

ABBA

FATHER

PRAYING THROUGH THE NAMES OF GOD

by Faith Girl

BACKGROUND

Though the Old Testament provides many rich names and titles for God, the New Testament reveals him most fully.

Jesus, in fact, shocked and offended the religious leaders of his day by claiming that he had a Father/ Son relationship with the God whose name they feared even to pronounce.

Furthermore, by inviting his followers to call God "Father," he made this the primary name by which God is to be known to his followers. That's why we can boldly pray the prayer Jesus taught his disciples, "Our Father who art in heaven...."

The Hebrew Scriptures normally depict God, not as the Father of individuals but as Father to his people, Israel. Pious Jews, aware of the gap between a holy God and sinful human beings, would never have dared address God as Ab (Hebrew) or Abba, the Aramaic word for "Daddy," which gradually came to mean "dear father."

Jesus shocked many of his contemporaries by referring to God as his Father and by inviting his followers to call God "Father." Rather than depicting God as a typical Middle Eastern patriarch who wielded considerable power within the family, he depicted him primarily as a tender and compassionate father, who extends grace to both the sinner and the self-righteous.

The most frequent term for "father" in the New Testament was the Greek word pater.

SCRIPTURE

"A father [' Ab] of the fatherless and a judge for the widows, is God in His holy habitation."
PSALM 68: 5

The first recorded words of Jesus, spoken to his earthly parents, are these: "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?"
(Luke 2: 49).

The expression " Abba, Pater" (AB-ba pa-TAIR) is found three times in the New Testament, all in prayer.

It is the form Jesus used in his anguished cry in Gethsemane: "Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will"
(Mark 14: 36).

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“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. “The older brother became angry and refused to go in....
“ ‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

(Luke 15: 20, 28, 31–32)

If you want to perceive who God the Father is, earthly models will fail you. Far better to read the parable Jesus told an audience composed of both sinners and self-righteous religious leaders, two groups that had much in common though they would not have thought so. Jesus offers both a stunning portrait of a father who responds to the appalling behavior of two sons in ways no Middle Eastern patriarch would have.

In Jesus’ time the Jewish community had a way of punishing sons who lost the family inheritance, squandering it among Gentiles. Angry villagers would gather together to conduct what was known as a qetsatsah ceremony, a ritual that consisted of filling a large pot with burned nuts and burned corn and then breaking it in front of the guilty party. As the earthenware pot shattered, the villagers would shout: “So-and-so is cut off from his people.” That would be the cue for the errant son to get out of town for good.

Remarkably, the father in Jesus’ story failed to act as his listeners expected. Instead of waiting at home for his profligate son to come crawling back, as any dignified Middle Eastern father would have done, the father in Jesus’ story keeps a lookout for him. As soon as he spots him, he runs out and throws his arms around his wayward son, showering him with kisses. By acting quickly and with so much tenderness, the father effectively prevents his neighbours from organizing a qetsatsah ceremony to cut off his son.

Kenneth Bailey, a theologian who has lived most of his life in the Middle East, explains how astonishing such a sight would have been:

Traditional Middle Easterners, wearing long robes, do not run in public. They never have. To do so would be deeply humiliating. The father runs knowing that in so doing he will deflect the attention of the community away from his ragged son to himself. People will focus on the extraordinary sight of a distinguished, self-respecting landowner humiliating himself in public by running down the road revealing his legs.

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Practical Application

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish ... no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one.
(John 10: 27- 30)

Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.
(Luke 12: 32)

I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty. (2 Corinthians 6: 18)

But what of the older son, angered by his father's acceptance of his foolish younger brother? Once again, Jesus depicts the father in a way that would have surprised his listeners. Instead of slapping his son and publicly rebuking him for refusing to attend the celebration, the father humbles himself by leaving the feast in order to reach out to his angry son.

Both sons, one a law breaker and the other a law keeper, had publicly offended their father by their selfish behavior. Both were offered not what they deserved but what they needed—extraordinary grace from the father who loved them.

Ask yourself today whether you are more like the older or the younger of these sons. Then thank God for treating you not as you deserve to be treated but as a child worthy of his faithful, fatherly love.

