

## **Followers of the Way**

### **What kind of Father have we got?**

**Philip Quenby, 03-07-22**

**Isaiah 64:1-12; Revelation 2:26-29**

The Bible has a lot to say about fathers and fatherhood. And, whether we like it or not, those things loom large in all our lives. Whether our relationship with them is/was good, bad or indifferent, even if we never knew them, we've all had fathers. And, whether the men amongst us are or will become fathers in the physical sense or not, they (we) all have the capacity to be spiritual fathers. Spiritual fatherhood is something we see modelled in the Scriptures – think of the relationship between Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, Mordecai and Esther, Paul and Timothy, and most of all between Jesus and His disciples. Fathering and mentoring or discipling aren't exactly the same, but they have a lot in common. Personally, I can say how blessed I've been by the men who've been spiritual fathers in my life. But even if we don't have this kind of relationship, we all have access to a perfect heavenly Father, who doesn't have any of the shortcomings of the human variety (either natural or spiritual). The Bible says the LORD is "a father to the fatherless" (Psalm 68:5) and "defends the cause of the fatherless" (Deuteronomy 10:18). He's on our side, He's looking out for us, and He wants to bring us to a place of wholeness, healing, fullness, maturity and blessing – for no better reason than because He loves us.

We're going to spend some time over the next few weeks looking at fatherhood, and I want to say at the start that this isn't in any way to exclude women. Just as all believers in Jesus are destined to be part of the Bride of Christ, whether male or female, all believers are granted sonship, whether men or women. Sonship is the flip side of fatherhood, as a son is the flip side of a father. What we'll draw from the Scriptures today and in the weeks to come is for all of us. "I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters", says the LORD Almighty" (2 Corinthians 6:18, quoting what God told David about Solomon in 2 Samuel 7:14). Remember that when God changed Abram into Abraham (Genesis 17:5), He added the letter *Heh* to his name – Heh (standing for the Holy Spirit) is feminine in Hebrew grammar, a

reminder that the fullest expression of humanity requires both male and female.

And so, there's another aspect to what we're going to be looking at, which is about being fully who God intended us to be. Men can't be fully men unless women are fully women, and vice versa. We need to help each other in allowing God to release us into our intended roles. Learning how to be sons (and daughters) is part of this. Fatherhood, in other words, connects with identity and purpose. Truly knowing and living in our God-given identity is vital if we're to come into maturity and manifest the kingdom of God as we're called to do. We start by asking: what kind of heavenly Father do we have?

The Bible's first use of the word father is in the context of God's plan for human families: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." (Genesis 2:24). Man and woman united in marriage are intended to invite the Holy Spirit to join them so that the three together become a representation of God himself. Earthly fathers and earthly families are a picture for us of things in the spiritual realms. That's one reason Satan has worked so hard to destroy families and downgrade fatherhood. In Eden, God came "walking in the garden in the cool of the day" (Genesis 3:8), like a father spending time with His children. It's a closeness broken by human sin that God wants to mend, restoring us to our rightful place as sons and heirs.

For much of Old Testament history, this concept of God as Father seems to have been lost, or at any rate overshadowed by the aftermath of the Fall. We see God addressed by many different names in Scripture. To Moses, He's Elohim, Creator God (Genesis 1:1) and Yahweh, the great I AM WHO I AM (Exodus 3:14). To Abraham, He's El Shaddai, God Almighty (Genesis 17:1). To Hagar, He's Lahai Roi, God who sees me (Genesis 16:13). To Ezekiel, He's the Sovereign LORD (Ezekiel 2:4 and 216 other mentions). Even King David, "a man after [God's] own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14) never seems to have addressed God as Father, though the LORD told David He'd "be [Solomon's] father, and he will be my son." (2 Samuel 7:14). Hundreds of years – thousands of years – of human history passed before Isaiah was given his vision of the coming Messiah and declared, "he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." (Isaiah 9:6). This prefigured the shift that took place when Yeshua haMeshiach (Jesus the Messiah) by His sacrifice on the cross enabled people once again to be in right relationship with God, who wants to be a loving Father to us.

