel 9:1-7). And it’s our special relationship with God through the sacrifice of his son Jesus Christ that gives us the grace – in spite of all our lameness – to have an honored place at the King’s table both now and at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb.

Okay, reality check: this isn’t proof of our own merit, but rather undeniable proof of the Father’s kingship. When Hendon grabbed that chair, he did it to prove to himself that Edward was king. But at the same time, to his own astonishment, he proved to himself as well as to the whole court that he was Earl of Kent. Why? Because Edward was king and had bestowed that
dignity upon him. By the same token, because our dad reigns, the pleasant surprise is to find that
we’re not only called his servants, but his friends and his kids (John 15:15, I John 3:1).

It’s not who you are, but who you know.

**Friend of God**

The musical trio Phillips, Craig and Dean wrote in their song, *Friend of God*: “Who am I
that You are mindful of me? That you hear me when I call? Is it true that You are thinking of
me? How You love me, it's amazing, so amazing! God Almighty, Lord of Glory, You have
called me friend.”

In John 15:14, 15 Jesus tells His disciples (of which I are one, and so are you!): “You are
my friends if you do whatever I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for a servant
doesn’t know what his master is doing, but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard
from My Father I have made known to you.” Basically he’s called us to know what’s really
going on, and to take an active part in our Lord’s business, kingdom and household.

Now consider for a minute your own relationship with your closest friend. Having just
one true friend in a lifetime is a real gift. We’re talking about a friend who is there when
everyone else leaves you flat. Someone you can trust with the keys to your house, your car and
your diary. Someone to whom you can sit down and pour your heart out over coffee. Someone
who calls you on the carpet when you mess up; who knows everything about you and still sticks
by you. If we’re fortunate enough to find that one true friend in the opposite sex, we do well to
marry that person. If we find another of the same sex to be our comrade-in-arms in addition,
we’re fortunate indeed. If it’s a brother or sister in the household of faith who can join us in
prayer, we’re blessed beyond measure.
But those who have realized that above and beyond the earthly sphere, God is that ultimate of best friends who transcends human relationships; the Friend who sticks closer than a brother, who knows us better than even we know us, and who still loves us beyond any human love ever could reach – those bask in the privileged place occupied only by God’s friends.

And those friends get close enough to him to have meaningful exchanges with him.

Let’s consider Abraham, the Friend of God. In Isaiah 41:8 the Lord calls Israel “the descendants of Abraham, My friend.” James remembers Abraham as the Friend of God in James 2:23. Now, to me, the true mark of my real friend is that they’re not afraid to get in my face and tell it like it is; to get the cards on the table and the dirty laundry sorted; to argue that sore point with me till it’s settled.

Now, that may very well stem from the fact that I am a descendant of Abraham the Friend of God, because if there’s one thing Jews are notorious for, it’s arguing. Argue, argue, argue! You can tell Paul was a Jew: the first thing he’d do upon entering a city was to go into the synagogue and argue the Scriptures. But in the strictly Jewish sense, the argument of Scripture is more of a dispute over differences till we convene at God’s truth. It’s the same kind of arguing God says in Isaiah 1:18 that he wants to engage in with us: “Come now and let us reason together, says the Lord, Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool.”

So God says, Look: Friends should give friends fair warning. Abraham’s my friend so I really oughta tell him I’m about to fry his nephew. So over after-dinner coffee at Abraham’s at the end of Genesis 18, God says, “Oh, by the way: I’m gonna destroy Sodom tomorrow.”

“Really. What’s up with that?” Abraham asks. “I mean, yeah, okay: I know the city’s a mess and most of the population lives in terrible sin – but there’s still some babies in that dirty
bath water. Some good folks do live there, too, you know. Okay, well, maybe there’s a pitiful few of ’em – like maybe just fifty or so – but, hey: are you gonna fry those fifty good people? That’s impossible, because you’re the Righteous Judge of all the Earth… Right?”

“That’s right,” God says, “And I’ll tell you what: If I find fifty, nobody fries. Okay?”

“Yeah… well, that’s okay… but… but, what if there’s a little bit less than fifty? Like, say, just forty-five? You wouldn’t go ahead and zap ’em over a little discrepancy like five people, right? Okay, yeah: I know, I know. I’m just dust and ashes, and you’re the Lord of the Universe but, hey: if we’re gonna do a deal here, whaddaya say to no frying if there’s just forty-five? I mean, what’s five measly people between friends?”

“Okay, no frying if there’s forty-five.”

“Hey, that’s great! But… umm… uh… what if there’s just forty?”

“I won’t fry them over forty.”

Now you’d think Abraham would be happy right there and not push his luck, but if anyone could Jew ’em down, it was the Father of the Faith. He keeps at it till he gets the Lord all the way down to just ten people. Unfortunately, there aren’t even ten, but since God likes Abraham’s style – and loves Abraham as his friend – he sends in a personal angel escort to literally drag Lot and his family out of Sodom before raining down the fire and brimstone.

Moses is another of God’s friends. “The Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend,” the Bible tells us in Exodus 33:11. And as a man speaks to his friend, Moses met God’s determination to wipe out Israel with… an argument!

Moses and God have just spent a wonderful forty days on Mount Sinai together in Exodus 32 when God breaks the bad news:
“So guess what your people are doing right now? Throwing a party and dancing around a golden calf! So, look: you just stay here a minute – I don’t want your eyebrows getting singed while I blitz the whole camp – then how about we start from scratch and make you a great nation! Huh? Whaddaya say?”

“Oh, hey, that’ll look really great, won’t it?” says God’s friend. “What will the neighbors think? ‘Oh, yeah, God really loves those guys: He just brought them out of Egypt to nuke ’em with a single lightning bolt and then eat popcorn and watch their bones bleach in the wilderness.’ I seem to recall a promise you made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob: something about their kids, and a Promised Land, and an inheritance…?”

God reconsiders and gives the congregation *nine more chances* while they continue to scream, pout and rebel all the way up to the border of the Promised Land. Then in Numbers chapter 14 they refuse to enter it, and God tells Moses, “Okay, So how many miracles do I have to do to get these people to believe I’m big enough to bring them into this land I promised them? Forget it: we’ll disinherit them and go back to the part where I make a new nation out of just you and your family.”

“Oh, yeah, right. Hey, that’ll look great in the tabloids: ‘God’s Chosen People drop dead within inches of the border because he can’t quite pull it off to bring them into the land he promised them.’ Anyhow, that’s not like you: you’re patient and merciful and forgiving, and you judge the guilty righteously.”

As always, God’s love and justice meet in the perfect solution: Don’t worry, he tells Moses. I’ll keep my promise while judging the guilty righteously, and this is how it goes down: the rebels die in the wilderness, but their kids inherit the Land of Promise.
Now, Abraham and Moses were not without their faults. In fact, they pulled some real boners. After lying to a couple of kings about his wife being his sister and thus jeopardizing her virtue to save his own hide (Genesis 12:10-20; 20:1-18), Abraham Father of the Faith agrees to Sarah’s scheme to help the Lord out by providing themselves their own son when they figured God had forgotten his promise about an heir (Genesis 16:2) – a little mistake that’s produced a war over Palestine that’s lasted right up to this moment. And Moses Giver of the Law was the guy who didn’t even keep the Abrahamic covenant and circumcise his own sons (Exodus 4:24-26) – let alone the part where he disobeyed God’s direct orders (Numbers 20: 8-12). So we see that God doesn’t expect his kids to be perfect. He just expects what a dad is entitled to expect: that they trust their dad and listen to him. Yes, they can argue, fuss and fume – as long as they realize Who’s in charge and who is still growing up.

Paul has the proper perspective: No, I haven’t arrived. I’ll never arrive here below, and I really do know who I am and what a mess I’ve made. But where does he go from there?

Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing
I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward
to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 3:13-14

Reminding us of all the heroes of the faith who were also mess-ups and still did great things for God, he says:

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily
ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Hebrews 12:1-2

That is to say, he knows the weights and the sin are there, and he knows how often he falls into the traps, but he also knows that Jesus is the one who plants faith in him, and Jesus is the one cheering him on at the sidelines, and Jesus is the one who will ultimately see him across the finish line and throw the first and biggest roses and confetti.

