

The
FATHER-HEART
of God



Jesus' Foremost Revelation
Our Most Urgent Need

The Father-heart of God

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THE FATHER-HEART OF GOD

Jesus' Foremost Revelation; Our Most Urgent Need

If I asked ten believers why Jesus came to earth, I'm likely to get ten different answers. And most of them would relate to *what Jesus did*. This is what I most often hear:

- "Jesus came to die for us."
- "He came to forgive our sins."
- "He came to save us."
- "He came to show us how to live."
- "He came to make a way to heaven."

These are all gloriously wonderful *blessings* that are ours because of what Jesus accomplished. However, they are *not* the essential reason Jesus came.

"I am the Way, the Truth and the Life," Jesus explained. **"No one comes to the Father except through Me"** (John 14:6).

Jesus essentially came to reveal the nature of God. He came to peel back the curtains of heaven and reveal the Father-heart of God. *Jesus came to reveal the Father.* And He came to restore all of creation back to God's Fatherhood.

Let that sink in. Deeply. Profoundly.

This is not merely a Sunday school lesson for children. Nor is it a dry, dusty doctrinal statement. This is the foundational revelation Jesus downloaded. Yes, He died for us. Yes, He forgave our sins. Yes, Jesus has saved us. But He did all this to restore us to the Father. To re-unite us with the Father.

In communing with God Himself, Jesus used *father-language*. In revealing God to us, He used the word *father* more than any other word to describe God.

This single revelation frames our faith, shapes our values and informs our practices. Without this foundational revelation, we may well be seeking that which we already have. Without this undergirding truth, we may well fudge our purpose and mission.

Let me illustrate this with an incident that happened to me.

During a holiday many years ago, I was blessed to be given a week at a friend's cottage at the beach. Trying to unwind on the first few days of this time, I stumbled over a couple of jigsaw puzzles. Both were scenic pictures of over 2,000 pieces each.

I tackled the first with great relish expecting to conquer the challenge rather quickly. Instead I struggled for two days! I just could not figure it out. With far-less resolve I had a go at the second and again struggled to make heads-or-tails of it.

Just as I was about to throw in the towel—*Sigh ... Whipped by a couple of puzzles!*—I realised my problem. Some prankster had switched the box lids!

I was trying to build a puzzle with the wrong picture in mind! With the right picture in mind, I finished the puzzles without a sweat. (The relief to my pride was huge!)

I felt that God showed me something though this frustrating experience. In the same way that I was trying unsuccessfully to build a puzzle with the wrong picture in mind, many sincere believers are trying to build their life with a wrong picture of God in mind.

If we have a broken or incomplete picture of God, we will have a broken or incomplete walk with God. Here's the kicker: We are only as strong as our concept of who God is.

What is Your Picture of God?

For simplicity sake, let us consider five pictures we may have of God and the ditches that we inevitably land in if we do not anchor them in the revelation Jesus gave us.

CREATOR?

Many people view God as a Creator. Of course, God is our Creator and as His creation we have incredible privileges and sober responsibilities. But if we view God *essentially* as the Creator we begin to relate to Him as a “Distant Relative” or worse yet, an “Impersonal Force”. The result? We believe He is everywhere but live like He is nowhere!

PROVIDER?

Others view God essentially as a Provider. Again, God is without doubt our Provider and we can be assured of His care and provision. Yet if we view God *essentially* as the Provider we begin to relate to Him as a “Cosmic Butler” or worse, a “Slot-Machine in the Sky”. The result? We believe God exists for our personal benefit ... and become offended if He does not deliver on demand.

LORD?

Still others view God essentially as a Lord¹. Yes, He *is* Lord ... our King, our Supreme Ruler. Amen! But if we view God *essentially* as the Lord we end up relating to Him as a “Drill Sergeant” or worse still, “The Divine Kill-Joy”. The result? The precious, intimate relationship God intends for us is void of grace and becomes stifled by a thousand rules, demands and obligations.

SAVIOUR?

Many today view God essentially as a Saviour. And thank God He is our Saviour; we are saved ... not by what we do, but by what He has done! However, if we view God *essentially* as the Saviour we quickly start relating to God as a “Sin-Collector” or tragically, when in need: “The Instant Guilt-Remover”. The result? We become sin conscious rather God conscious and this is a miserable way to live.

FRIEND?

Finally, others view God essentially as a Friend. Certainly today more and more followers of Christ are revelling in what it means to enjoy fellowship with God and walk with Him as Friend. But if we view Him essentially as the Friend we often slide into relating to God as a “Buddy” and develop casual attitudes toward Him like: “God and I are tight!” The result? We lose a sense of reverence and devotion.

While God is certainly a Creator, a Provider, a Lord, a Saviour and a Friend, it should be clear how a picture of God that anchors in any one of these, at the exclusion of the others, can become a distorted view of who God is.

We live in a world today where people know a lot *about* God; yet, often, *this knowledge about God restricts an intimate relationship with God*. There is a world of difference between knowing about God and knowing God; and we are invited to know Him personally, intimately and deeply. For example, becoming a theologian does not guarantee a quality relationship with God. Those who knew the Old Testament best; were the first to reject the One it revealed!

