

## GOD THE FATHER ALMIGHTY

Romans 8:12-17

Brennan Manning wrote of an **Irish priest** walking about his rural parish. He noticed an old peasant kneeling by the side of the road, praying. Impressed, the priest said to the man, “*You must be very close to God.*” The peasant looked up from his prayers, smiled, and said, “*Yes, he’s very fond of me.*”

As we continue our journey through the Apostles’ Creed, I invite you to open your Bible to **Romans 8:12-17**. The first line of the Creed reads: “*I believe in God the Father almighty.*” God is almighty. Pagans believed their gods had specific powers: one could send a storm, another could heat the earth, another could insure a good crop—false gods with limited powers. The one true God is **almighty**. The psalmist declares, “*Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him*” (Ps 115:3). God can do anything he chooses to do, and no one can stop him. He acts with plan and purpose. He acts for his glory. And he acts in love. Almighty. And this Almighty God is a Father who, even it feels a little weird for you to hear it, is very fond of you. Hear the word of the Lord ... (***read the text***).

### I

**Jesus taught Christians to call God Father.** In the New Testament, especially in the Gospels, God is referred to as Father more than 165 times. “*Father*” is Jesus’ favorite way of addressing God.<sup>1</sup>

Referring to God as Father is **nothing new to us**. Jesus teaches us to pray, “*Our Father ...*” (Mt 6:9). I begin most of my prayers with the word *Father*. This is familiar to us. So familiar that we have lost the wonder of it. We take it for granted that Almighty God is our Father. I am no more astounded when I call God “Father” than I am when I call Dayna “my wife,” Nathan “my

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<sup>1</sup>Robert H. Stein, *Jesus the Messiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 131.

son,” Kristen “my daughter.” Naming God “our Father” is comfortable, status quo praying. It is like putting on old slippers. Nothing new here.

## II

**But there is something new for most of us in calling God “Abba, Father.”** It is by the Holy Spirit, says Paul, in v. 15, that we cry out, “Abba, Father.” God invites us to call him by this name. It comes here in the middle of Romans and is made more astounding because it comes after Paul has explored the nature of our sinfulness and brokenness. Paul announces the gospel numerous times in the first seven chapters of Romans, but sin weighs heavy in these chapters. Paul writes that every single one of us sins and falls short of God’s glory. Sin’s wages are death, sin earns God’s wrath. Sin enslaves us and makes us enemies of God. And nobody gets a pass, not even Paul. Sin is pervasive, monstrous, a death-merchant. Sin burrows into our souls like a tick that won’t let go, sucking the blood and life and joy out of us all. No wonder Paul concludes Romans 7 with the gut-wrenching cry of everyone who has even the faintest idea of the danger of our sin: *“Wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”* (7:24).

Thank God for **chapter 8**! You can almost hear the bugler playing the cavalry charge. There is remedy to our sin, declares Paul. Jesus can rescue us: “Therefore,” writes Paul, “*there is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus.*” Instead of condemning us, God saves us. Instead of leaving us to battle sin in our own power, God puts his Holy Spirit in us to give us his power to overcome. That’s what he’s saying in vv. 12-13: if you live by the sin nature—what Paul calls “*the flesh,*”—you will spiritually die. But if you live by the Holy Spirit, your sin nature does the dying, and you will live.

And the outcome of being led by the Spirit is that we become **sons and daughters of God**—not as natural born children but as adopted children. Father God adopts us who are orphaned by sin into his family. And don’t imagine yourself as the beauty queen, the star athlete, or the brainiac with the 132 IQ. No matter how we present on the outside, we are sin’s orphans, lots of brokenness seen and unseen—broken in mind and soul and body. We are the kids most adoptive

parents would look past as they make their choice, leaning into the orphanage director, whispering, “*Are these all you got?*” But God doesn’t look past us. Father God chooses us:

*“I want to adopt him.”*

*“You mean that angry kid with the scowl on his face. He’s a rebel, that one.”*

*“Yes, him.”*

*“I want to adopt her.”*

*“You mean that reclusive girl with the cleft palate?”*

*“Yes, her.”*

*“And I want to adopt him.”*

*“You mean that kid in the wheelchair with cerebral palsy.”*

*“Yes, that’s the one.”*

God adopts us, **chooses us**—chooses you—and makes you his son, his daughter. Not because you are worthy but because you are loved. Not because you are good but because God is gracious. Paul expands this thought in v. 30: “*And those he predestined, he also called; and those he called, he also justified; and those he justified, he also glorified.*” Father God adopts you and never sends you back to the orphanage. He is faithful to the end and eternity. And this is the God who invites you by his Spirit to call him what his Son Jesus calls him: “*Abba, Father.*”