Dad the Lifesaver:

By the same token, we all have a row we gotta hoe as we build our walk in Christ. We have to keep our hand to the plow, he tells us in Luke 9:62. He also tells us there’s no turning back. If the farmer gets distracted and starts daydreaming halfway down the furrow, it’ll look more like a bowl of spaghetti than a farm row. It can happen to anyone. That’s why farmers drive a stake at the end of their projected row. As they keep their eye on the goal, they can drive a straight line to it. As you make your way to the finish line at the palace, just remember that Daddy’s there holding the plumb line for you, and don’t ever take your eyes off him.

The truth is that when we lose our focus it’s most often due to looking at the wrong things. Ourselves. Circumstances. People. Negative thoughts and words. It’s never because we’re focused on God or His Word, Jesus Christ. Getting a revelation of God, finding out who he really is and how much he really loves you, can literally save your life.
Hagar finds this out in Genesis 16:13, when she flees from Sarah’s harsh treatment before Ishmael’s birth. God meets her, tells her that she, too, will be the mother of a great nation, and sends her back to Abraham’s house. In point of fact, the Genesis account doesn’t tell us that Sarah treats her any differently upon her return. What changes is Hagar’s outlook and attitude, because she knows beyond a doubt that God is there for her. This certainty is reflected in her choice of a name for their meeting place: Beer Lahai Roi, The Well of the One Who Hears and Sees Me.

Similarly, Jacob finds God when he’s running for his life from Esau. On his rock pillow he dreams of the angels’ stairway to heaven. He scrambles to his feet and slaps his forehead. “Duh! God was right here and I didn’t even know it,” he concludes, and names the place Bethel, the House of God (Genesis 28:10-22). He builds an altar and promises to serve the Lord. God now has Jacob’s trust and faith, and Jacob returns home greatly prospered (Genesis 32:30). But God still wants Jacob’s heart and will. As he wrestles with the angel, Jacob realizes he’s desperate for God and that he won’t make it without getting God’s attention and blessing. During their close encounter, God gives him a hip injury as a souvenir. Jacob realizes a profound truth we could all benefit from: how lame we are without him. Jacob doesn’t mind a bit. “I have seen God face to face,” he concludes, “and my life is preserved.” He names the place Peniel, The Face of God.

Moses has the huge responsibility of leading God’s people and realizes he needs to see the Lord for himself, and that he needs to know him closely and continually. He knows if he can just see God and talk to him, all will be well. From the moment God seeks his attention in the burning bush (Exodus 3:4) Moses has enough on the ball to turn aside and take a closer look. That’s when God actually calls to him from the bush and tells him he’s on holy ground – why? –
because God is there. And wherever God is, that’s holy ground. That’s a pretty awesome thought, when you consider he lives within us! Or did you think you were holy because you’ve got it all together?

Speaking from personal experience, just let me say: Not!

Moses teaches his disciples to seek the face and the presence of God, too. After affirming God’s covenant with Israel in Exodus 24:10, Moses takes Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel to the foot of Mount Sinai where they all see the God of Israel on the streets of heaven and eat and drink before him, just before God calls Moses up alone to the summit for forty days and nights so he can give him the Ten Commandments.

But after the Golden Calf Incident, God says he’s sitting this one out and deputizing his angel to accompany the congregation. In Exodus 33:15 Moses says, “Hey, look, Lord: If you’re not going on this trip, neither are we. After all, you said you’re our stamp of approval to the world that we’re your special and separate people. So… are you coming, or what?”

“Okay,” God says. “Because you’ve found grace in my sight and I know you by name.” Wow. That’s a pretty strong endorsement. But it’s still not enough for Moses. He knows what it really takes for him to see this trip through. He needs to see God. Right now. For himself. Boy, you’d think forty days and forty nights would be enough face time for this guy. Not a chance.

“Please show me your glory,” he says.

“I will make all my goodness pass before you,” God tells him. “Here is a place by Me; stand on the Rock and I will put you in the cleft of the Rock and cover you with My hand” (Exodus 33:19-22). This is so like our Daddy God. He loves to draw us close to himself where we can see his glory; to be hidden in the Glory of God, who is Jesus the Rock; and to keep us there where we are covered and protected by our loving dad’s own mighty hand.
He renews his covenant with Moses, reinstates the tablets, and then comes down to the base of the mountain with him in the cloud and stands there with him. He looks at Moses so lovingly and gets so happy he gives him seconds, passing before him and proclaiming his Name to him all over again without Moses even asking:

The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, ‘The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in mercy and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin; by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children to the third and the fourth generation.

Exodus 34:6-7

Moses bows in worship and seizes his opportunity: “Thanks, God, and remember you said you’d go along on this trip and forgive us, right? – oh, and by the way, would you mind making us your inheritance? That would be so totally cool if we could be your inheritance.”

You can fairly see God smile and pat his head as he tells him, “You got it: we have a covenant and I’m gonna do amazing things for you guys that nobody else has ever seen because I’m gonna spoil you so rotten.” Our dad is truly the God of the zillionth chance.

Then there’s David, my hero. In one of his most famous songs, Psalm 23, he sings to his dad about how when everyone’s out to get him, it’s a no-sweat deal. A thousand spear points can surround him while he’s whistling in front of the mirror, dressing up for the black tie affair his faithful and all-powerful dad the king is throwing for him right there in the Shadow of Death. He’s gonna waltz in, sit down and party with his God at the incredible feast he’s spread out for
his son on the whitest of linen cloths, and drink from the goldest of goblets while his enemies look on with their jaws on the ground and eat their hearts out.

Now, remember: David was anointed King of Israel by Samuel at age seventeen while Saul was still on the throne and was getting his jollies chasing David all over the desert from cave to cave and hilltop to hilltop for more than ten years. The entire might of the Israeli army was on Saul’s side and David’s army was a small band of disgruntled outcasts. The picture wasn’t too pretty for David. But no matter. He plays the game and keeps a jump ahead, knowing his daddy’s in charge and therefore he’s on the winning side regardless of how dark things appear. And from that overcoming position, in spite of overwhelmingly dismal circumstances, he and God can sit at the royal banquet night after night, slapping each other on the back, pointing and laughing out loud at his enemies.

To know Him is to love Him

The key to staying saved for a long time is in knowing how much God loves you. As you reflect on His love you have no choice but to fall in love with Him all over again. You’ll realize God loves you and has your best interest at heart; he’s worthy of your love. He’s earned your trust and devotion. Satan knows that since you’re God’s child he can do nothing to you personally, but he also knows that if he lies to you enough he can get you to do things to yourself. So he tells you the same lie he told Eve: God doesn’t love you or have your best interest at heart. He’s just holding out on you so He can rule over you. If you believe the lie that God’s the Big Meany in the Sky who’s just trying to keep you from having it all, it’s just a matter of time before you’re eating at the world’s pig trough. Francis Anfuso says:
The problem is that we think God goes in and out of like for us. If you think His love fluctuates between fuzzy love and yelling and screaming you won’t want to be around Him and you’ll think He doesn’t want to be around you. The truth is that God is really head over heels in love with us. He’s filled with joy when He thinks about us the same way I love being around my kids. Thinking He cares something less for His kids is a misconception.

The devil tries to diminish your perspective of God’s love. But Psalm 139:17 says, ‘How precious are Your thoughts towards me; how great is the sum of them.’ As parents you want your kids to know your love is a constant. How infinitely more is God in love with us and committed to us? David said, ‘This I know: God is for me.’ David didn’t question God’s motives or care for him. His thoughts for us are wonderful thoughts, not angry thoughts. He didn’t send His Son to condemn us. He could have stayed in heaven and done that. He sent His Son to bleed to death in order to save us because He loves us.

You can only believe the lie that God’s not for you if you haven’t really gotten to know God well enough to realize that such a claim is inconsistent with his personality and track record. That’s the difference between Judas and Peter. On the face of it we can see that Peter messed up way more than Judas did. Regarding their relationship with the Lord, Judas only denied Jesus once, while we have Peter’s long history of opening his mouth and inserting his foot. But when
tragedy strikes, Peter knows enough to go out and weep bitterly and repent. Because Peter knows his dad. He knows his nature is loving, forgiving and redemptive no matter how low he’s fallen and how black things look for him.