¹Although most Bibles use the word, “**Lord**,” they are actually, in most cases, translating the word “Yahweh” (transliterated as *Jehovah*), “Our Covenant Father”. The NKJV and the NIV both use this word “LORD” but do so in uppercase (as indicated) to clearly distinguish when referring to the covenant name for God. The Hebrew word for “Lord”—meaning, “Supreme Ruler, Absolute Controller”—is *Adonai* and although this word does certainly reveal God as our Supreme Ruler, it does not appear nearly as frequently as the word *Jehovah*, “Our Covenant Father”. While the word *Adonai* appears 439 times throughout the Scriptures; *Jehovah* is the foremost revelation of God in the Old Testament and is used 6,828 times.

Of course, a passionate pursuit of God involves study and learning. We are called to be His disciples (learners); and there is simply no subject more comprehensive, more satisfying, more intense, more enriching and more life-changing than the quest to grow in the knowledge of God Himself. But here is the point: we must purpose to grow in the knowledge of God Himself; not merely knowledge about God. Paul warned us: “**Knowledge** (in and by itself) **puffs up**” (1 Corinthians 8:1).

All devotion ... all learning ... all study ... should be centred on knowing Him; growing in an experiential knowledge of His character and His ways. *Our thirst for knowledge is to transform our lives with revelation, not to merely fill our heads with information.* And each mouthful of fresh revelation of God’s glory should result in an inner change, from one degree of glory to another (2 Corinthians 3:18), so that my role and responsibilities in life are energised with His Divine Life.

First and Foremost...

The beginning of this quest to know God begins with a revelation of God as Father.

CREATOR? Yes, God is a Creator but only because He is first and foremost a Father. *As our Father, He created us in His image and likeness that we may be His children.* His Father’s touch is seen in our individual beauty and uniqueness; not one of us is the same! The Father’s finger-print is upon each of us so that we all have our own unique finger-print.

PROVIDER? Yes, God is a Provider but only because He is first and foremost a Father. *As our Father, He provides for us His children.* And like any good father, He will—at times—withhold the provision from the child if the provision will spoil the child. Certainly, if our motives are selfish and bratty, we should expect Him to discipline us instead of throwing more toys our way. (I realize this is a revolutionary thought to many!)

LORD? Yes, God is our Lord but only because He is first and foremost a Father. *As our Father, He governs us and leads us.* He knows how best this life is to be lived ... having created it in the first place. His rules are not there to restrict the enjoyment of life, but to enhance it. In the same way that the rules of a sport protect the participants, bringing order and maximum enjoyment of the game, so God’s government does the same.

SAVIOUR? Yes, God is our Saviour but only because He is first and foremost a Father. *As our Father, He immediately sought to rescue us when we fell.* Father God’s love bankrupted heaven to send Jesus to deliver us and forgive us. Father’s forgiveness not only cleanses us from all sin but enables us to walk with Him in holiness and faith.

FRIEND? Yes, God is our Friend but only because He is first and foremost a Father. *As our Father, He amazingly desires our fellowship and friendship with us.* This awesome reality does not negate that He is first our Father; He is not our buddy or our “china”. My own natural father is among my best friends; but he remains my father. In awe and reverence of our heavenly Father, we respond to His awesome invitation of friendship.

God hangs His identity on Fatherhood...

Ponder on this. God could have picked any foundational name to hang His identity on. Of course, He reveals Himself as Creator, Provider, Saviour, Lord and even Friend. In fact, we know He reveals Himself by many names to help us understand His character and the various attributes of His wonderfully comprehensive and delightful personality.

However, as a foundational name, He could have easily and rightfully chosen the title, “Great and Awesome, Sovereign God”. And in so doing, everything from Him would then have been essentially defined around this. Our identity would then have been that of a slave: obligated to serve Him, robotic in our existence; and the highest we could attain would be to swear blind allegiance to His commands, suffering punishment for one indiscretion.

But this is *not* what God did.

Instead, He reveals Himself essentially as a Father. An incredible example of this is found in two passages in Isaiah. Through this prophet, God speaks to His backslidden people. They had forsaken and rejected Him, but how does God choose to respond?

God says: **“Come now, and let us reason together ... though your sins are like scarlet...”** (Isaiah 1:18). Wow! Here is the Almighty Sovereign talking to His backslidden creation that has actively rebelled against Him ... and He *invites* them ... He *appeals* to them: **“Come now ... let us reason together”**.

He could well have just squashed them like bugs. Instead, Father God invites them to fellowship with Him ... to talk to Him ... to reason together ... to re-enter communication with Him. The picture is of a father who still believes the best of his children, trying to assure and affirm His relationship with them.

Later when God is then accused of neglecting these rebels ... (Did you get that? They have betrayed Him but lash out with false accusations to justify their sin.) ... God says, **“Can a woman forget her nursing child...? Surely they may forget. Yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands”** (Isaiah 49:15).

