

I love the traditions of the holiday season. I never drink egg nog except at Christmas. I never watch "It's A Wonderful Life" in July. And Jana never cooks a turkey except at Thanksgiving. Our whole family gathers around the Thanksgiving table and we give thanks. One by one we share what we were thankful for. A couple of years ago my announcement went something like this. "I am thankful for my children. I want you to know that I know how hard it is to be a pastor's kid. And I also know it is even harder to be my kid." I meant that. It is hard to be my kid because of my imperfections as a father. I have come to realize that many of my flaws are magnified because of my desperate need for my father's approval. Many of the decisions I have made in life were informed by the desire to make my dad proud. I have even neglected my family at times chasing success so my dad would approve of me. I would like to say I have that all worked out now but I am still marked by my dad's opinion. And here is the crazy thing - my dad is dead! He is in Heaven where we will get all this worked out some day but in the meantime I am constantly reminded of the power and influence of fatherhood. Today we come to the third of four names Isaiah uses to describe the Messiah, Eternal Father.

I am aware that the word "father" evokes a wide range of emotions. Some of you had great dads. "Father" stimulates feelings of gratitude as you recall the times you've had with your father by your side. Some of you never even knew your father. Some of you know who your father is but he was emotionally absent so the word "father" leaves you anxious as you recall the man who couldn't be there when you needed him, or the man who is not there now when you need him the most. And then there are those who wish they wouldn't have had the dad they had.

The responsibility of every human father is to reflect the nature of our Heavenly Father in His strength and tenderness, His mercy and grace, His wisdom and guidance. The problem is every human father is...human, an imperfect reflection. Everything we seek in our flawed earthly fathers are gifts that can only be found in our perfect Heavenly Father. We have a perfect, everlasting Father.

The name "everlasting Father" is one that has caused some people to scratch their heads and wonder, "If Jesus is the Son of God, how can He also be the everlasting Father?" It is not the role Isaiah has in mind here but the character of Jesus. He is father-like in His care for us.

The Hebrew phrase translated "Everlasting Father" could be translated literally "Father of Eternity." George Washington is sometimes called "the father of our country." Thomas Edison is the father of electricity. The word "father" can mean source or origin. The Bible says that Jesus had an active hand in creation. "For by Him all things were created, *both* in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him." (Col. 1:16). He is the father of time and eternity. Why is this significant? Because Jesus was, is and shall always be. He is the same yesterday, today and forever. In other words, you can count on Him always.

Whether you grew up with or without a father, whether you grew up with a deeply flawed father, whether you have good memories or bad memories of your earthly father, you have a Heavenly Father who is and always will be perfect. Jesus came to show us what He is like. So here are three eternal realities you can receive from your Father - three enduring gifts that only the Father of Eternity can give.

1. The gift of your Father's approval. Since Jesus is the Father of Eternity, His acceptance never ends. I don't remember my father ever telling me he was proud of me but occasionally he told me I had done a good job. I interpreted this as approval. But if the only time you feel acceptance and worth is when you do a good job, you will soon begin to feel like the results are getting the credit instead of you. That is why so many of us men place far too much weight on accomplishment and material success – the tangible evidence that I'm accepted.

"How can you be so sure that Jesus approves of me?"

1. He chose you. "You did not choose me but I chose you." Jn. 15:16

2. He died for you. "But God demonstrates His own love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Ro. 5:8

3. He forgave you. When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions." Col. 2:13

4. He included you. "No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you." John 15:15

5. He has given you everything you need in life. "His divine power has granted to (me) everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called (me) by His own glory and excellence." 2 Pe. 1:3

6. He will never leave you. "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you." Jn. 14:18

You don't have to do anything to earn Jesus' approval. He knows your struggles, your sin patterns, your weaknesses but He still loves you. Photo of Rhett...Here I am looking down at my grandson. Do you know what I'm thinking? I'm thinking, "I wish you would get up and do something. You're never going to amount to anything just lying in that bed. Stop acting like a baby." I'm thinking, "Lord, if it is possible, give me this virus. Take it away from this precious child. Please Lord, allow me to carry his sickness." It didn't happen...or did it? It happened for you and me. 2 Cor. 5:21 says, "God had Christ, who was sinless, take our sin so that we might receive God's approval through him." (God's Word Translation)

2. The gift of your Father's protection. Since Jesus is the Father of Eternity, His protection never ends. A father's job is to protect his kids. We count on God's protection often expressed by our prayer for "a hedge of protection" over those we love. Where does that idea come from? From Job. Satan complains that God had placed a hedge around Job so that Job could not be tempted. The problem is the hedge doesn't always hold. Your child gets sick. Your husband gets in an accident. A mother with a special needs child chokes and dies. Where was the hedge?