    Judas spent the same three-plus years with Jesus and still didn’t know him. He spent those years criticizing and murmuring and, at the end, second-guessing God: *Surely God could never forgive what I’ve done. The only answer is suicide.* As I’ve always told my own kids: What could it hurt to ask? The worst you’ll get is a no, and that doesn’t put you back any further than you are now. Judas’ misjudgment of the Lord – his belief that he is an implacable, unforgiving father, rather than a loving and merciful Dad – cost him his life and his destiny.

    Esau committed a similar error when he found he’d thrown away his birthright: he sought repentance with tears, yes, but only before men. He sought the sympathy of his earthly dad, the only one that he supposed controlled his destiny, rather than the infinite mercy of his heavenly dad who could have restored him (Genesis 27:3-40; Hebrews12:16-17).

    It truly is a matter of life or death: We must see God for who he really is and get to know his wonderful personality, attributes and care for his children. This in turn helps us to see ourselves for who we really are and, as we realize how much he loves us anyway, we can’t help but give him all our love, our devotion and our lives.
**Like Father like Sons:**

*Striving to be a picture of our heavenly dad*

A parent must strive to model godly traits as much as humanly possible. That’s because your child’s eyes are on you at all times. Philips, Craig and Dean wrote: *I want to be just like You, because he wants to be just like me; I want to be a holy example for his innocent eyes to see.* And the redeeming thought they also reflected in the lyrics is that there’s hope because we’re “learning from the best father of them all.” Regardless of how we were treated by our less-than-perfect parents – and all parents fall into that category – we mustn’t let our tweaked little brains and mutilated perceptions be mirrored in our attitude toward our kids. Rather, we must pray that God’s overarching grace will allow us to present the best picture we can of his redeeming love – a love that causes pride to gleam in our eyes every time we see our kids just because they’re our kids; a love that doesn’t have to be earned by stellar behavior or a place on the Olympic team. In his book *FatherLove*, Richard Louv tells the story of Stan Hay, a kid from the inner city whose entire life was hung on his hopes of an athletic career:

When Hay was a boy growing up in Oakland, like many African-American men, he figured that sports was his ticket to somewhere. He doesn’t remember anyone telling him they admired him for who he was, only for who he would be.

One day, a scout for the Houston Colt 45s came to his door and told Stan’s mother that he would be a famous baseball player someday. That’s when the fear began. Maybe, he thought, he wouldn’t make it; maybe he wouldn’t be somebody, ever.
After a street brawl in 1965, he was sentenced at age seventeen to prison. He spent a year in Soledad. But his life was not without luck. A visiting coach from the University of Oregon saw him play football on the prison team. The coach worked for two years to obtain an early release for Hay and arranged a sports scholarship to the university. Stan Hay was finally going to be somebody.

Then during a bar fight a few weeks after he was released from prison, someone pointed a shotgun at him and shattered his ankle and his sports career.

Hay’s life and all his hopes of love and recognition were shattered along with that ankle. That’s the problem with giving kids recognition for who they may become someday rather than who they are: your kids. Hay’s example is extreme but we can see it on a smaller scale in our own homes. By all means don’t reward mediocrity in your children but do recognize small successes and do reward them proportionately. Give your kids accolades as earned, but by all means give them all your love and all your acceptance at all times. We mess up constantly, but God still gives us his. Dr. Kevin Lemans says:

A child’s sense of worth and belonging comes from contributing to the home life in which she has been nurtured and cared for. Her contribution might be as simple as milking a cow, feeding the chickens, or collecting eggs, but such a child grows up with a sense of belonging and purpose.
What can you do in the suburbs? Take out the garbage? Great – what will the kids do for the remaining twenty-three hours and fifty-five minutes of the day? Somewhere around the 1960s, suburban parents found the “answer”: kids need to prove their worth outside the home. We have to find something they’re the “best” in. If they fail at basketball, baseball, gymnastics, track, soccer, and chess, we try Girl Scouts, drama, piano lessons, art, spelling bees, you name it. And, whether we want it to or not, all this frenetic activity says one thing to our kids: Prove yourself.

I’m so glad I serve a God who says, “Kevin, I’ve proven my love for you,” rather than “Prove yourself, Leman.”

If you want to raise a well-adjusted daughter, don’t run her into exhaustion in a vain effort at helping her finally prove herself.

Prove your love. Prove your commitment. Prove your affection.

That’s what builds healthy kids.

King David said, “When my father and mother forsake me, then the Lord will take care of me” (Psalm 27:10) and the Lord himself says, “Can a woman forget her nursing child and not have compassion on the son of her womb? Surely they may forget you, yet I will not forget you” (Isaiah 49:15).

The implications to parents are clear: you’re human and you’re going to mess up. Yes, strive to show unconditional love to your kids. But do all with one goal in mind: to point them in the right direction so they can find out who’s their daddy. He’ll be there when you’re not.
Chapter Four

Daddy’s Hands

Mustard, cats and moisturizer

The inflated cost of a quart of yellow mustard is still just eighty-three cents.

To extrapolate the ratio of the tiny mustard seeds to other ingredients in the jar would boggle the mind of the most devoted seed counter. But God’s wry sense of humor compares our pathetic so-called faith to one mustard seed. He shook his head and smiled at us when he said that, just as when he said, “Don’t worry, you’re worth several sparrows” (Matthew 10:31). Notice he doesn’t say “faith as a tiny fish egg in an ounce of expensive caviar,” or “faith as a tiny bit of compressed coal dust as it becomes a diamond,” but rather, faith that literally gets lost in the sauce in a cheap jar of mustard.

In fact, what he actually said is, “If you had faith as a grain of mustard seed,” which implies we can’t scrape together enough of the stuff to offset one infinitesimally insignificant seed in the balance.

How well he knows us.

Last week God brought our cat home. Tigger had been lost for a full six weeks, since the day after we moved into our new house. During two years of construction she had come and gone freely from our temporary abode at an apartment one stop down the freeway. Of the three
cats, we’d expected her to be the most at home upon our return. After all, hadn’t she spent a joyous, carefree kittenhood in our dilapidated mobile home in that very same spot on that very same property? Okay, so the place had been bulldozed, the mobile home was gone and in its place stood a two-story frame-and-stucco she’d never slapped night vision on. So, what about all those land-on-your-feet feline instincts?

It was just no longer home to her, we told each other as the weeks wore on and we pretty much gave her up for dead – or at least lost forever. Truth be told, we’re just one block from the open range out here. Roadrunners, quail and cottontails frequent our patio and the hoot owls and coyotes perform our nightly serenade.

“Lord, I sure miss Tig,” I said recently. “If she’s still alive, could you please bring her home? How long it’s been isn’t even an issue for you.” Chris came in a few mornings later and said, “Guess what, honey? Tigger’s back!”

It kind of surprised me that I wasn’t really surprised. Then God slapped me upside of the head and showed me that – Duh! – he can bring back our kids just as easily as he can bring back our pets. That same morning our son Daniel, who had turned his back on God almost a year before, called to say he and his live-in girlfriend were coming into town to get married. The next morning he and his new wife came to church and she recommitted her life to Jesus. We’re counting the moments till Daniel and his brother Ben do the same. But we’re reminding ourselves, too, that God is faithful to his promises – and that has nothing at all to do with us.

We have a small plaque that advises: “Before you go to sleep tonight give your troubles to God – He’ll be up all night anyway.” When our kids are out there doing brainless things and shooting themselves repeatedly in the foot, it goes without saying that they’re constantly on our minds and in our prayers. But during those split seconds when they’re not – like, for instance,
when we’re asleep or we’ve put our gray matter in the pot to stew on some other current crisis – those kids are still on God’s mind and heart. He’s all over their case and hasn’t forgotten them for a nanosecond.

