

“Our Father”

Matthew 6:9

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READ Matthew 6:9b Standing: “Our Father”
 President Theodore Roosevelt’s childhood was idyllic.
 Especially his relationship with his father.

Teedie, as he was known by his family, was always with his father.
 His father personally educated him, his father took him all over
 the world (and this 130 years ago).

His father cared for him when he was sick, as he often
 was.

Roosevelt’s earliest memory of his father was being
 carried in his arms hour after hour in the night so
 Teedie, the weak, asthmatic child could breath.

His father encouraged him and tutored him into manhood.

Years later, when Roosevelt became President, he told his
 sister that “he never took any serious step or made any vital
 decision for his country without thinking first” what his father
 would have done. (In Edmund Morris The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt 72)

But when Teedie was 20 and in college, his father, whom he called
 his best friend in life, very suddenly died at 46 years of age.

That day Theodore, who had journaled from childhood, wrote in
 his diary, “My dear Father. Born Sept 23, 1831...” And there
 his pen wavered and stopped.

It was three days before he again picked up his pen and then he
 wrote, “He has just been buried. I shall never forget these terrible
 three days...the dull, inert sorrow, during which I felt as I had been
 stunned, or as if part of my life had been taken away...” “He was
 everything to me.” “My father was the best man I ever knew.” (The Rise of
 Theodore Roosevelt 70-73)

For twenty years it had been Roosevelt’s experience to know his
 father’s presence, encouragement, guidance and love.

With a father like that you can take on the world.

If you remember something of his history, you know that Theodore Roosevelt was a man's man and a Renaissance man all in one – adventurer, cowboy-rancher, “Rough rider”-warrior, New York aristocracy, Harvard-educated, author, naturalist and politician.

But into adulthood, he longed for his father.

For the first time in his life he felt alone and the world around him grew very large.

Practically and realistically, are we, each one, alone in the world?

Oh, we have acquaintances, even some we call friends, we have parents or a spouse but there is a part of us, maybe a large part of us that feels alone.

It's the part of us that no one else sees or hears.

It's our private lives of the past with its guilt or the future with its uncertainty, or even the present with its mixture of motives.

Alone in the anxiety we feel about work, or kids, or marriage and alone in determining how to fix the situations we face day after day.

In the movie about WWII submarine “U571”, when the boat was in crisis, the young captain told his crew he didn't know what to do.

The older master sergeant took the captain aside and asked for permission to speak freely and then said, “You're the captain. Don't ever tell the crew you don't know what to do. The captain always knows what to do whether he does or not.”

That's something of the “alone” of which I speak.

In many of the roles of life, we feel almost forced into an “alone” position – on our own – and the truth is we don't know what to do.

With a good marriage, healthy kids, and a successful career, John Eldredge still found himself so often angry.

He writes, “I realized I was so furious about feeling all alone in a world that constantly demanded more of me than I felt able to give. Something in me felt very young – like a ten-year-old boy in a man's world but without a man's ability to come through.

There was much fear beneath the surface, fear that I would fail, fear that I would be found out, and finally, fear that I was

ultimately on my own... Why does something in my heart feel orphaned?" (Eldredge Wild at Heart 126)

As young adults we separate from our parents and unless pride totally clouds our perspective, when we become aware, we begin to ask, "Am I on my own?"

We try to attach ourselves to another through marriage and/or other close relationship but even if we succeed, sooner or later we are still asking from the depths of our souls, "Is anybody with me?"

As we grow older and answers to life's questions become less certain, we continue to wonder, "Am I alone?"

There is in every person an aching, though often-unacknowledged homelessness and fatherlessness.

Novelist Thomas Wolfe wrote, "The deepest search in life...the thing that in one way or another was central to all living, was man's search for a father, not merely the father of his flesh, not merely the lost father of his youth, but the image of a strength and wisdom external to his need and superior to his hunger, to which the belief and power of his own life could be united." (Wolfe cited by Doberstein in introduction (p9) to Thieliicke's Our Heavenly Father)

When we look at history and even our own lives, it can appear that we are alone – that there is no God out there, no "father" listening, caring, and acting.