When He could have clenched His fist at them and written them off, Father God opens up His heart and makes Himself vulnerable. He appeals to them using a metaphor of a nursing mother. Could a mother forget her new born infant nursing from her breast? The overwhelming response would be: never! Yet, God says that a nursing mother is more likely to forget her baby than He is of forgetting them! The picture is of a broken-hearted parent weeping; tears streaming down his face and falling into his open hands in which he pictures his child secure and safe. Wow!

We could recount passage after passage revealing the Father's heart towards His people. But consider just one more. Through the prophet Hosea God reveals His Father's heart, appealing to backslidden Israel. He says: **“When Israel was a child, I loved him. And out of Egypt I called My son. But the more I called them, the further they went from Me ... I taught [them] to walk, taking them by their arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I drew them with gentle cords, with bands of love, and I was to them as those who take the yoke from their neck. I stooped and fed them... [But] My people are bent on backsliding from Me. Though they call to the Most High, none at all exalt [Me]. How can I give you up...? How can I hand you over...? My heart churns within Me; My sympathy is stirred. I will not execute the fierceness of My anger”** (Hosea 11:1-9).

God reminds Israel that He was intimately involved in fathering them, even though they did not recognize or honour Him for doing so: **“When Israel was a child, I loved him ... I taught [them] to walk, taking them by their arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I drew them with gentle cords, with bands of love, and I was to them as those who take the yoke from their neck. I stooped and fed them...”**

When Israel consistently rebelled against God, exhausting His grace and provoking His justice, God still appeals to them, this time revealing His broken-heartedness and the intense emotions of pain and grief: **“My people are bent on backsliding from Me ... How can I give you up...? How can I hand you over...? My heart churns within Me; My sympathy is stirred...”**

The Almighty, Sovereign Creator of the Universe reveals Himself to us essentially as Father. No other religion does this. The gods of other religions are not personal; they are either raging tyrants demanding religious effort to appease them ... or they are distant creators always too busy or simply disinterested ... or worse still, they are some concoction of man's imagination that has no power to intervene or deliver.

What about the Trinity?

God is One

How does a revelation of God's Fatherhood balance with an understanding of the Trinity?

Good question.

We worship and serve the Three-in-One God, the Trinity, or as Paul reveals Him: **“the Godhead”** (Colossians 2:9). While the concept of the Trinity often (always!) blows our finite minds², the fact is that grasping the Father-heart of God not only reminds us of the distinctive beauty of each member of the Godhead, but also brings revelatory clarity to understanding God the Son and God the Spirit.

First of all, let's remind ourselves that God is *not* “three-separate-gods” nor is He “one-god-who-disguises-himself-in-three-masks.” He is the awesome “Three-In-One” God.

“The Lord God is One” (Deuteronomy 6:4); yet He is three Persons in One: the Father³, the Son and the Holy Spirit; the same in essence, distinct in personality, but equal in power and glory (see Matthew 3:16, 17; Ephesians 2:18).

²Two illustrations may help in understanding the Trinity.

- Water. Water can exist in three forms: liquid, ice and steam. Although water can exist in these three forms it remains essentially water. In this analogy, water in liquid form may represent God the Father, from whom all life flows; ice may represent the Son, in whom our faith is secure; and steam may represent God the Spirit. This analogy does break down in that although God is at all times three in one, water can only exist in one form at a time.
- The Triangle. While each corner of a triangle is *distinct in shape and size*, they together form *one* triangle. If you remove just one corner, you no longer have a triangle. The limit of this illustration of course is that an angle in itself is not a triangle.

Both these analogies are helpful to our finite minds that can only grasp infinite truth to a degree. Even Paul said, **“now we see in a mirror, dimly”** (1 Corinthians 13:12). This is, of course, a comforting fact. If we could fully wrap our minds around the awesomeness of God, He would be no bigger than our minds ... and not much of a god to worship and serve. Thankfully, God is bigger ... much, much bigger ... than my “little” mind!

³Some may point out that the word *Father* is not used very frequently of God in the Old Testament. However, the covenant name of God, “Yahweh” (transliterated into the better known word, *Jehovah*), refers to God as the “Covenant Father”. This word is used 6,828 times and is the primary revelation of God in the Old Testament. There are many expressions, or names, that are derived from this name. *Jehovah Jireh*—Our Covenant Provider—and *Jehovah Rophe*—Our Covenant Healer—to mention just two. Of course, these are all characteristics of God's Father-heart, dimensions of His wondrous personality. The Old Testament certainly carried the concept of God's Father-heart in embryonic form, a seed that germinated into full bloom through Jesus' life and teachings.

The Son Reveals the Father

As mentioned, when Jesus Himself spoke to God, He used the word *father*. In what is often called Jesus' High Priestly prayer, Jesus **"lifted up His eyes to heaven and said: '*Father...*'"** (John 17:1ff). And throughout the prayer we marvel at His intimacy with His Father as He repeatedly uses father-speak.