### III

**I rarely hear anyone speak of or to God in this way.** Do you? Jesus spoke to the Father that way. Mark 14—midnight in Gethsemane. Jesus is trying to come to grips with the sin he would bear on the cross he would be nailed to when the sun came up. In agony and grief, Jesus cried out, “*Abba, Father, if there’s any other way than the cross, please show me that way. But what I want is not important; what you want matters most, and I’ll do whatever you want*” (Mk. 14:36). *Abba, Father.* This is not passive praying. This is the way you pray when someone you love is racked by Covid, fighting for her life in an ICU.

In an hour when Jesus is overwhelmed with grief, he isn't talking to some **impersonal force** in the universe, some Prime Mover, some First Cause, or some cosmic Evil Stepfather who picks wings off butterflies and gets his jollies watching children suffer. Jesus is talking to his Father, to his *Abba*, Father. Jesus is talking to his *dear* Father.

That's **what *abba* means**. It's an Aramaic term that, like the term *amen*, has survived in its original language across many centuries and many languages. Which is all the more amazing because Aramaic was sort of Hebrew street-language. Aramaic was not the highfalutin language of the academy and the courtroom; it was the language of the marketplace, the city park, the dinner table, and the corner bar. There is nothing formal about this language and nothing formal about this term *abba*. *Abba* means *father*. It is nursery speech—a baby learning to say, “*Da-da*.” Some scholars think it carries the warmth of *Daddy*. Joachim Jeremias researched the prayer literature of ancient Judaism and wrote, “*Abba was an everyday word, a homely family-word. No Jew would have dared to address God in this manner. Jesus did ....*”<sup>2</sup> So did Paul. And as Paul writes in v. 15, by the Holy Spirit “*we cry out ‘Abba Father!’*” too.

Other scholars suggest that though *abba* is warm and familial, *Daddy* is taking it a bit far. Either way, *abba* is **more than a title**. It is a term of familial warmth, endearment, and trust. A man who had visited Israel told me about an occasion there when he was walking down the street. He heard racing footsteps and turned to see a boy chasing after his father, shouting, “*Abba, Abba*.” This is not one of those words used only in Bible-times. People **use it today**. And it's not just for babies either. We never outgrow this term. I often hear some of you in your 50s speak to your old man in his 70s. And when you do, you don't call him father; you call him daddy, which is not exactly *abba*, but it is the spirit of *abba*.

Because we are in God's family, because God's Spirit has made us sons and daughters of God, we can **join Jesus and Paul** (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6) and call God “*Abba, Father*.” Do you grasp

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<sup>2</sup>Cited by John Stott, *Romans: God's Good News for the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), 233.

how remarkable that is? I know most of who I am. And I know some of whom God is. And God says, “*You can call me Abba.*”

#### IV

**But you don’t hear it much, do you?** My late friend, Otis Hood, liked to call God “Big Dad.” Years ago, my daughter wrote a song called *A Daddy Like You*. When she was working on that song, finding her notes on the piano, and singing through the lyrics, I remember thinking, “*Wow! Kristen wrote a song about me.*” I was honored and embarrassed all at the same time ... until I listened closer to the lyrics. That song was not about me. The Daddy she was singing to is God. It struck me as a little strange—just like it did when I was in a prayer circle in college and one of the students began her prayer, “*Hi, Daddy.*” I remember being startled by that, half-ducking and half-looking up, hoping God would be discriminate with the lightning bolt. “*Hi, Daddy?*”

I grew up Presbyterian, for crying out loud. I **wasn’t ready for that informality**. I grew up hearing people speak to God as Thee and Thou and Thy. I’m fine with You and Him and Your, but “*Hi Daddy?*” A little too intimate, a little too touchy-feely for me. We’re talking about Almighty God here, Creator of heaven and earth. Majestic mountains. Tall pines and sturdy oaks. The sun by day and the moon by night. All kinds of animals. The amazing physiology and intricate detail of human beings. Stars beyond counting and galaxies beyond our own, light years into space. “*Hi, Daddy?*” How do you crawl into the lap of the One who made all this? It seems a little strange and presumptuous, don’t you think?

