

What if Your Father Didn't Love You?

By David Powlison

This is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins—I John 4:10.

If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, will He not also give us all things with Him?—Romans 8:31f.

The love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us—Romans 5:5.

You have received the Spirit of sonship. When we cry "Abba! Father!" it is the Spirit Himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God—Romans 8:15f.

How do you come to know the love of God the Father? The passages of Scripture just cited speak of two aspects. First, there is a blunt, inescapable, historical fact: Jesus Christ went to an agonizing death out of love for sinners. Second, there is a powerful internal dynamic: the Holy Spirit pours out God's love in us to create the child's trusting response. *Did God act in love? Does God act now in love? Yes and amen.* "There are some defeats more triumphant than victories."² The love of Christ—that converts enemies into thankful children—contains both anguish and glory. He who wore the brutal crown of thorns now wears the radiant crown of glory. God's love is effective, both then and now.

But what about people who seem to know neither the fact nor the dynamic? You know such people. I know such people. The crown of thorns leaves them cold. The cries from the cross evoke a shrug. The Holy Spirit is a theory. There is little or no "Abba,

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²See our back cover. Quotation from Montaigne.

Father" in their hearts. How do you reach them? How does God reach them?

Listen to a statement I've heard repeatedly, both from Christian counselors and from struggling Christians: "You can't really appreciate God as Father if you had a poor relationship with your human father." This statement logically correlates to a second statement about counseling methods and Christian growth. "If you have had parent problems in your personal history, you need to experience some sort of re-parenting or corrective emotional experience. You need the love of some father substitute, therapist, mentor or support group if you are then to be able to experience God as a loving Father."

Are these statements #1 and #2 true? If your father was abusive, demanding, critical, neglectful or selfish, are you crippled from knowing God as a loving Father? Must you first experience a corrective human relationship in order to make "God is my Father" a nourishing reality?

These two statements prove false under examination. They distort the nature of the human heart and why it is that people believe lies about God. They flatly deny the power and truth of God's Word and the Holy Spirit. They replace the Almighty God with an almighty psychotherapist, whose tolerance and affirmations of people retool the heart for a god who will merely tolerate and affirm.

This is not to say that people with poor human parents don't often project those images onto the true God. People often imagine a Satan-like god. Then (naturally!) they state that such a god is untrustworthy and unloving. Statement #1 appeals plausibly to a common phenomenon: "I had a rotten parent. I think God is rotten." But is the plausible connection between these facts the real connection? You must dig below the surface of the pat answer. Do people twist their view of God *because* they have had sinful parents or for some other reason? Are there any people with bad parents who have a great relationship with God? Are there any people with good parents who have a rotten view of God?

Statement #2 also appeals plausibly to a

common phenomenon: "It really made a difference to meet a person I could trust, and my relationship with God grew." Of course, good, caring, wise friends are a tremendous assist to change. A godly counselor is like a godly parent in many ways. But is the plausible explanation of change the right one? Again, you must dig. Do affirming human relationships correct the problem of mis-seeing God, or is there a different primary solution? Are there any people who know a person they trust yet still think God is untrustworthy? Can a relationship with a person you trust mislead you further about God?

God is my King, Shepherd, Master, Savior, and God

Think first about this. In the normal course of life, *none* of the words God uses to describe Himself have wonderful experiential correlates. Sinful human fathers are not unique in misrepresenting God. Consider, for example, "*God is King*." Human rulers are frequently impotent, remote, tyrannical or corrupt. To whom do you look for examples of what God the King is like: Queen Elizabeth? Bill Clinton? Saddam Hussein? The judges in the Philadelphia traffic court? God-imaging rulers have always been decidedly rare. Does your experience of figureheads, politicians, tyrants, and grafters cripple you from knowing God as King and Judge? It needn't. God Himself informs you about bad kings, mediocre kings, and good kings, so you can learn to tell the difference. He tells you about the just and the unjust, the fair and the unfair, the consistent and the erratic. The Bible shows and tells what sort of king God is. Do you allow the Word or experience to dictate your perception of God? You project human experience onto God at your peril. But to those who have ears, the Holy Spirit speaks through the Word to argue with and reinterpret life experience. Truth increasingly informs subsequent experience.