When He taught us to commune with God, He encouraged us to focus on the Father. "In this manner, therefore, pray: 'Our *Father* in heaven...'" (Matthew 6:9). Whenever He spoke of God in His teachings, He revealed God as a father. For example, in what is called the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus frequently uses the phrase: "your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5-7). For example, He says: **"Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your father in heaven"** (5:16).

The disciples evidently got the message. Well, sort of. All the father-talk eventually compelled an exasperated Philip to say, **"Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us"** (John 14:8). Jesus replied: **"He who has seen Me has seen the Father"** (John 14:9). In fact, His response was a little like: "Are serious? Do you still not quite get it? I'm here to reveal the Father. Everything I say and do is to reveal Father God."

As already referenced, Jesus expressly declared that He came to reveal the Father: **"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me"** (John 14:6). Notice, He did *not* say, "No one comes to heaven..." Or "No one gets saved..." Nor did He say, "No one gets a better life...". God the Son reveals God the Father: **"No one comes to the *Father* except through Me."**

Yes, Jesus has saved us. Thank God! Yet John explains it best when he writes: **"Behold what manner of love the *Father* has bestowed on us, that we should be called the children of God!"** (1 John 3:1). Being restored to Father God is the goal of salvation.

Yes, heaven is a blessing of the redeemed. But heaven is only heaven because of who is going to be there! Without Father God, heaven would simply not be heaven. In fact, Jesus defined **"eternal life"** as knowing the Father intimately, personally, deeply (John 17:1-3). Jesus did not come to merely promise us a place in the afterlife; he came to invite us into a relationship with Father. And yes, following God's will does yield a better life. However, our life is only enriched because of *Who* we now know. The better life is only possible when it is lived from the Father's perspective and in His counsel. Jesus did not merely promise us a better life; He came to welcome us into the loving arms of Father God.

Over and over again Jesus stated emphatically that He came in response to His Father's desire, that He only did what brought His Father pleasure and that He came to reveal what His Father

was like. *We cannot fully grasp God the Son until we grasp God the Father who sent Him to restore us into relationship with Himself as His children.*

The Spirit Reveals the Father

Jesus referred to the Holy Spirit as the **“Promise of the Father”** (Acts 1:4, 5). Did you ever make that connection before? I mean, was Jesus Himself not the Promised Messiah?

Yes ... in part. God promised the Messiah throughout the Old Testament *but made it clear that His full intention was to indwell His children with His very being.* Thus the promised Messiah was in part “God in the flesh” because only as a Man could He accomplish what He did. But the promised Messiah was fully received when “God by the Spirit” indwells in the miracle of salvation. God as a Man could not indwell us; He could and did die on our behalf paving the way for God the Spirit to indwell our blood-washed lives.

You may recall that Jesus first spoke of the Holy Spirit back in John 14:16-20 when He assured the disciples that He will **“pray the Father and He will give you another Helper, the Spirit of truth.”** Listen to His words: **“I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you ... At that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you”** (John 14:18).

Orphans. The picture is poignant. By the indwelling Spirit, an orphaned creation is reunited with their Father.

Paul then wonderfully describes this miracle, amplifying on this picture. **“For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, ‘Abba, Father’. The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ”** (Romans 8:14-17).

Interestingly, the word Paul uses for **“sons”** refers to a “mature son” rather a “young child.” He is speaking about *mature* believers contributing to God’s purpose for creation in this eighth chapter of Romans. The implication of course is that maturity is only possible as we yield to the indwelling Spirit. But just as enlightening, maturity results in a deepening understanding of God’s nature, specifically manifested in a heart-revelation of His Fatherhood as we embrace “Abba, Father.” *Spiritual maturity yields a deeper intimacy with the Father.*

The word *Abba* is Aramaic for “Daddy”. It stems from the simple word *Ab* which, according to the Hebrews, is the first sound an infant child makes in reference to their father or mother. Hence, it is the purest and greatest expression of dependence on parental love. The Holy Spirit awakens the deepest recesses of our soul to the love and affection of Father God. As we mature in our faith, He reveals greater depths of intimacy with God as Father.

Paul actually refers to the “**Spirit of adoption**”. However, the adoption he refers to is not the concept of adoption we know today. In Hebrew culture, a father would adopt his own son at the age of thirteen, an act that would affirm his pride in his son, an expression of the father’s blessing: “**This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased.**” In this concept of adoption, the father invites his son into adulthood; a more mature relationship in fellowship and a recognition of his inheritance in the family business. Hence, Paul’s use of the phrase, “**if children, then heirs.**”

God the Spirit continues to reveal God the Father. Again, *we cannot fully grasp God the Spirit until we grasp God the Father who sent His Spirit to indwell us, to make His home in us, and to fully restore us as His children into His inheritance.*

The Godhead

Paul taught the function of each member of the Godhead in sublime simplicity in one verse to the Ephesian church: “**For through [Jesus], we both have access by one Spirit to the Father**” (Ephesians 2:18).

Hence, we come “**to**” the Father, “**through**” the Son, “**by**” the Spirit. The focus of our devotion is the Father and we have access to Him through what Jesus has done and by the Spirit who indwells us⁴.