Like Ezekiel, Isaiah spoke of God most often as Sovereign LORD (Isaiah 7:7 and 17 other mentions), whereas only four times does he speak of God as Father – twice in the same verse: “But you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us or Israel acknowledge us; you, O LORD, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name.” (Isaiah 63:16). Yet precisely because Isaiah sits at the point of rediscovering God as Father after a long period of not knowing Him that way, he has important things to tell us about what kind of heavenly Father we have. Whatever the world may do or not do – whether our earthly father (Abraham, to use Isaiah’s terminology) knows us or the collective groups we’re part of (Israel, to take Isaiah’s example) acknowledge us – God is our Father, and He’s also our Redeemer.

That’s a long lead into our Scripture passage, but it sets the scene for examining our expectations of God’s Fatherhood, how they match reality (or not) and how His Fatherhood meshes with other aspects of His being. What we see is:

God dwells in heaven, far above the earthly realms, but He hasn’t turned His back on the world. He watches, **He intervenes**, and when He does, the whole Creation shakes: “Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!” (Isaiah 64:1).

Opposing God is foolhardy in the extreme, for **He’s an adversary to be feared, jealous of His name**: “As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you!” (Isaiah 64:2).

**The LORD is a God of power**, which no-one and nothing can withstand, and He’s full of surprises: “For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you.” (Isaiah 64:3).

Whether or not we perceive Him with our senses, **He’s present and active, but is also sovereign**, and acts according to His timing, not ours: “Since ancient times no-one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.” (Isaiah 64:4).

**He’s righteous**, judges justly and works to uphold the standards He has set: “You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways. But when we continued to sin against them, you were angry. How then can we be saved?” (Isaiah 64:5).

**He's holy** and in our own strength we can't hope to stand before Him: "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away." (Isaiah 64:6).

His holiness means that **undealt-with sin places a barrier between us and him**: "No-one calls on your

name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and made us waste away because of our sins." (Isaiah 64:7).

Transcendence, jealousy for His name, power, sovereignty, righteousness, justice and holiness. These are the qualities that have been deliberately twisted and misread to build the caricature some people want to make out of God as revealed in the Old Testament. A God before whom we might quake and tremble, as a child would cower before the sort of father who'd treat him like a dog and beat him on a whim. If we've had bad experiences at the hands of a father-figure, it's a picture we might accept almost without realising it. We need to make an effort of the will to refute this lie and cling to the truth of what the Bible teaches. We need to ask Jesus to "show us the Father" (John 14:8). And we need the Holy Spirit to give us both the desire and the courage to step out in faith, to "taste and see that the LORD is good" (Psalm 34:8).

Sometimes big events turn on what might seem small decisions or seemingly chance happenings. And sometimes small words have a big impact. In this passage of Isaiah, it's that little word at the start of verse 8: Yet. It carries the force of saying, "nevertheless", or "despite all that". So, the weighty truths that Isaiah has proclaimed in the preceding verses about God's transcendence, jealousy for His name, power, sovereignty, righteousness, justice and holiness – all these are balanced against the fact that He's our Father: "We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand." (Isaiah 64:8). Knowing this, and remembering that "we are your people" (Isaiah 64:9), Isaiah dared to ask God:

To be merciful in judgment: "Do not be angry with us beyond measure, O LORD" (Isaiah 64:9);

To forgive wrongdoing: "do not remember our sins forever" (Isaiah 64:9);

To treat us as His own: "Oh, look upon us, we pray, for we are all your people." (Isaiah 64:9).