During that strategic instant when they’re babies who still have no say in the matter, we dedicate our kids to God, placing them in his hands, and to my knowledge God has never fumbled a catch. When they rebel or turn away from him – usually due to an over-inflated view of themselves – the exasperatingly human tendency is to give them up for dead – or at least lost forever. Especially if they’re as stubborn as their dear old parents. But at our inner core, our eyes and heart of faith will tell us the truth.

These days I find it increasingly necessary to apply heavy duty moisturizers to strategic places on my anatomy and to hoist things up that gravity has invariably sucked down – yet again – into the swirling black vortex. But when I massage the headache behind the lines running across my forehead, I rebuke my lack of faith.


Tigger lazily bathes herself on the rocking chair next to the computer desk. “So! You’ll be immortalized in print, Tig. Shall we hire a bulldog to fight off the paparazzi?” She gives me the raised eyebrow and silent meow, flips onto her back and plunges into yet another cat nap. Some of us were simply created for nonchalant fame and ten lives.

Are your kids far from God right now? No worries. His promises to you and to them will be kept. Temporary derailments from his intended purposes can’t cloud the crystal clear future
and destiny he has for them. It’s waiting right there for them when they return. They can run but
they can’t hide because the Hound of Heaven, the Holy Spirit, is after them.

But he’s after me, too, and it’s my priority job to hurry up and learn what he’s trying to
teach me so that we can all get out of this valley and onto the next mountaintop. Scriptures I’ve
known forever have come into play during this most excruciating trial of a parent’s life.

Scriptures like “Be still and know that I am God” and “Stand still and see the salvation of the
Lord” were written for big mouth New York Jews who feel they have to dive in and handle
everything themselves – and totally forget in the process to let God be God when it’s the most
crucial moment to do so. What a bunch of Indian givers we are! Here’s my child, God… oh, but
wait. Can I have that back for a second?

Why is it so hard for us to trust God with our kids? Trust, I mean, as in taking our sticky,
goopy little hands off the project, and backing up to give God enough breathing room to do his
thing. Can we do the job better? Permit me to guffaw. Their heavenly dad loves them way more
than you or I ever could. They were his first and they will be his last. They are his always, on
loan to us for just a moment in time. God knows that human beings can’t parent human beings.
That’s why he gives us human beings to parent: so we’ll come to the end of ourselves and learn
to trust them to him. So we’ll put them in his hands.

So we’ll remember who’s their daddy.

**The aha! factor**

At six-foot-three and over three hundred pounds, my dad was an impressive figure.

A hug placed my nose just above his belly button when I was thirty, and nobody could boom a
deeper version of Disney’s *Bibbity-Bobbity-Boo* down a hallway. His lifelong pursuit was to sink
an extensive, inextricable root system deep into New York concrete. The kids and grandkids all wound up out West but Dad the travel agent never left his first love, the core of the Big Apple – although if Broadway and genuine New York deli existed in some alternate universe he might have been seduced.

We grew up on live opera at the Met, Gilbert and Sullivan at Carnegie Hall and movies with a side of The Rockettes at Madison Square Garden. I was twelve years old when we went out to see the newly released *Mary Poppins* there, followed by hot dogs at Nedick’s. While blazing a trail through the humanity on the sidewalk in our quest for the subway entrance, Dad pointed out the Empire State Building to my five-year-old brother.

“Pick me up so I can see the top,” Steve said. In one fluid motion Dad swooped him from knee height to his favorite perch on his shoulders, from which superior vantage point I have no doubt he could see every last radio antenna. Neither of them acknowledged Steve’s statement of absolute faith as anything out of the ordinary. Of course he could see the top from Dad’s shoulders. Of course Dad would oblige him immediately. Of course the world would be his, because Dad would give it to him.

What a great statement of childlike faith in a father’s love and ability. Not only can my dad do anything – *Duh, of course, what planet are you from??* – but he can’t wait to pull it off just for me. A five-year-old has nothing to lose by admitting he’s three feet tall and needs a lift; that he can’t get the whole picture without Dad giving him the best seat in the house. And speaking of opera, the reason a box seat costs a whole lot more is because it’s high enough to offer a superior view from every angle – and that’s the view we most often miss out on.

When I find myself lost in the concrete jungle of setbacks, trials and things that I’m sure should have gone some other way and *what in the world is God thinking?* – I often ask him to
swoop me up to see the top. The observation deck may still be shrouded in dark cloud cover. I may miss an antenna or two. But I can usually come away with at least one *eureka*!

I call them heavy revvies – those moments of *aha*! – like the revelation I finally got from this passage I’d read hundreds of times before the light bulb finally glowed: “Trust in the Lord, dwell in the land and feed on His faithfulness. Rest in the Lord and wait patiently for Him. Cease from anger and forsake wrath. Do not fret: it only causes harm” (Psalm 7:3,4,7,8). When two of my sons walked away from serving him, God visited me with a real understanding of this verse. But not before my knee jerk reaction landed my foot squarely in their teeth.

*What*??! How could they even entertain the notion that God wasn’t worthy of their praise and their service and their whole life and heart? Hadn’t we raised them in church? Didn’t they know we smashed our own faces into countless brick walls trying to find God? Weren’t they grateful for this most precious of gifts virtually dropped in their laps? Didn’t we spend hours of Bible study in family devotions and expository homeschool classes exploring God’s unchanging word with them? Didn’t they know how many people would give anything for what they took for granted? I couldn’t believe I was back on page one with these guys, witnessing to them as if I were dealing with some random sinner on a skid row outreach who had never heard the Gospel.

Our other kids and kids-in-law spoke comfort to me in godly wisdom (after slapping me into five-point restraints), telling me these two were raised in the same truth in the same home and in the same way the other six were who still love and serve God; that they’re adult men already living for years on their own; that we had made godly deposits in their lives since birth and couldn’t tell them anything we hadn’t already; that they were responsible before God for what they did with what they had received; that they had to get their own brains back and make
the right choice to love and live for him. I thank God for bringing these precious nuggets to me, God’s perfect praise out of the mouths of our babes and babes-in-law.

But still it was obvious to me that I had somewhere dropped it and broken it, and as any Type A+ knows, that means you must run, not walk, to pick it up and fix it. I grabbed the toolbox and spent a good deal of time and effort pulling out everything I had. I applied liquid wrench; I pried, tugged and tightened. But mostly I hammered. I went back and spent quality time peering into the recesses of the box, dusting the corners and trying to remember where I’d put the rest of that stuff. You’d think after forty years of salvation I’d know I was rummaging through the wrong box. What I really needed was Dad’s. Finally I ran and grabbed it, popped the lid up, and there it was:

Trust. Dwell. Feed on his faithfulness. Oh, yeah: his faithfulness. Not mine. Now, there’s a heavy revvy in its truest form. It’s not about me. It’s not about them. It’s about God’s faithfulness and the fact that I can trust him (… yathink??) – so that I can quit being angry and fretting, which only causes harm (I’ll say)! I spent the next three months on my knees asking God to forgive me for everything I had said or done that would send them screaming in the other direction instead of drawing them to him (which pretty much took in all of it). So much for my best efforts. Then came another heavy revvy: Jesus said no one comes to him unless the Father draws him (John 6:44). There it is: I’m not the damage control department. It’s simply not my job description and I’m definitely not equipped for the task.

I finally realized my kids’ backsliding isn’t an unexpected turn for God. More and more as I’ve gotten swooped up and hung my backpack on his more than capable shoulders, I’m freed up to figure out the rest of the picture. From up here I can tell this isn’t just about my sons. It’s also about God working out stuff in me: namely, a deeper trust in Dad. At last I’ve learned I
Don’t have to worry about my kids no matter what the current craziness appears to be. They’re still right there in Daddy’s hands where Chris and I put them way back when, and that’s still the safest place in the world. It’s like putting the baby in the crib for the night: you can relax and unwind after that. You can lie down and sleep. So now I can trust and dwell because I’m feeding on His faithfulness.

Hang time

But yeah, okay: I admit it. There’s still the issue of that nagging little p word in verse seven. Rest in the Lord and wait patiently for Him. Sure, I’m not doing the work anymore; I’m giving it back to God; I’m resting and trusting and feeding and all that. But the agonizing part of trusting is waiting. In the microwave generation, wait is a four-letter word.

