

# God Our Father

by Mark Drabenstott

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## Introduction

*"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1).*

With these few short words the Bible introduces us to God. We learn that the God of the Bible is Creator — maker of heaven and earth, the giver of life, the giver of good. But the Bible shows us that God is much more than a creator. He is our heavenly Father.

God wants us to be His children. God wants to be our heavenly Father. In fact, this is one of the most powerful messages in the Bible. God is willing to make us part of His special family, but that does not happen automatically. We must enter His family in the special way He has prescribed. That way is summed up in these words:

*"Yet to all who received Jesus, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God — children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God." (John 1:12-13).*

In this booklet we will learn about God our Father and how we can become His children.

## Revelations of God in the Bible

The Bible provides us with a record of how God has revealed Himself to us. Over time, God has revealed Himself in many ways. He is the same God, but over time He has told us more about Himself. In one sense, the Bible is an extended record of those revelations.

Long after He made the earth God appeared to a special man, later named Abraham, speaking promises that surely seemed incredible (the first of these promises is recorded in Genesis 12). But Abraham believed God, and went to a place he did not know far away. God promised to Abraham that he would found a great nation, and that he would receive a magnificent inheritance, with eternal life. But last of all he made the greatest promise: *"I will be your God"* (Genesis 17:7). In making this promise, the Creator became the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. He became the God of Jacob's descendants, the nation of Israel.

Some four hundred years later, Abraham's descendants hardly seemed to be God's nation, for they were slaves in Egypt. But God had not forgotten His people. The Lord appeared to another special man: Moses. God told Moses that he had a great mission to complete. Moses was to deliver God's people from their bondage. Moses asked the question that he had to know to begin his task — *"WHO ARE YOU?"*

A powerful voice gave the answer:

*"I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you"* (Exodus 3:14).

God revealed himself as "Yahweh" — a Hebrew name meaning "He who was, who is, and who will be" (compare Revelation 1:8). To Moses and to the nation of Israel, God showed Himself to be a God of power and deliverance, leading the nation out of slavery in Egypt through mighty displays of power.

Some 500 years later, the Lord appeared to Elijah, a man who would become a prophet without equal for centuries to come. Once Elijah became afraid and fled to the mountain of God, Mt. Horeb (the account is given in 1 Kings 19). There the Lord God summoned him to the mouth of a cave, and revealed Himself in a mighty wind that broke the rocks. But God was not in the wind. Then he revealed himself in a thundering earthquake — but God was not in the earthquake. He revealed himself in a raging fire — but God was not in the fire. Last of all, God spoke in a still small voice.

In the Old Testament, we can read how God revealed himself to Abraham, to Moses, and to Elijah. These Bible accounts contain awesome, fantastic pictures of God. But they also reveal a God quite distant from a sinful people. This is a God that is high, far-removed, and nearly unapproachable. When they saw God revealed, the sight was so fearsome that Abraham fell down to the earth in a deep sleep, Moses hid his face, and Elijah covered his face with his coat. God was so removed from His people that only one man, the High priest, could come into the Lord's most holy place, and then only once a year.

Yet in His revelation to Elijah there were special words — still small words that pointed forward to a time when the Lord would be revealed in full.

Some 900 years later that voice did spring to life. The son of God, a man named Jesus, was born in a village named Bethlehem. This Jesus came with a very special purpose — to reveal God in a way no one else had ever done. To reveal God as He really wants us to know him. To reveal God as Father. It needed a son to reveal the Father.

Revealing God as our heavenly Father was one of the most important missions in the life of Jesus. In the preface to his Gospel record, the Apostle John says,

*"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth, we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father"* (John 1:14 RSV).

Jesus himself would later say, *"He who has seen me has seen the Father"* (John 14:9). Jesus was, in effect, turning on its head the popular phrase, *"like father, like son"*. In this case, no one had ever seen God. But now they saw His son, and in seeing Jesus they could see all the magnificent character of the Father.