In one of the most amazing passages on Scripture, Paul outlines God’s eternal plan and how the Godhead works together to restore all of creation back God’s Fatherhood.

First, Paul writes, “**Blessed be the God and *Father* of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ**” (Ephesians 1:3). Notice how he directs his praise and gratitude to the Father. Then He outlines what these blessings are and how they fit into the His overall purpose: Father God has chosen us, predestined us and redeemed us (vv. 4-7) in order to “***gather together in one all things in Christ both which are in heaven and which are on earth***” (v. 10).

⁴ So who should we pray to? Essentially we are to pray to the Father, led by the Spirit, in the Name (and nature) of Jesus. All the prayers in the New Testament are directed to the Father; some of them also include Jesus (see Acts 4:24-30; Romans 1:8-10; 1 Corinthians 1:4-9; 2 Corinthians 1:3, 4; Ephesians 1:15-23; 3:14-21; Philippians 1:3-11; Colossians 1:9-12; 1 Thessalonians 1:2-5; 2 Thessalonians 1:3-12; Philemon 4-6; Hebrews 13:20, 21).

This does not mean we cannot address Jesus and the Holy Spirit (see Ezekiel 37:1-10). We can and should ... enjoying a liberty in our worshipful prayer and enjoying the Personhood of the Son and the Spirit, not just the Father. As God, the Son and the Spirit deserve and receive our worship and prayer. However, we would be wise to, generally speaking, direct our prayers to the Father, while we ensure that we maintain an awareness and relationship with each member of the Godhead.

Too often, we can just jumble words together, like “O Father Jesus...” This tends to happen when we pray without thought or when we pray religiously. Yes, prayer should be from the heart but this does not mean that it should be mindless. As we commune with God from our heart to His, focusing our mind on each member of the Godhead enables intimate worship, supplication and intercession in response to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

In other words, Father God is restoring all creation to Himself in Christ. Paul then goes onto to mention that the “**Holy Spirit of promise**” is the seal and guarantee of God’s plan (vv. 13, 14). Wow! No wonder Paul bursts into prayer in the next few verses praising the “**Father of glory**” (vv. 15ff).

A Quick Recap...

In the last few pages we considered the implications to the Trinity. If it made things a little technical, I apologise. Discussing the Godhead often gets a little ... (okay, a lot!) ... complicated. If we have muddied the waters, let us then sum up the core point of this article.

Narrow views of God and the ditches we may fall into...

Concept of God	Ditch if Held Exclusive
Creator	Distant-Relative or Impersonal-Force
Provider	Cosmic-Butler or Slot-Machine-in-the-Sky
Lord	Drill-Sergeant or Divine Kill-Joy
Saviour	Sin-Collector or Guilt-Remover
Friend	Buddy or My-China

Grasping the Father-heart of God brings balance...

Foundational Revelation	Characteristics of Father-God	Our Blessings
<i>Father</i>	Creator	We are created uniquely
	Provider	We are provided for wisely
	Lord	We are governed fairly
	Saviour	We are forgiven graciously
	Friend	We are befriended intimately

A Parable with a Knock-out Punch...

Luke, Chapter 15 is famous for what is called, “The Parable of the Prodigal Son.” I’d like to suggest that it is in fact not primarily about the prodigal. It is the first of three parables and the third builds pointedly on the first two to reveal The Father’s Heart.

Luke opens the setting for these three parables by revealing Jesus’ audience (vv. 1-3). The religious establishment of the day were aggravated beyond comprehension at Jesus’ open-hearted and generous acceptance of the dregs of society; the lost, the last and the least. **“This Man receives sinners, and even eats with them!”** complained the indignant religious leaders.

Jesus then tells them, not one, but three parables. Jesus seldom did this. It was not His habit to underline a point He was making. Yet the fact that Jesus tells three parables to hammer one point, and concludes with one of the longest parables He ever told, seems to add significance to it. At the very least, it was the subject that mattered most to Him. Or maybe He knew it was something we struggled to embrace.

First, Jesus tells the parable of the faithful shepherd who will hunt high and low” to find his lost sheep (vv. 4-7). Then he tells the parable of the faithful woman who goes on a search and discovery mission to find her missing coin (vv. 8-10). The words that He uses to express the elation of heaven—**“rejoicing”** (v. 5), **“rejoice”** (v. 6) and **“more joy”** (v. 7)—are in stark contrast to His audience’s cold and gloomy attitude toward those they considered sinners.

As if Jesus had not made His point; He then goes for the jugular. In a kind of jab-jab-and knock-out, Jesus then tells the parable of the faithful Father ... “The Parable of the Father’s Heart” ... revealing the love of the Father not just for lost sheep; not just for a lost coin; but for His beloved children.

Hence, this is primarily not a parable about the prodigal son even though he is the primary beneficiary in the story. The parable essentially reveals the Fatherhood of God and the message is in fact directed to the religious leaders represented by the older brother in the story. The younger, prodigal son only features to expose the older, religious brother’s hard-heart and to reveal the extravagance of the Father’s lavish, unconditional love.