In his book *If You Want to Walk on Water You’ve Got to Get out of the Boat*, John Ortberg describes the vulnerable moment in which you’ve listened to God and let go—but you can’t feel his other hand catching you yet. Now, if you’re like me and entertain no delusions of NBA fame, you probably don’t enjoy dangling in mid-air for extended periods of time. Most of us don’t consider it among our favorite sports—although I will allow that it provides enormous amounts of entertainment for spectators on the sidelines. In actual execution, though, only Wile E. Coyote can hang in space for very long without experiencing fear of heights, fear of falling, fear of the unknown and all those other fears that necessitate lifelong therapy. That’s why Ortberg reminds us that “waiting requires patient trust.” At least successful waiting does. He likens it to the role of a trapeze flyer:

As the flyer is swinging high above the crowd, the moment comes when he lets go of the trapeze, when he arcs out into the air. For that moment,
which must feel like an eternity, the flyer is suspended in nothingness. It is too late to reach back for the trapeze. There is no going back now.

However, it is too soon to be grasped by the one who will catch him.

He cannot accelerate the catch. In that moment, his job is to be as still and motionless as he can. ‘The flyer must never try to catch the catcher,’ the trapeze artists told Nouwen, ‘He must wait in absolute trust. The catcher will catch him. But he must wait. His job is not to flail about in anxiety. In fact, if he does, it could kill him. His job is to be still. To wait.

And to wait is the hardest work of all.’’

Another favorite verse of mine in Psalm 22:30-31 says, “Cast your burden on the Lord and He shall sustain you. He will never permit the righteous to be shaken,” or in the King James, “He will never suffer the righteous to be moved.” This is not to say that trials won’t come and shake us up some. “Many are the afflictions of the righteous,” David said, “but the Lord delivers him out of them all” (Psalm 34:19). In other words, the hurricane can blow the leaves off the branches and break a few twigs; it may even destroy our clubhouse. But it can’t shake us out of our tree. Is this because we’re great men and women of limitless faith? I’ll try not to snicker.

Focus with me, now: Remember the lost-in-the-sauce mustard seed? That’s our faith… in our dreams. So, how come we’re not shaken? Because we’re up on Daddy’s shoulders and he’ll punch anyone’s lights out who tries to knock us off our favorite perch. The secret lies in our request for swooping, like the father who came to Jesus in Luke 9:24: “Lord, I believe,” he said, “but help my unbelief.” He knew he needed God’s help to see the top. Did he have faith? Just enough to get swooped – and that’s plenty because Dad takes it from there. Pastor Harold
Warner said Jesus followed his mustard seed remark with the mountain moving analogy in order to refocus the disciples’ attention from the measure of their faith to the measure of their God:

If you doubt Old Faithful, just hang around Old Faithful. Because Old Faithful is faithful, and the better you know it the more you’ll trust it. It’s not about trying harder but about knowing him better.

The size of our faith is not what we should focus on, but the size of our God. Trust in God unlocks faith. Don’t be paralyzed by what’s left undone in your life. When it’s all done we’re still unworthy. He loved me when I didn’t have my act together. But now I can kid myself that it’s together and miss out.

A sign on my fridge says: “I finally got it all together but I forgot where I put it.” That’s the real me, and thank God he knows the real me and loves me anyway. Confidentially, we both know the truth: I’ll never have it all together and there’s no sense kidding myself that I will. It’s like congratulating yourself on your humility, as I joke with the kids: “Have I told you lately how humble I am? It’s one of my best qualities.”

The same dad who said we’re worth more than a few sparrows also reminded us to consider the lilies, because their breathtaking beauty and grace is their greatest quality, but they can’t take credit for it. Now, why would he mention that? Have you ever noticed that nobody can deflate a kid’s swollen head like a parent? Because only you have the exact count on the dirty sox under his bed. One word from Dad can bring true humility and remind us that when we think we’ve arrived we’ve barely gone our first half-inch, and it’s usually in the wrong direction.
Matthias and the marshmallow

No waiting on register six!” “To bypass this greeting press the star key!” “Buy now and pay nothing for six months!” Any industry that caters to consumers knows how to get our attention: eliminate that annoying word. We hate to wait. Patience is a quality most of us don’t have in huge supply. But it’s that patient waiting that grows our faith and trust in our heavenly father. My pastor’s definition of patience is waiting on God’s appointed pace in God’s appointed place. As we sit right where he’s told us to, don’t fidget and don’t complain, don’t cut and run and don’t grab it all back and mess with it, we are acknowledging that Dad really does know what he’s doing. That no matter how long it takes and no matter what I go through in the meantime. I trust it will turn out better because I’ve left it confidently in his hands.

Real patience in its truest form, however, does indeed have that element of no fidgeting and complaining. Patience is not just the ability to wait, but the ability to wait well. Also known as delayed gratification and emotional intelligence, it’s the cornerstone of all the foundational building blocks of character. John Ortberg explains:

At the heart of emotional intelligence is the ability to delay gratification and not live at the mercy of impulse. The most celebrated example of this phenomenon is what has come to be called the ‘marshmallow test.’

A four-year-old is in a room with some marshmallows and told that the experimenter has to run an errand. If the four-year-old can wait till the experimenter returns, he can have two marshmallows. If he wants to eat right now, he can – but he only gets one. This will try the soul of any four-year-old – ‘a microcosm of the eternal battle between impulse and restraint, id and ego, desire and control, gratification and delay.’
Kids would develop all kinds of strategies to enable them to wait – sing songs, tell themselves stories, play with their fingers. One kid actually bent down and began to lick the table, as if the flavor had perhaps transmogrified into the wood.

What is most amazing is the impact this one character trait displayed at the age of four had on the lives of those who were part of this experiment. A Standford University research team tracked these children for many years. Those who were able to wait as four-year-olds grew up to be more socially competent, better able to cope with stress, and less likely to give up under pressure than those who could not wait. The marshmallow-grabbers grew up to be more stubborn and indecisive, more easily upset by frustration, and more resentful about not getting enough. Most amazingly, the group of marshmallow-waiters had SAT scores that averages 210 points higher than the group of marshmallow-grabbers!

Moreover, all those years later, the marshmallow-grabbers still were unable to put off gratification. And studies have shown that poor impulse control is much more likely to be associated with delinquency, substance abuse, and divorce. No wonder Goleman, in summarizing all this, calls the ability to wait well ‘the master aptitude.’ The inability to control impulses, the refusal to live in patient waiting and trust, lies close to the heart of human fallenness. Life has been that way since Adam and Eve took a bite from the forbidden marshmallow.
The widow who made a room in her house for Elijah understood the marshmallow principle. After a life of delayed gratification and service, finally the Lord grants her the one thing she had always wanted most: a son. Then abruptly her son dies. Does she go ballistic, wallow in self-pity, shake her fist at heaven and demand her rights? Uh… no. She lays the child in his bed, tells her husband no worries it’s all good, and runs for Elijah.

Now obviously she knows something is up. But she also knows who God is, and therefore she knows he’s well able to keep what’s committed to him (II Timothy 1:12) and that her God has the final answer. She puts it in Daddy’s hands and relaxes, and all is well. And that’s the right response. It’s the same response Abraham gave to God’s request to sacrifice Isaac. Scripture records in Hebrews 11:19 how the wheels turned in the patriarchal brain: “Concluding that God was able to raise him up even from the dead, from which he also received him, in a figurative sense.”

There it is: as Job said, the Lord gives and the Lord takes away. It’s really his call and everything I receive from him is his – now and always – to do with as he pleases. It’s all his stuff and therefore it all belongs in his hands and not in mine. Invariably, when I take matters into my own hands, I come to find out I’ve settled for second best, anyway.