The God who revealed Himself to Abraham, Moses, and Elijah was now revealed more clearly — as a Father, and not just Father of the son, Jesus. In the Lord's prayer Jesus once and for all dispelled the fear that men had felt when approaching God;

*"Our **Father** in heaven, hallowed be your name"* (Matthew 6:9).

God is the Father of the son. But wonderfully, incredibly, He is our Father too. Indeed, the mission of Jesus was not only to reveal God as Father. It was also to show us, you and me, how to become His children.

Who is our heavenly Father? How do we become children of the Father? And if we are His children, how then should we live? These are the questions we answer in the sections that follow.

## Who is our heavenly Father?

God as our Father is a subject that is developed mainly in the New Testament. The reason for this is plain — it needed God's son, Jesus, to reveal his Father. Nevertheless, the theme of God as Father can still be found in the Old Testament. There, we find echoes of the "Father" theme. For instance, in 2 Samuel 7 we read this promise that was given to David, one of Israel's greatest kings:

*"He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son."* (vv. 13-14).

Written about 1000 BC, this was a prophecy of a great king, who would also be the son of God. This prophecy came true when Jesus was born, as recorded in Luke 2 in the New Testament.

Another place where God is referred to as a father is in Psalm 103. This is clearly a more general reference to God as father:

*"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).*

While God is likened to a father in a figure of speech, He is not formally addressed as "Father". To Abraham, Moses, Elijah and many others in the Old Testament, God is revealed in power and glory, but not as Father. That aspect of our God is revealed most fully in the New Testament where our understanding of God becomes much more complete.

Jesus could fully reveal the Father because he was exactly like his Father. The first chapter of Hebrews tells us this:

*"In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son...the Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (Hebrews 1:1-3).*

This is an important verse because it teaches us how to understand both Jesus and his Father. The words *"exact representation"* are translated from the Greek word *'kharakter'*. A Greek dictionary shows that this is a word used by engravers to mean "the figure stamped by an engravers tool; a precise reproduction". In other words, Jesus is an exact copy of the Father. That is, Jesus had his Father's "character" (the English word obviously derives from the same Greek word). Put simply, Jesus was not His Father — he was his Father's son. Jesus is not God, Jesus is the Son of God (compare John 14:28, 20:17).

When we look at Jesus, we see the Father in every respect. Like son, like Father. Jesus was the only such revelation of His Father. John tells this in the preface to his gospel record:

*"No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known" (John 1:18 RSV).*

What do we learn about the Father when we look closely at Jesus? From the four Gospel records (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) we can hear the words that Jesus spoke about his Father. These tell us about the wonderful character of our heavenly Father.

Jesus' lessons about his Father are found in many places, but three are especially useful. The first is the sermon on the mount (Matthew chapters 5-7). The second is a series of "children" passages throughout the four Gospel books. And the last are a series of passages from the book of John.

### **(1) Lessons from the sermon on the mount**

1. The Father is concerned about His good name — and how his children reflect on it.

*"Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (Mt. 5:16).*

2. God shows no partiality, and He expects us to treat all the same.

*"But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Mt. 5:44-45).*

3. God is all knowing, and we act to serve Him, not ourselves.

*"Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven...But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." (Mt. 6:1,6)*

4. God provides for our every need — so that we can devote our lives to service to Him.

*"...your Father knows what you need before you ask him... your heavenly Father knows [what] you need... But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Mt. 6:8, 32-33).*

5. He wants to grant our requests, if they are good for us.

*"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. "Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!" (Matthew 7:7-11)*

6. God is merciful and expects us to be merciful, too.

*"Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36).*

## **(2) Lessons from the "children" passages**

1. We must be His children — and trust Him like children — if we want to be in His kingdom.

*"I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it" (Mark 10:15).*

2. We must never put ourselves in our Father's place.

*"He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: 'I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven'" (Mt. 18:2-3).*

## **(3) Lessons from the book of John**

1. Grace and truth are two key traits of the Father.

*"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father" (John 1:14 RSV)*

2. God is love — He loves Jesus and all His children.

*"Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love" (1 John 4:8).*

*"The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands" (John 3:35).*

*"No, the Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God" (John 16:27).*

3. The Father is a teacher.

*"Jesus gave them this answer: "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does" (John 5:19).*

*"So Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me" (John 8:28).*

4. The Father delegates authority.

*"Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son... For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself" (John 5:22,26).*

To sum up, we can learn much about God as our Father by looking to Jesus. Jesus came to reveal the Father — and when we look to Jesus we "see" the Father. Our heavenly Father is very near, and He loves His children. He cares and provides for us with abiding love. Like any Father, he wants to develop our full potential. With a Father like this, the only question for us is this: How do we become His children?