Consider another example: "*The LORD is my shepherd*." Human shepherds generally provide us dubious exemplars. Few are like Philip Keller, who portrayed so winsomely the care and wisdom of the shepherd's craft (*A Shepherd Looks at the Twenty-third Psalm*). What if the real-life shepherds you knew were ignorant menials or drunken drifters? Or what if all you've known are picture book scenes of lambs and fair youths gamboling in green meadows? Is either picture descriptive of God? Is Psalm 23 then powerless to strengthen you until you know a Philip Keller-type shepherd? Of course not.

Consider also the shepherds of God's flock whom you've known. Some people can point with joy to a "godly pastor who made such an impact on my life." But other people grew up under false teachers, greedy willful, arrogant and careless men, as Ezekiel 34 details. Does this mean that you can gain no comfort from the

fact that the Lord is a shepherd until you have the corrective experience of knowing a godly pastor? Ezekiel 34 (and then John 10) argues the opposite. God assumes we can hear comfort straight from Him even if people have betrayed our trust: "I am against these evil shepherds, and I, the good shepherd, will myself come and take care of you, my flock." The existence of perversity does not make us blind to purity. Will you believe your experience of sinful men or will the truth of God remake your experience? Get first things first. The Holy Spirit often *uses* godly shepherds but does not *require* them; He is powerful enough to reveal the Chief Shepherd even without noble human models.

Or consider that "*The Lord is my master, and I am his bond slave*." How do people typically experience authority figures—masters, bosses, supervisors, commanding officers, CEOs, management? Often there is estrangement, rivalry, manipulation and suspicion between masters and underlings. Literal slavery has always been full of degradation and resentment. Yet God chose a word that is loaded with such negative experience and expects us to experience it as a delight. He portrays Himself as a kind master and us as willing slaves! What a shock Paul's slavery language must have been to any resentful or despairing slaves. But how liberating, once he or she grasped the point. Again, frequently one-sided experience must yield to two-sided truth. There are both good and bad master-slave relationships. Will you believe God or the world you've known? The Holy Spirit is effective to renew minds.

Consider this biblical image: "*God is my Savior, Rescuer and Helper*." What are human beings like who play the savior by rescuing or fixing others? Perhaps they have a "messiah-complex." They are proud. Meddlesome. Self-righteous. Controlling. It's no fun being helped by such a would-be helper! Or perhaps they are "enablers," whose self-trust, hyper-responsibility, fear, and sentimentality actually feed the problem. Such saviors often become depressed or embittered. If you have only known pseudo-saviors in your human experience, are you crippled from richly knowing Jesus Christ as your Savior? Amazingly, somehow God seems to be able to reveal Himself as utterly Godly without utterly godly people necessarily showing the way.

Consider one last example, the ultimate example: "*The LORD is God*." What is the typical human experience of "God"? Depending on whom you listen to, God is a philosophical abstraction, your higher power, an idol, an experiential high during mantra meditation, a remote tyrant, a good buddy, creative energy, a benign grandfather, or even yourself. All these images of God grossly misshape God. Is it impossible for me to know the living and true God if I have spent my life hearing

and worshiping such false images? The Bible everywhere repudiates such an idea and offers to “open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light” (Acts 26:18). God is in the business of changing people’s minds; He is not hindered by distortions. He can reveal Himself, “shining into our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” He doesn’t need people to prepare the main course so that He can creep in with dessert. God is powerful, and people can repent of believing lies. Life experience is not supreme.

In each of the above examples, to say that life experience dictates a person’s reality is absurd. In fact, the very experience of disappointing and distorted images can make you long to know the *real* King, Shepherd, Master, Savior and God. “My pastor growing up never taught me about God. How I rejoice that Hebrews 13:20-21 is true, that the great Shepherd of the sheep shed His blood for me and teaches me to do His will. My boss is manipulative and deceptive. How I rejoice that Ephesians 6:5-8 is becoming true in me and that I can serve Christ with integrity instead of brooding bitterly or fearfully! The God I grew up hearing about seemed like a remote killjoy. Praise the real God that Psalm 36 is true, and He is an immediate refuge and a fountain of love, light and joy!”

The Holy Spirit weighs more than fallen experience. Why for so many people should “*God is Father*” seem to be an exception? Must your own father dictate the meaning of that phrase until a substitute human father puts a new spin on it?

But God is my Father?