It’s a case of Paul vs. Matthias. Jesus’ last word to the disciples is to go to the upper room and wait. There it is again: that little w word we all love so well. So the disciples give it a full five minutes before the big questions begin to arise: Why are we just sitting here? Hasn’t it occurred to anyone that Judas is dead and we’re short an apostle? God’s letting this whole thing fall through the cracks, our slip is showing and we must fix it immediately. So, do we pray and wait on God? Nah. We don’t do wait. Here’s a more spiritual approach: we draw lots.
Matthias is promptly chosen, everyone’s relieved and we never hear about the guy again. But a few chapters later God shows up right on time, knocks Paul off his high horse and the Apostle to the Gentiles is born – who between shipwrecks, running for his life, getting beaten and jailed and doing command performances before the entire gamut of the powers that be, still finds time to evangelize most of the known world and to write two-thirds of the New Testament.

Hmmm… maybe God’s best is worth waiting for.

Dad the Champ

When we put requests in his hands we must learn to say “it is well” as the widow did, regardless of circumstantial evidence to the contrary. The leanness of your checkbook is put in perspective when you consider your dad’s unlimited resources. Psalm 50:5-15 says he waters the earth; Psalm 65 says he crowns the year with goodness, his paths drip with abundance and he clothes the earth with flocks. Psalm 145:15-16 says “The eyes of all look expectantly to You and You give them their food in due season. You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing.” And this is what exasperates Dad the most. He wants his kids to look to Him for their needs and to just listen, for once:

Open your mouth wide and I will fill it. Oh, that My people would listen to Me! That Israel would walk in My ways! I would soon subdue their enemies, and turn My hand against their adversaries. He would have fed them also with the finest of wheat: and with honey from the rock I would have satisfied you.

Psalm 81:10,11,13,16
God’s kids have access to the cattle on a thousand hills because their dad owns all those mobile steaks and all the real estate under them. But his provision goes far beyond our physical need. Job says “I have esteemed the words of His mouth more than my necessary food” (Job 23:12), because man shall not live by bread alone but by every word from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4). Isaiah 40:11 says he feeds his flocks and gently carries his lambs. and John chapter 10 says that he is the good shepherd of the sheep. It’s pretty evident that our dad knows how to care for us in every possible way, and is excited about hearing and answering our silliest of small requests – you know, the if onlys, the kind of wishes a dad kills himself to grant, just to see his child smile. Don’t hesitate to ask for it because you think it’s too puny for him to bother himself with.

In II Chronicles 16: 9 it says: “The eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is loyal to Him.” Patience is keeping our heart loyal; being faithful to trust Dad to show up right on time. When his kid is getting bullied all he has to do is show up for him and save the day. Those who know their God will be strong and do exploits, Daniel 11:32 tells us. They know him so they know he’s bigger and stronger; that he’s there to fight the battle and be their champ and hero.

Are you feeling beat up? That’s because you’re not supposed to be in the ring. You’re the lightweight. Bring in the champ and watch that upstart cower. “Against none of the children of Israel shall a dog move its tongue,” God tells his kids in Exodus 11:7. Run to his arms: he’s your shield, your buckler, your tower of strength, and he squashed the bully for you! The eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, says Psalm 33:18, on those who hope in His mercy. Those are the kids who grin ear to ear, grab the popcorn and watch from a ringside seat while Daddy tosses the
robe aside and does unimaginably awesome things just for them. Because they know God’s in the business of defending his children.

Not permitting him to provide for you or to defend you is also a lack of trust. It can even fall under the category of denying the power of God. If we pray for Dad to meet our needs but then try to meet them ourselves, are we not having the form of godliness but denying its power, as it says in II Timothy 3:5? Isn’t this also a way of stealing God’s thunder, taking the glory for ourselves and trusting in our own abilities? “Behold great Babylon that I have built!” boasted Nebuchadnezzar. After seven years on a strict vegetarian diet of grass and rain water, he remembered: Oh, yeah: I’ll bet God was the one who gave me the ability to build and receive all that stuff, huh? I’ll bet he was keeping his promises. and yet I still thought I was all that.

Deuteronomy 8:18 says: “And you shall remember the Lord your God for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that He may establish His covenant which He swore to your fathers.” Remember that next time you jump up from your knees and run off with your credit card to fix it all regardless of what you just prayed for. Philippians 4:6 says my God will supply my every need. That means I can rest assured that. even if what I need doesn’t even exist, he’ll create it just for me because I’m his daughter and he loves me. Whatever it takes, he’ll supply everything just so I can give him all the glory and tell him he’s my hero.

Yes, our dad’s the undisputed King of the castle, but we’re the ones who get to “come boldly before the throne of grace to obtain help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16). Anyone can shuffle into the palace courts and hang out on the fringes, but who dares to come boldly into the throne room? Only the heir has unlimited access, day or night, and it’s the monarch’s joy and thrill to turn his attention to him. Meantime the courtyard contingent gets to go see seventeen
secretaries and take a number for a two-minute audience three years down the road. Such is our position of privilege with our Daddy.

And yet religion often makes him out to be Father God the Furious and Implacable. You know this kind of dad. Nothing you can do will ever please him. You can never be good enough; you can never get anything right, so it’s just a given that he’s always angry with you. But let’s put this in perspective a bit: Why would God waste time being angry when he could just fry the whole globe along with you and the rest of its inhabitants, and just start over from scratch? Why would he take time at all to deal with us and teach us? Why would he come down to be a human, of all things, to live and suffer and die just to bring us back into sweet fellowship with himself? Because if anyone knows the meaning of loving patience, it’s your dad.

To get tweaked, give up on people and go postal is human. To forgive is divine. Thank God we’re not God. or we’d all be grease spots on the highway of life before any of us hit mile marker one. As I look at all the extremely unlovely people like me that appear on page after page of Scripture, I continually see the crowds moving away from those people in droves, and I see only Jesus moving toward them. Coming closer. Always heading their direction to save them from themselves and their mess and to remind them how much they’re loved. Thank God for grace! That means there’s hope for me, too. I don’t ever take for granted all the love in Daddy’s hands.

**Lose the training wheels**

My daughter Debbie held up a sippy cup and asked her two-year-old if he was thirsty. He reached for the drink, pumping his small fists in anticipation.

“What do you want?” she coaxed. “Do you want juice?”
“Oof!” was the delighted response.

“Say juice, please.” Seth clasped his hands behind him.

“Oof … ees!” he dead-panned with a final emphatic nod.

The juice was immediately awarded while Mom and Grandma agreed he was way beyond adorable. A parent is all over a child’s needs before they’ve even registered, and their delight is in supplying them. But to have the need met, that kid must still ask – and nicely, too.

Jesus said your heavenly father is way ahead of you, too – he knows exactly what you need so you shouldn’t even worry (Matthew 6:32). But he still revels in your baby talk because it’s just too cute. Next time you wax eloquent with your best Sunday morning King James prayer, remember God says we don’t even know how to pray or what to pray for because we’re too weak and too small, but Dad sends the Holy Spirit to fill in the holes in our vocabulary with groanings that can’t be uttered, making intercession for the saints according to the will of God (Romans 8:26-27). In other words, he cleans it up and presents it properly for us.

From the very beginning Dad is there to nurture and protect his kids. He picks us up, cuddles and carries us; he sets us down to crawl, and watches us take our first baby steps with consummate pride. When we fall he lets us cry, wipe our nose and get back up, knowing that falling is part of the walking process. We won’t get strong if he continually rescues us from every distress. But he does say he’ll never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). He does walk with us and he does hold our hand. In Isaiah 45:1 God speaks of “Cyrus whose right hand I have held,” as this pagan king was used as a tool in God’s plan. Cyrus sent the captives home to rebuild the temple at Jerusalem, for which purpose he was anointed of God, the Scripture says.

Daddy holds our hand on the operating table, too, when surgical procedures are called for. He knows we must go under the knife and he knows it will all come out better in the end, but
he also knows there will be pain in the process. While we’re lying there having things ripped out of our innards, suffering a loss that leaves our gut hollow like losing a child – whether to physical or spiritual death – he reaches out to us. And if we’re smart enough to reach back, grab on and never let go, we’ll make it. During those crucial moments God’s comforting arms wrap around us through the entire painful procedure, giving us a divine transfusion of his strength and love.