And it would be if God didn’t give us permission to do it. You heard it for yourself: God’s **indwelling Holy Spirit** compels us to cry out, “*Abba, Father.*” God invites us into a warm intimacy in our relationship with him. We can have more than a formal father-child relationship, more than a distant one, more than a father-child relationship marked only by respect or awe or fear. Our Father God invites us into close personal relationship. He wants us to know him more deeply than as Creator or Provider or the one who disciplines us when we go wrong. God wants us to

experience a warm intimacy with him. He doesn't just want us to *know* he loves us; Abba Father wants us to *feel* his love.

This is **hard for some of us to embrace**. I have known and worshiped God all my life, and it's hard for *me* to embrace. Like some of you, I grew up with very little relationship with my father. I remember playing catch with him some, but between his work-travels and the way he and my mother fought when he was home, there wasn't much energy for a real relationship. Then, after my mom left him in my third-grade year, I probably didn't see him or hear from him more than 50 times the rest of his life. I suppose that if you had or have a warm relationship with your earthly father, it's easier to experience that kind of relationship with God. But easy or hard, God loves us warmly and calls us into intimate relationship.

## V

**We are his sons and daughters after all.** Look at v. 15: Paul tells us that by his Spirit God made us sons and daughters. We have "*received the spirit of adoption.*" The Jews had no practice of adoption, but the Greeks and Romans did. And in that culture, if a father adopted you, you were made as much a part of the family as if you were born into the family. You got the family name. You got an equal share of the inheritance. You were insider not outsider. You were not the father's child only by law. You weren't a step-this or a half-that. You were made a full and equal part of the family.

That's what God does for us. And it's an **amazing act of love**. Even though we were outside the family, sinners estranged from God and enemies of God, God adopted us into his family. He chose us. He chose you. He picked you out and said, "*I choose you.*" Before you chose him, he chose you. **Through the blood of the crucified Christ and by putting his Holy Spirit into our lives, God transforms us into full-fledged, blood-bought, Spirit-filled, what-belongs-to-the-Father-belongs-to-us, members of his family.** So now, when we pray, we don't have to say, "*Mr. God*" or "*Dr. God*" or even the formal term "*Our Father.*" All of that is fine, but God invites us to be less formal and much warmer: we can call him *Abba*.

But don't get the idea that God is an **indulgent Abba**. He doesn't spoil us. He doesn't close his eyes to our disobedience or wink at our sins. And he doesn't ensure that life is always easy and never hard. In *The Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis wrote, "*We want not so much a father in heaven as a grandfather in heaven—whose plan for the universe was such that it might be said at the end of each day, 'A good time was had by all.'*"<sup>3</sup> Paul tells us in v. 17 that "*we are God's children, and if children, also heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ—if indeed we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.*" If God allowed his only begotten Son Jesus to suffer, he will allow our suffering too. Our sufferings link us with Christ, affirm our oneness with him, prepare us to share in Christ's glory. God is our *Abba*, but he is not an indulgent, make-life-as-easy-as-it-can-be *Abba*. He loves us too much.

And our Father God is not an *Abba* who **thinks his children can do no wrong**. He knows us completely—which is scary and comforting at the same time. It means that nobody can tell God any dark secret on you that he doesn't already know. It means you don't have to worry that some skeleton will tumble out of some hidden closet that will cause God to change his mind about you. It means you don't have to fear that he'll finally notice some character flaw you've kept from him and thereby love you less. Or that if you do something to tarnish his good name, he might disown you, disinherit you, and boot you out of the family. Our Father's love for us—for you—is with eyes wide open. "*He knows our frame,*" writes the psalmist, "*he remembers that we are dust*" (Ps 103:14). He knows we are capable of great good and evil too. He knows everything there is to know about us—past, present, and future. And yet Father God chooses to adopt us into his family, forgive our sins, stick with us forever, and tell us we can call him *Abba*.

He wants us to call him *Abba* because his love for us is **not mechanical and not the result of some legal transaction**. God doesn't love you because he has to. He doesn't love you because you've prayed the sinner's prayer and now, he's obligated to love you. God loves you because he chooses to, because he likes saving what's lost, restoring what's broken, and relating to his

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<sup>3</sup>Cited by Philip Yancey, *Where Is God When It Hurts?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977, reprint 1990), 92.

children on a warm, personal level. God loves you with passion, with feeling. If there was no passion, there would be no cross. In Christ, God loved you enough to send his Son Jesus to die in your place to save you from your sins. He opened his arms wide on the cross to receive the nails that pinned him there *and* to receive all sinners who will repent and believe the gospel. God loves with passion. **Scan the Scriptures:** God seeks us when we go astray, throws a party when we come home (Lk 15), and he carries us in his arms as a shepherd carries his lamb close to his breast (Isa 40:11). And underneath all that affection is the committed, covenant, steadfast *abba*-love of God for all his children, including you.