Concepts from our psychologized culture saturate the way people—even Christian people—think about themselves and others. The intellectual source for the notion that your experience of your father determines your view of the heavenly Father is psychodynamic psychology, not the Bible. The notion was developed by men such as Sigmund Freud and Erik Erikson. They observed that people often fabricate their own gods. Psychodynamic theory made this “from the bottom up” pattern into a normative explanation for ideas of God. It denied that the real God revealed Himself “from the top down,” rebuking vain imaginations with truth. The psychodynamic god was a projection of the human psyche. Various popular versions and variations of this way of thinking now infuse our culture.

“If my father didn’t love me, I can’t know God as a loving Father.” Of course, this idea rings a bell in the human heart. As sinners we tend to manufacture false images of God, and human fathers are one prime candidate. As sinners we duck responsibility for our unbelief,

savoring the role of victim. When we project lies and faulty images onto God, we may prefer to point at human fathers as the cause rather than looking to the activities of our own hearts. The psychological “insight” panders to one variation on a sinful propensity. We like to find excuses for culpable unbelief.

In an earlier generation one of the stock human excuses for unbelief was, “The church is full of hypocrites, so I don’t want anything to do with God.” That was more willful and bitter: “Get lost, God.” The new variant is more self-pitying: “I just can’t seem to trust God.” But the net effect is the same. No cry of “Abba, Father” springs from the heart. No dynamic of becoming a peacemaker, one of the “sons of God” (Matthew 5:8) occurs in the wars of life. “My father didn’t love me, so my self-centeredness, self-pity, and unbelief has an underlying reason. Somebody else caused my problems; somebody else must fix them.”

The therapeutic technique follows logically, given the premises. “Your Dad was distant and mean. You think of God as distant and mean. I, your therapist, will be interested in you and nice. Knowing my love will let you think of God as like me, interested in you and nice.” Whoa! Stated baldly, that’s a shocking statement. (That’s why it’s usually insinuated not trumpeted, so it sneaks up on people.) Catch my point carefully. Such “re-parenting” not only despises the Word and Spirit; it merely replaces one false image of God with a different false image. The dissatisfying god manufactured by the human soul, supposedly because of bad parents, can now be remanufactured in the image of a satisfying therapist.

It’s easy to see that the living and true God is not like an abusive, rejecting, capricious parent. The real God sent Jesus Christ on a mission of love to save unacceptable people. But neither is God like the benign, all-accepting therapist. The real God has just anger and an unchanging standard, and those people He loves are “helpless, ungodly, sinners, enemies” (Romans 5). The real God is not a devil. But neither is He Carl Rogers. The “re-parenting” methodology has a faulty view of who the Father is and what a parent ought to be. It knows tyranny and neglect are wrong. It replaces such sins with other sins, with supreme confidence in the therapist’s powers and (usually, there are exceptions) coddling affirmations of the self. There is no authoritative truth, no dying to self, and no crucified Savior in this version of love. Am I saying that caring and concerned counselors and friends are irrelevant to change? Of course not. One needn’t choose between truth and love: people grow in the way Ephesians 4:15f describes. My point here is simply a matter of getting first things first so that our vision of human love connects with God’s

love rather than competes with it.

People change when the Holy Spirit sheds the love of God abroad in their hearts through the Gospel. Whoever receives the Spirit of adoption as God's child learns to cry out, "Abba, Father." People change when they catch hold of their responsibility for what they believe about God. Life experience is no excuse for believing lies; the world and devil don't excuse the flesh. People change when biblical truth becomes "Technicolor and Dolby sound," more vivid and louder than previous life experience. People change when they have ears to hear and eyes to see what God tells us about Himself:

The LORD has comforted His people, and will have compassion on His afflicted. But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me, and the Lord has forgotten me." Can a woman forget her nursing child, and have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you. Behold, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands (Isaiah 49:13-16).

He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His loving kindness toward those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear Him (Psalm 103:10-13).

These things are true, both the promises and the actions that fulfill them. God addresses the fears and anxieties of sufferers and sinners.

Do people come to know *this* God because human counselors skillfully re-parent them? No, and the very attempt to make that a counseling paradigm is idolatrous. But aren't good counselors like good fathers (and mothers)? Yes, of course.

But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children. Having thus a fond affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives because you had become very dear to us. For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers; just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory (I Thessalonians 2:7-12).