Children die, friends are unfaithful, and evil too often wins. When things happen, good or bad, chance too often seems as good an explanation as Providence.

We don't want to be alone, we want there to be someone out there – but do we dare to believe there really is?

Helmut Thieliicke suggested it is as if each person is walking through a dark forest at night all alone.

Strange sounds make them afraid, shadows flit across their path.

They would give anything for someone to be with them who knew the way, knew how to avoid the dangers, and

was good enough and powerful enough to take them through safely.

But in our day we have become so sophisticated that we “know” no such person exists to help us – we are on our own.

And so some attempt to compensate by having times when they can enter into the solitude of their own souls and find a counterbalance to the frenetic activity of life.

We must be centered, they say, we must find that place of inner composure.

Some call it mediation while others might call it prayer.

They would say that prayer is really only another way of talking to oneself to clarify life and bring composure to our minds.

And so we talk to ourselves like a child walking through a graveyard trying to comfort himself with the sound of his own voice, even while knowing that he is all alone.

(paraphrased and concept from Thielicke p18)

But Jesus wasn't whistling past the cemetery.

He wasn't just making noise to drown out his fears and he wasn't talking to himself.

His speaking was a call – he was addressing **someone** - “Father!”

He said to his followers in Matthew 6:9

“This, then, is how **you** should pray: ‘Our Father in heaven...’”

The very word “Father” spoken from the heart is a statement of faith.

Jesus knew that someone was there, listening.

Jan Lochman wrote, “The classical New Testament confession of faith is prayer...(and) the context of prayer is our need” of God... In prayer we reach beyond ourselves... Prayer is a protest against (aloneness). (Lochman p5-7)

When we utter the word “Father” we are saying I believe you are there.

The first thing in prayer is coming to **Someone**.

In prayer we are not talking about God but to him.
 This is foundational!
 Ultimately God is not to be talked about but to.

He is, and therefore we must engage him.

Karl Barth wrote, “Seriously, properly, and strictly, Christians cannot speak about the Father but only to him... “Father” as a (called name), whether expressed or not, is the primal form of the thinking...speaking...and obedience demanded of Christians...the primal form of the faithfulness with which they may correspond to his faithfulness.” (Karl Barth *The Christian Life Dogmatics IV* p51)

In the autobiography of Friedrich von Bodelschwingh he writes in one chapter of the death of his four young children within two weeks of each other during the allied bombing of his German City.

Most moving is the way he describes how he committed them one after another to the fatherly hands of God.

Most impressive is that even during this darkness of life, this man never lost contact with his Father in heaven.

He never started talking **about** God as when we ask, “How could God let this happen” or “Why is God doing this?”

He did not speak about God but always to God. (In Thielicke *Life Can Begin Again*)

He trusts his Father enough to call to him.

And in our speaking to God, the main thing is not that we make correct requests but that we enter into conversation and relationship with God.

Speech is an integral part of a relationship.

There may be silence but it is eloquent silence, full of meaning.

Again from Thielicke, “That is why God did not merely give us pious feelings and subjective religiosity, of the kind that is inspired by the odor of incense, the strains of sacred music, or the silence of a sun-drenched clearing in the woods. These pious feelings pass away...” but His Word does not. (Thielicke 38)

Isaiah 43:1 "...I have summoned you by name; you are mine.”

Prayer is not a soliloquy but a dialogue.

But to engage that great “Someone” in conversation, to call on his Name, is to call on a very specific “Someone” – “Our Father” – or as Jesus called him, “Abba”!

Joachim Jeremiah of the last century said that he had studied all the prayer literature of ancient Judaism and found no place where God was referred to as “Abba”.

Abba was an everyday word, it was a homely family-word.

No other Jew would have dared to address God in this way and yet Jesus did it always.

And he authorized us to use that same familiar and trusting word when we speak to our heavenly father.

(Joachim Jeremiah b.1900 The Prayers of Jesus SCM Press 1967 p57)

No, we are not alone but even better, the One who is there is “our Father”, our “Abba”.