## How do we become children of the Father?

The Bible tells us much about the Father, but it shows us something even more powerful:

*"But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become **children of God**; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:12-13, RSV).*

In answer to our question how to become children of the Father, one place we can look is the book of John. John is the "book of the Father", because it contains more references to God as Father than any other book in the Bible (111 times!), but in another sense it is also the "book of the children".

The main points of the Gospel of John are these:

- ***God is the Heavenly Father.***
- ***Jesus is the Son of the Father.***
- ***We can become His children too if we believe in Jesus.***

The defining characteristic of a father is having children. The Gospel of John tells the story of the SON of God, and the process by which others become the children of God.

## Lessons from John 3

John 3 is an important place where Jesus discusses how we become the Father's children. The chapter records a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, an elderly man who was among the most learned Jewish scholars of the day. In this conversation, Jesus lays out very clearly what we must do to become a member of God's family. The conversation includes three brief exchanges between Jesus and Nicodemus. For clarity these are paraphrased as follows:

### First exchange (John 3:2-3)

*Nicodemus: You are a teacher, and God is with you.*

*Jesus: If you truly want to enter the kingdom of God, you must be born "from above." (The Greek word can mean "from above" as well as "again".) Put another way, only children of the Father will inherit His kingdom.*

### Second exchange (John 3:4-8)

*Nicodemus: How can this be? Can a man be "born" a second time?*

*Jesus: To be born again, "from above", you must be born in a very special way: of water and spirit. That is what baptism really is — two events in one. When you are baptized, you go under the water and you rise a child of God. When you rise from the water, you are reborn and in a spiritual sense, you take your first "breath" as a child of God.*

### Third exchange (John 3:9-12)

*Nicodemus: How can this be?*

*Jesus: While my words and actions prompted you to come tonight, you still do not believe in me. And now that I have elevated your thinking to truly heavenly topics you are still clearly not ready to believe in me. But you must believe if you want to be a child of the Father.*

Nicodemus was a revered man in Israel. As he stood before Jesus, however, he really had nothing, because he was still not a child of the true Father. He had great knowledge, but he did not believe in the fullest sense. He did not put his trust in God's cure for sin. He relied on a pile of rules that had accumulated for centuries.

Here is a very important principle to take to heart. We can understand every detail of God's word in our mind. But if we do not truly believe, if we do not fully entrust our life to God then we are just like Nicodemus — standing before Jesus with our minds full of years of learning, but still not a child of the Father. We must never confuse knowledge with belief. Knowledge is a prerequisite to believing, but it never takes the place of it.

A few verses from the book of Proverbs provide one of the best definitions of "belief" in the whole Bible:

*"Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil. This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones" (Proverbs 3:5-8)*

Becoming a child of the Father begins with belief in the Lord Jesus, but it does not end there. Our belief must give rise to the earnest desire to be baptized, to be fully born from above.

### **A gospel summary in John 3:16**

Later in John 3, in verse 16, the apostle provides a very useful summary of the lessons that Jesus taught Nicodemus — and those who still listen to his words in the 21st century. This summary, which some Bible scholars describe as the "gospel in miniature," reinforces the process by which we join God's family.

*"God so loved the world..."* — the motive of every true father is love, and the same is true of our heavenly Father. He has provided for our every need. With the greatest care and motivated by the deepest love, He has provided for our greatest need of all, a cure from the sting of death.

*"that he gave His only begotten son..."* — salvation comes from God. It is a gift that cannot be earned.