Why should a counselor be like this? Because God is like

this. The difference between Paul and re-parenting therapy lies on the surface. Did Paul "re-parent" the Thessalonians so that, now knowing and changed by Paul's love, they would become able to envision God as loving? No, that's exactly backwards and even blasphemous.

Paul was vigorous, caring, and authoritative as a parent-counselor who carried the Father's message. The love of the Father changes people; it changed Paul. Knowing divine love, he gave love, a love that was both the fruit and the vehicle of the message he pressed on his hearers. God is primary; the human agent is significant but secondary. The modern re-parent/therapist reverses this. The human counselor is primary; God is significant (perhaps, different strokes for different folks) but secondary. The issue at stake is not whether or not counselors should be patient, kind, and so forth. I Corinthians 13 settles that. But in God's drama of redemption, who will play lead and who supporting actor? If you need human acceptance in order to know God's love, the psychotherapist plays lead.

If your father didn't love you, you *can* know the love of the Father. A godly counselor (or parent or friend) may be instrumental. But the key to change lies between you and God, not between you and that other person.

Getting Down to Cases

Let me briefly describe two cases. Sally is a 28-year-old woman who grew up in an abusive household. As an adolescent she was sexually molested by her father. This put the bitter icing on a miserable relationship. Sally became a Christian in high school. "But for years I felt that I could never know God as my Father because I had such a rotten relationship with my real father. I thought of God as being like my father: untrustworthy, demanding, merciless, unpredictable. Then I realized that my biggest problem was *me*, not God or my father. My belief system was all messed up. I was projecting lies onto God and not believing what was true about God!" Sally fed her faith with truth. God the Father *is* faithful, merciful, consistent. He patiently worked on her, disciplining her and teaching her to know the truth about Him. Sally saw that her view of God was not *caused* by her life experience but by what her own heart had done with that experience of being wronged. As Sally repented and her mind was renewed, she was progressively freed to let go of old disappointments, old bitterness, old fears and old demands. She became able to say wholeheartedly, "Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good, for His steadfast love endures forever."

Bill is a 36-year-old man whose family was abandoned by his father when he was three years old. He is a committed Christian, mature in many ways, and using

his gifts. But he sought counseling, complaining of a longstanding sense that "God is remote, like my father was." In a nutshell, there were three significant components to change. First, he grasped the fact that he, like all of us, tended to let his life experience operate as a thrilling soap opera in Technicolor and Dolby sound. The Bible seemed a dull, black-and-white silent movie in comparison. The flesh produces this state of affairs by interpreting life through the lens of its lies and desires. Bill began with two key truths about God as Father. First, God IS aboundingly merciful (Psalm 103; II Corinthians 1:2f). Second, God IS committed to meet his children directly, to teach, to bless and to transform (John 15:2; Hebrews 12:1-14). Bill prayed and meditated these truths into his life. As he learned to repent of the lies he had believed, he found the Father becoming vivid.

Second, in the process, Bill faced sins he had been avoiding. The flesh is deceitful. He found that his sentence, "God is remote, like my father was," in part came from buying into pop psychology's convenient and self-excusing diagnosis. It's true, God did seem remote. And Bill's father had been absent. But on examination the two things proved to be minimally related, about like saying, "I'm angry because I'm an Aries." In fact, early in Bill's Christian life God had not seemed remote at all. But some very specific patterns of sin—sexual fantasy, manipulating and avoiding people, laziness, love of money—underlaid Bill's recurrent sense of God's remoteness. Dynamic psychology had turned the antique relationship with parents into a magic wand to explain all of life. The Bible offered Bill a more concrete and life-transforming explanation.

Third, Bill found some good friends and models (Proverbs 13:20; I Thessalonians 2:7-13). He had been quite isolated. He found people to know and be known by, to love and be loved by. These people did not substitute for God and re-parent Bill. They were fellow children of the Father, seeking to grow up into the Father's image. Through it all Bill began to read God into his experience—to trust and obey God—rather than continuing to read God out of his life experience. No surprise, his relationship with God was transformed both objectively and experientially.

Can you (and your counselees) know God as Father even if your human father was violent, deceptive, cold...or even just occasionally disappointing? The Bible says, YES! Listen and believe, and join in fellowship with other children of the Father!