The same God Almighty who spoke worlds into existence wants to **tussle your hair**, dry your tears, encourage you when you're down, discipline you when you're wrong, hold you when you're scared, challenge you when you flounder, and let you to crawl up into his lap and sit a spell in the warmth and security of his arms. *Abba*, Father.

## VI

**I know for some of you, it's hard to think of God in these terms, but he invites you to, and we fail to do so to our spiritual loss.** Embracing Father God's *abba*-love can change your life for the better. Sociologists have a theory called the looking-glass self which means that you become what the most important person in your life thinks you are. What if when you looked in the mirror you saw yourself **as *Abba* Father sees you**? It would change you like it has changed others who learned that in our relationship to God there is much more than mechanics and obligation, rules and rituals. God is passionate about you. And when you embrace God's passion for you, you can love him passionately in return—not just with your mind but with your heart and your soul and your might (Lk 10:27). You can love Father God warmly, serve God gladly, and relate to him not just as the Almighty God of the universe but as *Abba*.

I wish I could tell you **how to get there** and how to experience that kind of warm intimacy with our Father. I turn 65 next month, and I'm still working on it. But as I've wrestled with all that



this week, it occurred to me that maybe it's not about *working* to get there. Maybe it's more about letting go. Holding on to your reverence for God but ...

- letting go of some of your formality with God
- letting go of your angry ogre god, your Pharaoh god who rides you like a slave-master demanding more bricks
- letting go of the perfectionism that leaves you with a nagging sense of failure and a sense you can never measure up
- letting go of the stubborn pride and self-sufficiency that only leans on God when you can't handle things yourself
- letting go of the need to present your best face to God
- letting go of trying to earn the approval God has already given you
- letting go of old grudges against an earthly father who didn't live up to your expectations
- letting go of the barriers you erect to protect your heart from hurt and rejection and relationship pain.

And maybe it would help if you could learn to **receive God's love on God's terms**. If you've ever hugged a non-hugger you know what I mean. Non-huggers are stiff, awkward, and uncomfortable. Might as well hug a statue. But if non-huggers could learn to relax into the hug and receive it, they may find it feels pretty good. That's the way Father God wants to love us, so learn to receive it.

And do something else: **practice every now and then calling God "Abba" in your prayers**. It will be awkward at first, but maybe over time it will warm your heart to the warmth of Father God's *abba*-love for you. I'm no expert here. I struggle with this myself to some degree, but maybe these things will help those of us who have a hard time relating to God in such personal, family ways.

## VII

**There was a day when Australian golfer Greg Norman, “the Shark,” was an intimidating force on the PGA tour.** He was tough, stoic, had ice water in his veins. He learned that from his father. He once recalled, *“I used to see my father, getting off a plane or something, and I’d really want to hug him. But he’d only shake my hand.”* Commenting on his aloofness going into the 1996 Masters golf tournament, Norman snorted, *“Nobody knows me out here.”*

After leading golf’s most prestigious event from the start, Norman blew a six-stroke lead in the last round, losing to rival Nick Faldo. *Sports Illustrated* writer Rick Reilly described the scene:

Now, as Faldo made one last thrust into Norman’s heart with a 15-foot birdie putt on the 72<sup>nd</sup> hole, the two of them came toward each other. Norman trying to smile, looking for a handshake and finding himself in the warmest embrace instead.

As they held that hug, held it even as both of them cried, Norman changed just a little. *“I wasn’t crying because I’d lost,”* Norman said the next day. *“I’ve lost a lot of golf tournaments before. I’ll lose a lot more. I cried because I’d never felt that from another man before. I’ve never had a hug like that in my life.”*<sup>4</sup>

Have you ever **felt a hug like that** from your Father God, your *Abba* Father? He invites you into warmth and intimacy and love.

And in the Apostles’ Creed, when you say, *“I believe in God the Father almighty,”* you are saying yes to that love.

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<sup>4</sup>As told by Rick Reilly, *Sports Illustrated* (30 December 1996)—cited in “To Illustrate,” *Leadership* (Summer 1997), 64.