*"that whoever believes on him..."* — you cannot be born from above unless you believe: unless you are fully persuaded that God is able to do what he has promised. We are justified by our faith, and by our faith alone.

*"Believes into him..."* — the word "in" is translated from a Greek word that in almost every other place in the New Testament is translated "into." One literal translation (The Emphatic Diaglott) translates the phrase this way: *"that every one believing into him..."*. While this is a little word, it describes an important step in the process-and spells the difference between belief and knowledge. We might know Christ, but not be in him. We might have the academic knowledge of Nicodemus, but not put every part of our trust in the son of God. Our belief must move us to baptism, for if we are not born of water we cannot see the kingdom of God.

*"might not perish..."* — we must acknowledge that without Christ there is no cure for the sting of sin.

*"but have everlasting life..."* — a child of the Father will live in the Father's house, the new Jerusalem that was the last great vision that the apostle John described before he died (see Revelation 21:1-4).

To sum up, the key elements from John's gospel are these:

- *Jesus is the Son of God.*
- *God loves us as a Father.*
- *He has provided His Son as the cure for sin.*
- *To obtain that cure, we must believe into Jesus.*



- *For if we are not born of water and spirit in baptism, we cannot enter the kingdom of God.*
- *Believe, be born in baptism, and become a child of the Father.*

## Lessons from the writings of the Apostle Paul

This message is not unique to John's writings. It becomes the central theme for many of the letters written by Paul. Becoming a child of the Father was important to Paul for a very personal reason. Paul had been born Saul of Tarsus, a descendant of Abraham and a defender of the doctrine of righteousness through works. He discovered that being a child of the Father is something altogether different. It is a life based on faith in the Son of God, and a salvation based on God's grace.

*"...not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his descendants; but 'Through Isaac shall your descendants be named.' This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are reckoned as descendants... So it depends not upon man's will or exertion, but upon God's mercy" (Romans 9:6-8,16 RSV).*

Paul stresses the importance of baptism in joining God's family in Galatians 3. There he underscores the principle that being a child of God is not a matter of natural descent — it is a matter of faith in the son of God!

*"Consider Abraham: 'He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness'. Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the Gospel in advance to Abraham: 'All nations will be blessed through you.' So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith" (Galatians 3:6-9).*

*"The Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe. Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law. You are all **sons of God** through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." (Galatians 3:22-27).*

## Conclusions

The Bible is the story of God revealing Himself as our heavenly Father and showing us how to become His children. That process is remarkably simple. Learn who the Father is by listening and looking to His son. Believe in his son—entrust your life to him. Be born from above by being baptized into the name of Jesus. Live a life full of faith until Jesus returns to gather God's family together.

- There is tremendous power in being a child of the Father. It is a privilege that we should never take lightly. God has promised us eternal life on earth.
- To become a child of the Father, we must believe into Christ. We must know him, yes, but belief means much more than knowledge. It means trusting God with our heart, soul, and mind. It means trusting him in all the quiet decisions we face every day. Our knowledge must move us to action.
- To become a child of the Father, our belief must move us to baptism, a blessed event that marks our birth into the family of the Father.
- Becoming a child of the Father is a loving act of grace—there is nothing we do to earn it. We are born not of blood or the will of the flesh or the will of men, but by the grace of God. Paul and Nicodemus had spent whole lives dedicated to the human pursuit of righteousness. They learned what we must also know—we cannot earn our way into God’s family. Instead, we must believe into Christ, and through his grace, we will be given a new name—a child of the Father.

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## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How was God’s character revealed in the Old Testament? What does the name "Yahweh" mean? How does this name help us understand that God is the same, even though he chooses to reveal Himself in different ways through time?
2. God gave several promises to Abraham. Which one was the greatest?
3. What are the characteristics of the Father that we can learn from the teachings, the actions, and the character of his son, Jesus?
4. What is the first step in becoming a child of the Father?
5. What does it mean to be "born from above"?
6. If you become a child of the Father, then how should you live your life?

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