Still, God is also dedicated (as any good father is) to seeing his kids grow and mature into useful citizens in the kingdom. It’s cute to be short, eat baby food and say Dada at two years old. It’s definitely not attractive at twenty-two. God wants us to eventually lose the bottle and sink our teeth into a fat, juicy steak (I Corinthians 3:2). His desire is that we no longer be infants but grow up in God as he raises us up to what’s ahead. The baby carriage was cozy; the tricycle was low and stable; the training wheels were a tremendous help. But now it’s time they came off, as we start some more mature cycling along the path Dad has chosen for us.

It’s an unfortunate fact that growth never occurs while we’re in the warm and fuzzy comfort zone of Dad’s lap. It’s in the hard tests that occur while he’s away for a time that maturity arrives. “Endure hardness like a good soldier of Jesus Christ,” Paul told his son in the faith, Timothy. There’s a good, solid reason you don’t find parents at Boot Camp during some of the darkest times that try men’s souls. Because in six short weeks the unsuspecting greenhorn recruits are shaved bald, stripped, uniformed, hollered at, run ragged beyond human endurance and brought right up to the brink of disintegration. By the time they let the parents back at ’em it’s all over: they’re soldiers. At graduation our son could recite two dozen cadences, answered every inquiry with a proper Army Hooah! and knew that “Blood, blood, blood makes the green grass grow.”
That’s certainly true of the green grass lining the Christian walk – if you’re really serious about it. Paul was shipwrecked twice; thrown in prison repeatedly; beaten, stoned and left for dead; and let down over the city wall in a basket. So when he exhorts his son in the faith, Timothy knows it’s based on personal experience and example. In Acts 23 God tells Paul he’ll stand before Caesar, so he knows that sooner or later he’ll wind up in Rome – God just neglects to mention the part where he gets shipwrecked and bitten by a cobra on the way there.

Pastor Harold Warner said:

It’s not always smooth sailing and he may not change your circumstances, but God promises to be with you in the storm. Jude says he’ll present us in his presence without fault and with great joy. It doesn’t say how – it may be on a floating board – but it doesn’t matter because you’re still safely home.

When the winds howl and the waves crash in on us, that’s when we’re as sure as the disciples were that God doesn’t care if we perish. Surely he can’t be watching me go through all this if I’m his beloved child. Where is he right now when I need him most? Busy with other concerns? In some other part of the kingdom a zillion miles away with his back turned?

The three Hebrew children found out just how close he really is to us in the fire. He’s the fourth man in the furnace… but you don’t see him ’till you’re deep inside. When all seems lost, in the middle of being roasted and tried and purified, he steps into the flame right beside us and we can rejoice in trials and see Dad our hero get all the glory as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego did. And I could be wrong, but somehow I think they may have had their faith increased just a tad as well.
**Fear this**

The post-boomer generation has grown up with the tag line *No Fear*. While it sounds totally hip on a T-shirt or sunglasses, it’s hardly a mantra to live by. A large gulf lies between boldness and bravery, and many a time boldness nudges its way over the thin line into foolhardiness, a.k.a. brainlessness.

Conversely, real bravery is not a lack of fear, but rather action taken in the face of fear. When a Boeing 727 plunged into the Potomac River two miles from the White House in 1982, two people emerged as heroes during the rescue: Arland Williams and Lenny Skutnik.

Known as the "sixth passenger," Williams survived the crash, and passed lifelines on to others rather than take one for himself. He ended up being the only plane passenger to die from drowning. When one of the survivors to whom Williams had passed a lifeline was unable to hold onto it, Skutnik, who was watching the unfolding tragedy, jumped into the water and swam to rescue her. Both Skutnik and Williams (along with bystander Roger Olian) received the Coast Guard Gold Lifesaving Medal. The bridge was later renamed the Arland D. Williams Jr. Memorial Bridge.

What causes a man to jump into the freezing river where 78 others have just perished before his eyes? No fear? Or is it that drowning is an acceptable risk since the alternative is unthinkable? In a split second decision, true heroism demands that self-sacrifice take center stage, and that’s a decision that’s all about fear: *fear* as in respect for others and respect for one’s own deep-seated conviction that life is precious and must be saved at all costs.
The reality of fear as evidenced by respect rendered to others has suffered greatly in the last generation and, sadly, we’re beginning to see the fruits of it. The current culture reflects the philosophy that nobody anywhere at any time is worthy of either respect or honor. An entire generation has grown up with such an egotistical outlook that it may very well go down in history as the first generation with nothing of worth to pass on to their offspring, whom they’ve deemed unworthy to receive and operate under that tough love that demands something of them.

God permits us to go through the hard stuff in order to toughen us up so we can rise to the challenge before us on the battlefield of faith. This is real love. The growth process can be painful and the devil uses it to make his case that God doesn’t love us. He plays on our human emotions: “Curse God and die!” – just as every recruit is sorely tempted to take out the DI who’s barked in his face or has a boot in his back. But once on the field, the soldier is forever grateful he wasn’t sent out unprepared. He realizes the knee-jerk response of immediate respect and obedience was hammered into him to preserve his life. Boot Camp has provided an invaluable service: it has ingrained in the soldier the discipline necessary to endure hardness and survive.

Fatherly love also means God’s the boss and he demands obedience for our own good. When David sinned with Bathsheba he repented and was forgiven, but the child still died. David responds properly by keeping his heart right and submitting to discipline so he can move on. So there’s the lesson: When discipline comes just be respectful, endure the punishment and learn your lesson. In his book *Straight Talk to Men and Their Wives*, James Dobson tells us about the role respect plays in repentance.

Repentance is a word that’s often misunderstood. What does it really mean? Billy Graham defined repentance as having three parts to it. The first is conviction. You have to know what is right before
you can do what is right; and you have to know what is wrong in order to avoid those misbehaviors. Repentance also involves a deep awareness that you stand guilty before the Lord.

I’ve seen people who call themselves Christians and say, ‘Yes, I believe in Jesus,’ but they seem to have no real comprehension or awareness of their own sin and guilt. They have no contriteness of heart. From the Scripture in James we see that even demons believe and tremble; yet many individuals believe and do not tremble.

It’s true, the prince has unlimited access to the king. But he doesn’t just bop into a state dinner in his Levis and shades and interrupt an international summit. Even the heir must respect authority and follow protocol. In the case of Daddy God our respect comes in the form of obedience and awe, which is the only proper response to seeing him as he is.

Exodus chapters 19 and 20 show us how God taught his kids some respect. When he first invites the children of Israel to the base of Mt. Sinai he wants them to know he’s setting aside time just for them. Wash up, he tells them, and put on your Sunday best because this is our special time together. He appears in his awesomest majestic best, speaking to them out of a fire that ignites the entire summit, complete with thunder and lightning. He’s doing the natural daddy thing: whipping up a spectacular time, showing off for the kids in the hope they’ll be impressed, jump in and enjoy.

“Move in here a little closer – okay, but watch out for those flames! Stand right there… no, no: back a few inches – okay, that’s good. Now just stay there and listen: I have some important stuff to tell you.” But his children don’t get it. They monumentally miss the point,
freak out, and go running to Moses. “You talk to us!” they tell him. “If God talks to us we’ll die!”

Now, why would God go to all the trouble of rolling out the red carpet and putting together that first-class fireworks display if he just wanted to corral the kids and toast them? It reminds me of the time my next-door neighbor was giving his kids rides on one of his horses. Mimi my eleven-year-old horse-lover told me all about it at dinner, adding that “Manny offered to give us rides, too, but we said no because we didn’t have permission.”

“What? Why didn’t you come home and get permission?”

“Well, I figured you wouldn’t say yes.”

“As a matter of fact I would have said yes – but you didn’t even give me a chance.”

We’re so prone to second-guess God and write ourselves off from whatever privilege he may have in store. He’s trying to reach out in love, and all the while we’re so sure that he’s storming our way with a quiver full of lightning bolts. Moses tells the people:

Do not fear [as in, don’t freak out]; for God has come to test you, so that His fear [i.e., awe, respect, and keeping a safe distance] may be before you, so that you may not sin.

Exodus 20:20

(Brackets mine, obviously... at least I hope it’s obvious!)