Let me encourage you to be careful with Christian cliches. Have you ever heard someone say, "God will never give you more than you can handle." Really? He gives me more than I can handle regularly. That's how you grow. I'm just glad He never gives me more than He can

handle. Another cliché states, "the safest place in the world is in the center of God's will." Tell that to a long list of martyrs who have died for their faith. Care to know what Jesus actually promised those who were in the center of His will? "You will be delivered up (betrayed) even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. You will be hated by all for my name's sake. But not a hair of your head will perish. (Lk. 21:16-18). Some of you will be slaughtered. But you'll be completely safe. Huh? These promises sound contradictory, but they're not. Justin Martyr (AD 100–165), a second century preacher who was beheaded for the sake of the gospel, said, "They can kill us but they cannot harm us."

Paul was confident of this very thing when shortly before his execution he wrote, "The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed, and will bring me safely to His heavenly kingdom; to Him *be* the glory forever and ever. Amen." 2 Tim. 4:18

Jesus promised many wonderful things but physical safety isn't one of them. Cruel life circumstances are normal in a fallen world. Pursuing God may even lead you into physical danger. But you will be spiritually alive and eternally secure.

It's perfectly acceptable to pray for God's protection as a hedge. And the Lord does sometimes shield us from harm this side of heaven. But let's remember that the ultimate fulfillment of His guarantee of protection comes in eternity. We should not fear suffering but train our hearts to rest in the safety of God's secure, eternal grip. He will never leave us and He will get us safely home.

A pastor was visiting Washington D.C. with his family. One morning, he and his daughter decided to go for a jog around the city. They saw a couple of handsome men in jogging suits stretching as though they were preparing to run too. One of the men asked the pastor where he was planning on running and he admitted they didn't have a plan since they didn't know the city very well at all. The man warned them that there were certain areas they would want to avoid and asked if they could join them since they knew the city well. They took off and jogged a few miles and had a delightful time feeling very secure with these two very fit, experienced men with them. It was only after they returned to the hotel that they learned these two guys were Secret Service agents assigned to the President whenever he wanted to jog.

The Father of Eternity knows his way around town. He knows where every road will take us, what we will encounter along the way, and, most importantly, the way home.

3. The gift of your Father's provision. Since Jesus is the Father of Eternity, His provision never ends. There are a couple of different ways of looking at the word "provision." We often think of provision as food on the table and a roof over our heads. Surely our Heavenly Father provides in that sense. "Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow." James 1:17. I have an extremely generous Father willing and able to provide everything I could ever need. He has given me His Holy Spirit to take up residence in my life; He has given me His Word for my growth; He has assembled a loving community and given me a place in it; He has sacrificially given His Son, the Christ-child, for my sins... He has not withheld anything good from me.

But there is another way to view this word "provision." "Pro" is a prefix that means before or toward. "Vision" has to do with seeing. Put these two together and you can define a pro-vider or a pro-visionary as one who is always looking ahead, giving direction and defining the destination. Jesus is our pro-vider, leading us even when we don't feel His presence.

Jordan...I was present with him. I wanted to protect him. But I am also a pro-vider, one who looks ahead and keeps the end in view. I knew my son needed to conquer that hill. There would be many more hills to climb, many more days when he would be exhausted and want to quit. I also knew that I wouldn't be there for most of those challenging climbs. So I stayed back until he got to the top of the hill. Then I bumped his back tire with my front one and said, "Good job son." Needless to say, he was surprised by my presence...which my omnipresent Father had arranged. We rode down the other side of the hill and into camp together.

Three questions:

1. Have you accepted His acceptance of you or are you still trying to earn His love?
2. Do you trust Him to get you home? When I was a child I often hopped in the car and never questioned where my dad was going or how to get there. I knew he would get me home.
3. Will you acknowledge His provision this week? How? Sit down this week and have a conversation with Him. Read His letter to you and respond back with a letter of your own. Give Him a gift - the gift of you.