According to the Jewish law on inheritance, the older son would receive two-thirds of the inheritance, and the younger son would receive one-third. A Jewish father brought his children into their inheritance while he was still alive, and in this story, the father clearly released both sons into their inheritance at this time (v. 12).

The next few verses highlight the popular, well-known account of how the younger, prodigal son wasted his heritage in wild living, only coming to his senses after being forced to scap for a meal with a pig ... not exactly a kosher moment (vv. 13-19).

But let's pick up the less popular account of what the older son did *not* do with his inheritance.

Notice the way Jesus describes the oldest son's actions and reactions. First we learn that **“the older son was in the field”** working (v. 25). The man is hard working and dutiful.

However, when confused by the sounds of celebration, who does he inquire of? **“He called one of the servants and asked what these things meant”** (v. 26). What? He asks the servants rather than his father?

On hearing that his younger, troubled and disgraced brother had finally returned home safely, what is his reaction? Joy? No. Relief? No.

“But he was angry and would not go in” (v. 28).

His immediate reaction was anger ... and then to pout and sulk! And was he angry that his brother had broken his father's heart? Sadly ... no. Was he righteously angry that his brother had brought shame upon their family? Oh, no! He whined and complained bitterly, saying, **“you never gave me a young goat that I might make merry with my friends”** (v. 29).

The older son lived in the same home as his father, he enjoyed the blessings of his father ... but he never knew the heart of his father.

How many times would he have seen his grieving father pacing up and down the porch, scanning the horizon with longing for even a glimpse of the prodigal son? How many times would he have seen his broken-hearted father bent over in sorrow, weeping for his lost son? Did he share his father's grief? No. Did he carry he's father's burden? Sadly, no.

The older brother, symbolic of the religious leaders, focused on his own efforts and rewards—his self-interests, his stake, on what he had and what he did not have—rather than on relationship with his father: **“Lo, these many years I have been serving you”** (v. 29). Never once did he share his father's heart. He missed the point: relationship with his father.

I recall reading about an advert that appeared in the classified section of a newspaper. The advert was short and to the point:

“Single man with 160 irrigated acres of fertile land seeks marriage-minded woman with tractor. In replying, please send picture of tractor”.

Talk about the point missed!

We too can be good, dutiful, faithful believers and miss the point entirely. Until we know whose we are, we will never know who we are. A revelation of the Father-heart of God is crucial to intimacy with God and a fruitful walk in Christ.

Looking in the Mirror...

Herein lies another core issue: the older brother found his *identity* in *what he did*; rather than in *who he was*. The sad truth is that he was more a servant than a son, even though he had already been given his inheritance. Unless we live in a clear revelation of God as our Father, and thus derive our identity from that revelation, we too may miss the point. Just as God hangs His identify on fatherhood, *our destiny hinges on a clear sense of identity borne in the revelation of the Father-heart of God.*

Until we know *whose* we are, we will never know *who* we are. Until we understand whose we are; who we belong to; who our source is; who we derive our identity from ... we will never know who we are. We may spend our life trying to find something we already have in Him!

Identity...

Experts tell us that we get our identity—our sense of personal-worth—primarily from our parents, mainly from our father. They teach us that the feeling of being valuable is the product of parental love, and this conviction must be gained in childhood before the age of ten. If we do not develop this vital sense of worth by then, there is little chance of ever grasping it.

The psychologists are right ... to a point. Or better yet, they are onto something but don't have all the information. First, the Scriptures underscore the vital role of parenting in the development of a secure and significant child, capable of facing adulthood. **“Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it”** (Proverbs 22:6).

However, the Bible goes onto provide a powerful answer for those who have not had an ideal upbringing. There is hope for this orphaned society. What can Christ-followers do to rise above the unintentional inadequacies or negligence of their natural parents? What resources are there to those who have suffered the horrors of abusive parents? For those without Christ there is a wicked dead-end, but for the children of God there is an awesome solution! Of course, we need to restore our relationship with our parents if it is damaged, but that alone will not restore the damage to our soul. You see, *we cannot undo a bad childhood; but we can supersede it!*

Paul faced a generation even more vexed than ours in this regard, a confused society whose concept of family and parenting had been absolutely shattered by pagan stupidity. But God used this apostle as a master builder to reveal the true children of God. As we've seen, Paul taught the *principle of adoption*. **“For you did not receive the spirit of bondage ... but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry our, ‘Abba, Father’”** (Romans 8:15).

Too often we preach rebirth but we forget about the importance of adoption. Jesus did not just come to save us; He came to bring us back to Father. *There is no salvation until we are secure in*

Father's arms! Too often Christendom comes across as offering eternal fire insurance when many feel they're going through hell on earth. Now.

Consider this next statement.

The greatest need of the human heart is *not* the assurance of eternal security. It is the desperate need for security in the Father's heart *now!* The fact that this security is eternal is, of course, a wonderful but secondary blessing.