That word “father” had a place in other religions of Jesus’ day and certainly in Judaism.

But Jesus adds an emphasis that was otherwise, largely missing.

There is in his use a closeness, a relationship of love and trust.

What is your understanding of God?

God as “Father” can be misunderstood when compared to our selfish, capricious, authoritarian ways as human fathers.

Sometimes we act out of unrighteous anger and the punishment does not fit the crime or is altogether unwarranted.

But our heavenly Father is not an angry father or an absent father or a dependent father.

Without diminishing his majesty, Jesus demonstrates a very different Father, a Father of consistent love.

Jesus is **the God who comes near.**

The “father” in Jesus’ story of the prodigal son is the clearest illustration of the use of the word “father”.

There is, here, no patriarchal or authoritarian picture of a father.

The prodigal’s father doesn’t stop the son from going, though he could have, he runs to his son upon his son’s return - unheard of by a patriarch and he demands no restitution but instead celebrates his son’s return.

The prodigal’s father defies our usual concept of a stern, remote, unyielding, do-or-die God.

In his book, The Great House of God, Max Lucado writes that the Father’s mission is adoption, his motive is devotion and his method is redemption. (p13ff)

What is our Father’s mission? It is to adopt us, to adopt you.

When Jesus says we can call God “our Father”, the issue is sonship.

Jesus speaks of a new relationship with God.

Because of his justice God cannot dismiss our sin and because of his love he cannot dismiss us.

There may be unplanned pregnancies, but there are no accidental or unplanned adoptions.

When Jesus says we can call God “**OUR** Father,” “he is passing on to us his own priceless relationship” with His Father.

(Fredrich Bruner 239)

This word “Father” binds God to us unconditionally.

You can’t undo fatherhood.

Galatians 4:4-6 ”...God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “*Abba, Father.*”

Through faith in Christ, we are, you are, a son or daughter of God. He is “our Father”.

And what is our Father's motive? It is devotion.

Ephesians 1:3-5

“Long ago, before God made the world, God chose us to be his very own, through what Christ would do for us; he decided then to make us holy in his eyes, without a single fault we who stand before him covered in his love. His unchanging plan has always been to adopt us into his own family by sending Jesus Christ to die for us. **And he did this because he wanted to.**” TLB paraphrase

Not because we were attractive or worthy but solely for “his good pleasure”.

We don't readily accept that because we know that among ourselves there is no free lunch, there is always a price, an expectation, that if we don't meet, it's over.

Many Christians, and I think especially men, live with a quiet fear that they are alone and even if there is a God out there, they live with the quiet fear that they don't measure up or they live with the proud assumption that they do.

But that is not the way with our Father.
He asks for nothing but our trust.

And what is the Father's method for bringing us into this relationship? It is redemption.

The only rational basis for saying “our Father” is if the Father has shown himself to us first.

It is only in response to his voice that we know to say anything.

Otherwise prayer is only our wishful thinking.

That is why it is very important that Jesus himself is the one who taught us to pray, “our Father”.

In Jesus God has spoken.

Hebrews 1:1-2 “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...”

And that Son, Jesus, took the penalty for our sin, against God and others, on himself and died in our place.

Our Father, in Jesus, removed the legal barriers and brought us into his family by adoption.

To change metaphors, our Father rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves.

We, you, have become his child.

Don't misunderstand, Jesus did not come to save us from the Father. It isn't that the Father is just and Jesus is merciful.

George MacDonald wrote, "This is and has been the Father's work from the beginning...to bring us into the home of his heart. This is our destiny." George MacDonald cited in Michael Phillips A God to Call Father

Take Bethlehem, Calvary, and the empty tomb out of the equation and we have no evidence that we are not in fact all alone.

But put Jesus, the Messiah, into the picture and we can say, "Our Father".

The point I am making is that your relationship with God is all grace!

Think about it, adoptive parents don't ask the agency if the child can perform certain tasks or has a certain amount of money to give.