Dads are great at playing with their kids, throwing them in the air and catching them, allowing their children to leap off high things into their arms, etc.

Those who belong to God have an even better safety net, one that never wears out and that prevents them from making fatal spiritual mistakes. Scripture reminds us of this truth by assuring us that “underneath are the everlasting arms.” God is cradling us, keeping us safe for an eternity lived in his presence.

Sigmund Freud once wrote that one of the strongest needs of childhood is the need for a father's protection.

Fortunately, even those of us whose earthly fathers failed to provide this sense of security can experience God's faithful fatherly protection. Knowing that the Father will keep our souls safe means we can put our energy not into building up our sense of self but into building up his kingdom. Secure in his arms, we can learn to take the risks that faith requires.

If you have been playing it safe, resisting some new direction in your life that you know to be right, take some time today to meditate on God's faithfulness. Tell him you want his will more than you want your own. Then go ahead and do whatever the Father asks!

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Prayer Suggestions

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your
name, your kingdom
come, your will be
done on earth as it is
in heaven. Give us
today our daily bread.
(Matthew 6: 9– 11)

A father to the
fatherless, a defender
of widows, is God in
his holy dwelling. God
sets the
lonely in families, he
leads forth the
prisoners with
singing.
(Psalm 68: 5– 6)

As a father has
compassion on his
children, so the LORD
has compassion on
those who fear him;
for he knows how we
are formed, he
remembers that we
are dust.
(Psalm 103: 13–
14)

In the first two sentences of His now famous prayer, Jesus inextricably linked God the Father to our need for daily bread, for daily provision.

What a stunning revelation— that God is not only Lord and Master, the Ancient of Days, the Mighty Creator, the Holy One of Israel, but also Abba. And we are his children, not by virtue of our humanity but by adoption into his family. Because of Jesus our Brother, we dare to call God Father, to count on his compassion, to depend on his provision, to lean on his love.

‘Abba, you are a father to the fatherless and the defender of those in need. Holy is your name, for you stand above all. I lift up your name in praise and adoration, acknowledging you as my Father, a Father who is always there when I need you. Sometimes our earthly fathers abandon us or don’t know how to be there when we need them. But when that happens, you rise up as our true Father. You fill the gap and bring comfort and guidance to each of us who seeks your face as Father. You have so many children, ‘Abba, that I don’t know how you could keep track of us all at one time, but you do. You are the greatest Father of all.

‘Abba, how many times have I neglected to receive the comfort and care you have for me as my Father because I forget that you are there? Or because I simply don’t know you by this name?

You are God. You are the Creator. You are holy. And sometimes that makes me feel as if you are also distant. Yet the name ‘Abba tells me that you are not distant at all. In fact, you are as close to me as a father is to his child. When I’m afraid, I will trust in you because you hold my cares in your hand. You hold my heart in your own.

‘Abba, thank you for not leaving me as an orphan. Whether my earthly father is near and dear or is someone I do not know, he can’t be everything I need in a father because no human being is perfect. Only you are perfect, and only you provide me with all of the loving, gentle care a daddy can give. Thank you for your patience, kindness, and goodness. Thank you for being merely a breath away. When I whisper your name— ‘Abba, Father— you hear.

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Prayer Suggestions

See how the lilies of
the field grow. They
do not labour or spin.
Yet I tell you that not
even Solomon
in all his splendour
was dressed like one
of these. If that is how
God clothes
the grass of the field
which is here today
and tomorrow is
thrown into the
fire, will he not much
more clothe you, O
you of little faith? So
do not worry,
saying, "What shall
we eat?" or "What
shall we drink?" or
"What shall we wear?"
For the pagans run
after all these things,
and your heavenly
Father knows that
you need them.
(Matthew 6: 28- 32)

'Abba, I want to know you more.

I want to experience your presence more.

I want to understand what it means to live each day of my life
in the fullness of who You are and in the peace that comes from
trusting in you as my Father.

I want to seek your wisdom in my choices instead of rushing
ahead to pursue dead ends.

Forgive me for making hasty decisions and show me instead how
to look to you as my Father— the one who guides me in every
step I take.

When I am empty, fill me with your powerful and abiding
paternal care.