So, *Paul taught a formal transference of parenthood to God Himself.* And this is not just applicable to those who have had a difficult upbringing. Rather, those who have enjoyed a good upbringing are also invited to discover the dynamic reality of God's Fatherhood.

The damage or deficiencies of childhood can be healed through a new father—our Heavenly Father—who parents us with perfect love, when we allow Him to become a functioning father to us (see Hebrews 12:5-11).

A functioning father. This is absolutely key.

Throw away your theoretical clichés of Father God. This is not merely a kid's Bible story. Consciously and deliberately yield to His functional parenting in your life. Ask the Father to parent you in how you think; how you manage your attitudes and emotions; how you make decisions; how you relate to others and your world about you; how you respond to difficulty and adversity. Yes, we'll enjoy the emotional well-being and security that comes from knowing God as Father, but we'll also experience His character-shaping work in our lives, too.

Why would Jesus go so out of His way to stress that we must be childlike in our faith?

In fact, His words are scary: **“unless ... you become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven”** (Matthew 18:2). Jesus isn't making a threat in this verse. Rather, He's showing us that without childlike faith *we* won't be able to grasp the new reality He came to establish on earth. We won't *see* it. We won't get it.

A quick qualification. There's a world of difference between the word *childlike* and *childish*. God calls us to grow up. Great weight is placed on the need to grow in maturity, as we understand the ways of our Father and learn to align our lives with His intentions. Repeatedly, God calls us to lay aside all our selfishness and shed our childishness. But even as maturing followers we're urged to maintain a *childlike* faith in Him; active in our yielding to His functional parenting. As we grow out of our childishness, we're to maintain and foster the innocent, trusting dependence of a child.

So, I need to define myself as a child ... and do so regularly through prayerful evaluation and reflection. To be honest, this isn't easy to do. Everything in me wants to rather define myself as an accomplished, successful person. My ego and pride seeks for something more.

But in terms of my relationship with God, I am to define myself as a child. **“But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right [both the privilege and responsibility] to become children of God”** (John 1:12). And here's the kicker again: I can only define myself as a child, when I embrace a revelation of His Fatherhood.

Father God can only functionally parent me to the degree that I am actively fostering a childlike attitude.

The Building Blocks of the Soul...

God created Adam and Eve as, to borrow a psychological term, *fully actualised* individuals. They existed in harmony with their heavenly Father, with one another, and within the world they were created. With a healthy sense of personal-worth (identity), they enjoyed a sense of *security* in this union and a sense of *significance* in the dominion mandate God entrusted to them.

As we well know, Adam and Eve's rebellion ended this bliss. However, in their fall, what were once inherent blessings—security and significance—turned into deep, defining, driving needs. Disconnected from God, man became a *driven* creature. Out of sync with the Father, man is driven to meet his or her need for security and significance by pursuing a host of “other things.”

It's a little clichéd but it is often said that a woman's primary need is for security and a man's primary need is for significance. Truth is, every man and woman since Adam and Eve has been driven to meet both these needs. Irrespective of century, culture or circumstance, to the degree men and women remain disconnected from Father God, to this degree he or she seeks (both consciously and unconsciously) to fulfil these needs in various ways.

And the result is universal and inevitable.

We have a God-shaped hole that only restoration with the Father can fill, and no matter how much else we try to shove into that vacuum, it only ends up deepening it.

Only reunion with Father God restores the soul. Only in His Fatherhood do we find security and significance. Only in Him does our soul rest. Only in Him do we find a sense of purpose and meaning. Only in the Father's heart is our identity (personal-worth) rebuilt.

Who am I?

So, let's take a moment to spotlight this issue of identity because it is just so crucial. Several words can be used to describe the walk of faith, and again for simplicity, let us stick to just a few: *son*⁵, *steward*, *servant* and *soldier*. Unless we understand the Father-heart of God and thus derive our essential identity as son first we will fall into a few ditches, incorrectly understanding who we are and what He has called us to do.

Let me explain.

STEWARDS?

Yes, we are called to be stewards of all that God has entrusted to us (1 Peter 4:10). But unless we derive our identity as a son first, we will never be faithful stewards ... instead, we'll hold onto things too tightly, failing to entrust to God what is His. Rather than stewards, we become *hoarders* and end up deriving our identity *in what we have*.

SERVANTS?

Yes, we are called to be servants of the Lord, revealing Him to others (Matthew 20:26). But unless we derive our identity as a son first, we will never be faithful servants ... instead, we'll serve others for our own benefit with mixed motives, seeking attention or approval for what we do. Rather than servants, we become *slaves* and incorrectly derive our identity *from what we do*.

SOLDIERS?

Yes, we are called to be soldiers of Christ, battling the forces of darkness to establish the Kingdom of our God (2 Timothy 2:3). But unless we derive our identity as a son first, we will never be faithful soldiers ... instead, we will consistently fight the wrong battles, looking to defend our turf and protect our self-interests. In this case, rather than soldiers, we become *renegades* and error in deriving our identity *in what we fight against*.