Isaiah understood enough about the Father heart of God to pray for these things – in faith, though it has to be said, probably also with some degree of trepidation. Since he saw how Judah’s “sacred cities have become a desert; even Zion is a desert, Jerusalem a desolation [and] our holy and glorious temple, where our fathers praised [God] has been burned with fire, and all that we treasured lies in ruins” (Isaiah 64:10-11), that’s maybe not so surprising. We, however, have an advantage Isaiah didn’t have, because we have the benefit of God’s further revelation of Himself in Christ. In answer to Philip’s request to “show us the Father” (John 14:8), Jesus replied, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.” (John 14:9). So, whenever we find ourselves in doubt over what kind of Father we have and how His Fatherhood expresses itself in this messy and broken world, it’s usually a good idea to remind ourselves how Jesus interacted with the people He met. Remember:

His **compassion**: “He was filled with compassion” (Luke 15:20);

His **love**: He showed His disciples “the full extent of his love.” (John 13:1).

His heart of **service**, coming not “to be served, but to serve, and to give his life” (Mark 10:45).

His **gentleness** and **humility**, “I am gentle and humble in heart” (Matthew 11:29).

His **forgiveness**: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” (Luke 23:34).

His desire to **father** us, hence the Lord’s prayer starting, “Our Father” (Matthew 6:9, Luke 11:2).

His **priorities**, as revealed by the blessings pronounced in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:3-10) – the manifesto of the Kingdom of Heaven.

One internet site (dadgold.com) suggests nine characteristics of a good father are: being protective, dependable, interested, honest, playful, hard-working, communicative, respectful and loving. Our Father in heaven has all these characteristics, and more. It’s a wonderful privilege to be able to build a relationship with Him, but we need to be careful familiarity doesn’t breed contempt. In the same way that earthly parents are to be honoured (Exodus 20:12), so must our heavenly Father be. One of the aspects of fatherhood we’re in danger of overlooking or downplaying in modern Western society

is that it's not a one-way street. It's not for a child to be continually asking of a father without giving anything in return. Because fatherhood isn't only about responsibility. It's also about authority.

The word authority appears only twelve times in the entire the Old Testament, but once Jesus comes on the scene, usages of that word multiply. His incarnation brought the whole issue of authority into sharper focus than possibly at any time since the Fall of Adam and Eve. The source of authority and our response to authority is important, because if we're not properly submitted to the authority of our heavenly Father, we're ultimately giving authority over our lives to Satan. There's a battle in the spiritual realms over authority. Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18), although Satan of course continues to contest this. That's a doomed enterprise – a battle already lost – but the devil will try to take as many people down with him as possible. Like any Father, the LORD wants the best for His children. He wants us to be "overcomers" (Revelation 2:26). Which is where our passage from Revelation comes in.

Authority and obedience go hand in hand. If we fail to obey those who are set over us, we deny their authority or rebel against it. The LORD wants our response to His Fatherly authority to be obedience – to "[do] my will to the end" (Revelation 2:26). He desires this not because He's a tyrant or a control freak but because it's the mark of true sonship. Obedience indicates reciprocal trust and love, which is why Jesus says, "Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me" (John 14:21) and "whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Matthew 12:50). It's our obedience to the life- and health-giving commands of a perfect Father that will cause Him to release greater and greater measures of authority in us, for "just as [he] received authority from [his] Father" (Revelation 2:27), so his intention is to "give [His overcomers] authority over the nations" (Revelation 2:26). Who on earth can expect to receive anything like this degree of authority if they persist in being disobedient? Or cling to childish notions about the kind of God we serve? Earthly fathers give their children responsibility according to their ability to handles it, and our heavenly Father does the same.

When the Prodigal Son at last returned home, his father commanded the servants, "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet." (Luke 15:22). The robe was for righteousness, the ring for authority and the sandals for works of service. And so, the son

received back the Identity, purpose and authority he'd run away from. Some of us – maybe many of us – might have run away from the identity, purpose and authority God has for us. That's certainly been true of me at various times in my life. If that's you, today God's calling you to come back: back to a proper appreciation of who He is, back to a recognition of Him as the best Father you could possibly imagine, and back to a place where He can release you into the authority you should have as a son of the living God.

Where we come from is important – the Bible is full of genealogies for a reason! Whatever our start in life may have been, in God we have the best family background imaginable. As Paul says, "For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name." (Ephesians 3:14). We give praise and thanks today to our heavenly Father, and my prayer for you is, that you'll know more than ever before what it is to be His son.

Amen.