There we have the explanation: Fear God, but don’t be afraid of him. How does that work? Just as it does with parental fear, i.e. respect. Every one of us can go through the mental pages of our life’s journal and bring to mind what we could and couldn’t get away with growing up with our folks, and what fell into the category of something we’d never dream of doing. Why
was it unthinkable? Because proper parental fear kept us in line, and that was usually for the best. This is the kind of healthy fear that produces first-class citizens, and should never be confused with an unhealthy trembling-in-the-boots fear associated with abuse that causes a child to flinch whenever a parent is around. Nevertheless, the latter is most often the kind of fear we associate with a loving father God, just as the Israelites did. If those were my kids I’d be really sad to see they didn’t know me any better than that.

*Ironclad velvet*

My dad and my step-dad were at extreme opposite ends of the disciplinary scale. Dad was Mr. Easy-going Non-confrontational and had a tendency to let things slide, perhaps more than he should have. When he did get upset the fireworks rivaled Mt. Vesuvius. Papi (Spanish pronunciation: *Poppy*) was the ultimate old-school Latin American disciplinarian who blinked at nothing, although he did encourage closeness and affection here and there.

That both dads loved me was always a concrete certainty: they just came at it from different directions. In my childhood naïveté I just knew if I could combine ingredients from both these guys I’d find the most perfect dad on earth. Then I found the perfect dad and realized he’s not on earth. But at last I knew the secret formula by which I can now live in grace as a disciplined child of God:

\[
\text{Love} + \text{discipline} = \text{compassion} + \text{righteous judgment of sin.}
\]

Here’s the paradox. Compassion and judgment must go hand in hand. Love and discipline must go hand in hand. That’s why God must turn his back on his own son as he carries out the sentence for sinful humanity – here’s the ultimate meaning of the parental *this is gonna*
hurt me more than it hurts you! – because God himself must pay the price to bring the kids he loves back into his arms and hold them close once more.

But to achieve that intimacy he can’t tolerate the sin that separates them from him. It must be judged. And as his kids grow, spankings will certainly be administered because Proverbs 3:11-12 says the father corrects the son in whom he delights, and Proverbs 15:10 tells us of harsh discipline reserved for him who forsakes the way.

We’re made in God’s image. Just as a parent can be hurt by an ungrateful kid, so can our father in heaven who reaches out to us in love and gives us everything, only to be repaid with indifference. In Isaiah 63:8-10 we get a God’s eye view of the inner workings of divine discipline. Here is what truly grieves his heart:

For He said, ‘Surely they are My people, children who will not lie.’

So He became their Savior. In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the Angel of His Presence saved them; in His love and in His pity He redeemed them; and He bore them and carried them all the days of old. But they rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit: so He turned Himself against them as an enemy, and He fought against them.

In Jeremiah chapter 32 we see God’s righteous judgment on Israel’s sin. They’ve forgotten him again, and he’s definitely mad at his kids and punishes them. It can seem pretty harsh, as spankings usually do. But read on and see how immediately after the spanking he brings them back in love, explaining the real purpose of the discipline:
Then I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear [respect] Me forever, for the good of them and their children after them. And I will make an everlasting covenant with them that I will not turn away from doing them good: but I will put My fear [respect] in their hearts so that they will not depart from Me. Yes, I will rejoice over them to do them good, and I will assuredly plant them in this land, with all My heart and with all My soul. For thus says the Lord: Just as I have brought all this great calamity on this people, so I will bring on them all the good that I have promised them. Jeremiah 32:42-43

Here’s the redemptive heart of our God, the God of the zillionth chance. He’s the God of loving restoration. His father’s heart can’t bear to see the kids feeling rejected and out of harmony with Him after they’ve been spanked. So he brings them back, covers them, cuddles them and mends their hurting hearts, restoring them to perfect harmony so they have no choice but to fall in love with him once more.

Pastor Ashgar Kofoor explains the process of divine judgment and restoration this way:

Look at Israel’s history: When He speaks to His people and they don’t heed Him He sends the heathen against them as judgment.

But then it’s Passover and three million Jews are in Jerusalem sacrificing lambs as the Lamb of God is being sacrificed. He says, ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do,’ because when we sin we have no idea how much we’ve hurt Him. Jesus had
to be separated from His Father for your sin. In light of this there can only be one response: Live for the One who died for you.

Jesus promised us he’d never leave us comfortless. When I’m feeling the most beat up and kicked to the curb, I tell my Daddy God frankly: “I know in my head that you love me and haven’t left me, but I need to feel your arms around me in my heart.” Then he reaches down and picks me back up and cuddles me in his big, strong, deliciously comforting arms.

God’s in his heaven. I’m in his lap. All’s right with the world.
Like Father like Sons:

Striving to be a picture of our heavenly Dad

Daddy's Hands

By Holly Dunn

I remember Daddy’s hands folded silently in prayer,
And reaching out to hold me when I had a nightmare.
You could read quite a story in the callouses and lines,
Years of work and worry had left their mark behind.

I remember Daddy’s hands, how they held my Mama tight,
And patted my back for something done right.
There are things that I’ve forgotten that I loved about the man,
But I’ll always remember the love in Daddy’s hands.

I remember Daddy’s hands working ‘till they bled.
Sacrificed unselfishly just to keep us all fed.
If I could do things over, I’d live my life again.
And never take for granted the love in Daddy’s hands.

CHORUS:

Daddy's hands were soft and kind when I was cryin’,
Daddy’s hands were hard as steel when I’d done wrong.
Daddy’s hands weren’t always gentle, but I’ve come to understand
There was always love in Daddy’s hands.

Holly Dunn’s chorus is the picture of the love of my perfect Dad in heaven. Soft and kind; hard as steel; and always full of love. It’s the picture a parent falls so short of, yet the one we must try to model for our kids so they can learn who their heavenly daddy is. The best part is that God will help us because he loves them, too, and doesn’t want them to get a skewed picture of who he is.

Sure, we’re going to mess it up. Often. But as we strive for consistency in discipline and grace to cover their lack, remembering to mix this with tenderness and approachability as our Dad in heaven does, we are building a strong foundation. Dr. Kevin Leman tells us:

When Hannah was very young and just learning to write, she penned a short message after she got in trouble:

_Dad, I love (heart) u and hope your madness goes away. Tell me when it does because I need to ask you something. Love (heart),

Hannah._ Hannah knew I was angry, and she knew that she should probably let things cool off before we talked. But she also felt confident that the relationship was rock solid. She could look forward to the near future when we could communicate with words. Her letter shows a healthy fear – respect mixed with trust. She knew I was upset with her, but she also knew there were still tender feelings of commitment and love.
Those of us who come into a marriage lacking a good daddy reference point can break the downward spiral in raising our own kids as we find in God that true father figure. Carolyn Schlicher relates her own experience:

While I enjoy a relationship with my earthly father as an adult, it is due only to the transformation God did in my life and the power of forgiveness and mercy He continues to bestow on me…

Sometimes I still curl up in my bed, clutching a pillow to my stomach. The difference in being transformed is that now I can wait expectantly for my Daddy to come in. To hold me. To rub my back. To tell me that I’m beautiful. To share that life is hard, but He’s not going to let anything hurt me. Things I craved to hear in the past now flow regularly to my ears and heart, and when I stop crying and clean up, I know He’s there to walk me out of the bedroom and back downstairs to my reality.

My children hear these things all the time. My husband’s lap is always open for a snuggle, and tears are always dried to the cheeks before he lets them up again. It is natural for them to transfer that understanding to God because of Darryl. My heart rejoices that where he and I pioneered and labored in our relationship with God, now the children assume the land was always this good.

He’s my King, my Lord, my Master and I humbly submit to him because of his might. But I also boldly approach His throne sometimes to hop up and nestle down into His utter Abba love.
Works Cited


Anfuso, Francis. “God Likes You.” (Rock of Roseville Church, March 5, 2003). Sermon.


Maxey, Al. “*Abba!* Father! From the Anguish of the Anointed to the Assurance of the Adopted.”

Napier, K. B. “*Abba,* Father.”


Orthodox Research Institute. “The Name of God: *Abba*”


Smith, Alvin. “No Shame in His Name.” (The Door Christian Fellowship Church, June 30, 2004). Sermon.