⁵ The Scriptures use this concept of *sonship*, and it alludes to both men and women: sons of God and daughters of God. I'm just going to use the word "son" in these notes, but obviously refer to men and women. Ladies, if I can be the Bride of Christ, I'm sure you can stomach being a son of God?

SONS FIRST!

When we define ourselves as sons first; we find our sense of personal-worth in Him and Him alone. Then...

- ...we can be faithful stewards. Our attitude is “I’m a son, and therefore I look after all I have as a gift from Father which I will ultimately return to Him for account.” And not “I have worked for all that I have and will do whatever I must to keep it. Everything ultimately depends on me. If I don’t look after number one, no one else will”.
- ...we can be faithful servants. Our attitude is “I’m a son, and therefore I serve for my Father’s pleasure and delight.” And not “I use others to fill my own need for affirmation, approval or recognition”.
- ...we can be faithful soldiers. Our attitude is “I’m a son, and therefore I only fight the battles my Father deems important.” And not “I fight the battles that trigger me off, battles that validate my sense of worth or that move my sense of injustice”.

When we grasp God’s Father-heart and accept the privilege (and responsibility) of our sonship in Him, we are empowered to live life as He intended ... *because every child is empowered by the Presence of his Father.*

Grasping the Father-heart of God enables us to embrace our own identity:

<u>Foundational Revelation</u>	<u>Characteristics of Father-God</u>	<u>Our Identity</u>	<u>Our Role</u>
<i>Father</i>	Creator Provider Lord Saviour Friend	<i>Son</i>	Steward Soldier Servant

A Lesson from Parenting...

Without doubt, being a father to my own two children has been the single most enriching revelation of God the Father other than the Scriptures itself. To sense the selfless, unconditional love of a parent flowing through my entire being reveals something of Father God's love to me, to some degree at least. Perhaps this is why Paul encouraged Timothy and Titus to ideally choose elders from those who have children of their own (1 Timothy 3:1-5; Titus 1:5, 6).

I have always encouraged my children to express themselves through, among other things, painting and drawing. As a household, we have gone through reams of paper determined to give them a continual new and blank page to express their little imaginations. Initially, their "work of art" was a sum total of blotches and scratches, but with much encouragement—genuine delight at "baby strokes"—and a continued supply of "try-again" blank paper; slowly, slowly, they began to learn how to express their creativity in more distinguishable pictures. Does not Father God do the same with us?

Some assume God is expecting perfection from day one and every day following. Any attempt that colours outside the lines will get a crack behind the ears and a heavy scolding ... no place for expression, kind of like: "If at first you don't succeed ... shame on you!"

The result: so many live trapped by a fear of failure.

However, no decent father would treat his children this way. And the writer to the Hebrews reminds us that our earthly fathers parented us "**as seemed best to them,**" but our heavenly Father parents us "**for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness**" (Hebrews 12:10). God the Father is the perfect parent.

As each day dawns, Father presents us with a new "blank page" to express ourselves in line with His delight. Jeremiah described it this way: "**the Lord's mercies ... are new every morning**" (Lamentations 3:22, 23). No matter what a mess we have made before, each new day opens alive with the possibilities of forgiveness, restoration and a new start. No wonder Paul cheered: "**now is the day of salvation**" (2 Corinthians 6:2). As we awaken to each new day and align ourselves with Him, He gives us another "clean slate". In this way, the Father's kiss enlarges us ... and we share of His Divine nature.

The Father's Pleasure

Jesus ended this parable in Luke, Chapter 15 with an uppercut aimed at the religious jaw of those He squared off against. He concluded in such a way that He expected the older son, and by extension, the religious leaders to be convinced of the Father's love.

Jesus finished His parable with these words from the loving father:

“It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found” (v. 32).

Although we do not know if the older son ever caught his father's heart, we do know that most of the religious leaders did not. But let us make sure that we do.

Throughout the three parables in Luke 15, Jesus gives us an amazing inside peek behind the curtain of heaven. He used the word **“rejoice”**, **“rejoicing”** or **“joy”** five times from verses 5-10 to describe the prime activity of heaven. He even refers to degrees of joy that the host of heaven experience in the Father's Presence (v. 7). He then powerfully and extravagantly paints the picture of Father's joy in describing the reunion between the prodigal and his father, detailing the celebratory party held to express the father's love (vv. 11-32).

Think about it. The prime activity of heaven centres on the Father's delight in His children.

All this goes to underline a powerful point. *You* are dearly loved. Extravagantly so. Lavishly and unconditionally.

Father God delights in *you*. He takes pleasure in *you*.

The Father is for you. The question is ... *are you for you?*

While teaching on the purposes of God and mankind during a foundations class, I was once asked why God created us. The question was asked in a way that said, rather refreshingly, “I get all these theological answers but... *why?* Why would a self-sufficient God, totally enjoying the community of the Trinity, entirely satisfied and fulfilled in Himself, create us?”

Suddenly the light went on for me. I answered, “Father God was having a party and wanted us to share in the fun”. And for all the theological answers I have, which are Biblically true and correct, this one remains my favourite.

Listen. The Father is inviting you to the party: **“Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom”** (Luke 12:32).

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