Here is a simple summary of the way to grow in the knowledge of God your Father even if your father sinned against you.

1. Identify and take responsibility for the specific lies, false beliefs, desires, expectations and fears that rule you and poison your relationship with God.

2. Find specific truths in the Bible that counter your internal falsehoods and expectations. Let these truths contend with those lies and cravings. There ought to be a battle going on within you every day as God's light and love battle your darkness.

3. Turn to God for mercy and help, that the Spirit of truth would renew you, pouring out His love freely.

4. Identify and take responsibility for the particular sins that you express towards your father, and, as generalized patterns, towards other people: bitterness, willfulness, avoidance, blame-shifting, brooding, fears, people-pleasing, slander, lying, self-pity, etc.

5. Turn to God for mercy and help, that the Spirit of love would enable you to bear His fruit thankfully.

6. Identify the specific sins committed against you. Fathers who are selfish or hostile, who lie or betray trust, who duck responsibility, do evil. The love of God gives courage to look evil in the eye. Identifying wrong helps you know what to forgive. It also makes clear what God calls you to tackle constructively.

You need humility to recognize that some wrongs may be perceived wrongs—products of your own expectations—not real wrongs. Repenting of your own sins clears your mind to sort out evil done from evil merely perceived. You also need a renewed mind to understand that some things may actually be wrong that you were told or you assumed were right.

7. Ponder the good things your father did for you. Often bitterness and disappointment cloud the mind from perceiving love that was shown. There are some fathers who seem to incarnate evil. But most are a mix of love and selfishness.

8. The Father gives the power to return good for evil rather than evil for evil. He remakes His children like His Son, Jesus. Come up with a game plan for specific changes in how you deal with your father and his wrongs: forgiving, giving love, seeking forgiveness, confronting constructively, forbearing, refocusing your attention, pouring your energies into God's calling, etc.

9. Find wise believers to pray for you, hold you accountable, encourage, and counsel you. Faith in God our Father is catching. Wisdom for living as a peacemaker, a son of God, is also catching. "The companion of the wise becomes wise."

The Father is seeking worshipers and creating children who know Him. Ask, seek, knock.

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This issue of *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* begins the new publishing year: you have all recently subscribed or resubscribed. I'm glad. And I think it will be a good year. Here's what follows in this issue.

Jay Adams and John Bettler have been pioneers in biblical counseling. Jay is obviously better known because of his widespread writing and speaking. But Jay dedicated his book *Ready to Restore* "To John Bettler, a warm friend and trusted colleague: The hidden force behind nouthetic counseling." This past summer I sat down to interview the two of them. They look back over twenty-five years of biblical counseling and look forward to the future. I think you will enjoy seeing them go at it.

The metaphor of "healing" has swept the counseling field. While it's a biblical metaphor for Christian growth, the metaphor has run wild, obscuring the meaning it was intended to communicate. Gary Shogren has written on how the Bible uses the language of healing, "Recovering God in the Age of Therapy."

Biblical counseling is not just for "troubled" or "disturbed" people whose lives are full of "problems." It's for everyone. Comfort the disturbed. Disturb the comfortable. Edify each and all. Two articles explore counseling issues that arise in normal, daily life. Elyse

Fitzpatrick has contributed a fourth (and final) article in her series on eating disorders: "Disorderly Eating—for the Rest of Us." She opens doors on the eating disorders in "normal" people. Dan Doriani's "Birth Dearth" explores biblical decision-making in the area of how many children a couple should have.

We don't have a preaching section this issue but instead offer "A Pastor's Self-Evaluation Study." Tim Keller designed this, and I tinkered with it. Let it prompt your self-reflection, your prayers, your planning and your conversations with friends. This self-study could be adapted for use by elders, deacons, and lay people by eliminating the questions that do not apply.

Our book reviews attempt to inform and challenge across a wide spectrum: the good and the bad, the old and the new. You will find three books reviewed: *Love is a Choice*, *Luther's Prayers*, and *Great Divides: Understanding the Controversies that Come Between Christians*.

Lastly, we've reprinted a brief article by Jack Beatty from *The Atlantic Monthly* with a comment by Jiles Brooks. Human beings are responsible, and there are objective criteria of right and wrong. That radical message—so basic to any valid hope for change—is refreshingly different these days, both in the Christian culture and in the wider culture.