If the Duryeas or the Luebckes, who have recently adopted children, had asked the caseworker, "Does the child have clothes and money for school tuition? Does she have a college fund and a willingness to help make meals and wash clothes?"

If they weren't summarily dismissed, maybe someone would say, "Wait a minute, you don't adopt because of what the child **has** but because of what he **needs**. A child **receives** adoption they don't **earn** it.

We have become children of the Father not because we deserve it but because he has chosen us based only on his love.

That's the kind of Father he is.

1 John 3:1 "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!

We must stop feeling safe with God only when we think we are doing well.

We must come to understand that He is our Father even more when we are doing poorly, mostly when we have failed miserably – for then I am believing that his love is not caused by me, it is his love, freely given.

One author wrote, “When I seek to fashion a self-image from the adulation of others and the inner voice whispers, ‘You’ve arrived; you’re a player...,’ there is no truth in that self-concept. (Or) when I sink into despondency and the inner voice whispers, ‘You are no good, a fraud, a hypocrite, and dilettante,’ there is no truth in any image shaped from that message. My dignity (comes from being) Abba’s child....” (Manning in Abba’s Child 63)

I know that every stage of life has its unique challenges but as we grow older we look at childhood as such an idyllic time.

“Look at that kid”, we say of our own child, “not a care in the world”.

He doesn’t have to worry about where food will come from, whether he will have a bed tonight and if anything frightens or hurts him, he comes running to me with no doubt I can save him.

I’d like him to learn to say “please” and “thank you” but they are superfluous formalities to him because he fully expects to be cared for whether he says those things or not because, after all, I’m his father.

He may choose to disobey me and grieve the loss of a privilege or the threat of a spanking but it never even enters his mind that I would cease to love him or care for him – he knows I’m his father.

In fact if put my own life at risk to save his, if he was even aware of it, he would expect it – it would seem perfectly congruent with the relationship – after all, I’m his father.

Do you know that is your relationship with our heavenly Father?

You are not alone, your Father loves you!

Brennan Manning tells the story of Edward Farrell a pastor in Detroit who went to visit his 80 year-old uncle in Ireland.

On his uncle's birthday, the two of them went for an early morning walk.

After walking in silence for some time and then standing side by side watching the rising sun, the uncle suddenly turned with a great smile and began skipping down the path.

The pastor followed and said, "Uncle Seamus, you look so happy, can you tell me why?"

"Yes", said the eighty-year-old man, "You see me Abba is very fond of me." (Manning Abba's Child 64)

Everett Fullam was a missionary to a tribe of people in the interior of Nigeria.

These people had never heard the word Africa much less the word America.

When the chief heard one day of two Americans walking on the moon, he said it was impossible because one only as to look to see that the moon is too small to hold two people.

But in spite of their naïve view of the world when they became Christians their understanding of things eternal was deep.

Fullam explains it this way after he baptized three of them:

"There were two men and one woman.

- We stood on the banks of a muddy river, wet and happy.
- I had never seen three more joyful people.
- What is the best thing about this experience? I asked.

All three continued to smile...but only one spoke, in clear, deliberate English: 'Behind this universe stands one God, not a great number of warring spirits, as we had always believed, but one God. And that God loves me.'" (Everett Fullam Living the Lord's Prayer 1980

p27,28)

Thomas Merton wrote, "Whether you understand it or not, God loves you, is present in you, lives in you, dwells in you, calls you, saves you and offers you an understanding and compassion which are like nothing you have ever found in a book or heard in a sermon." (Thomas Merton The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters 146)

I have taken your time to speak about this opening word in the Lord's Prayer because I hope it is now obvious to you how crucial that word is.

If you misunderstand who the Father is, you miss the whole prayer.

If you know the Father and want to know him more you come to him as a little child to his father, full of expectation and full of confidence that his love for you is so great that he will do only the best for you.

Then no matter what the situation we call out to the God who is there and we say "Our Father"!

That is how we begin the Lord's Prayer!

Stand and pray it with me.

Our Father who art in heaven
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread
And forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
And lead us not into temptation
But deliver us from evil
For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever Amen.