

ABBA

The Love of a Father's Heart

An interactive Bible study resource

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ABBA

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ABBA: Lesson 1

Heavenly Father

Bible Study

Start with prayer. Focus on the Lord and open your heart and mind to receive his revelation to you through this lesson.

From our human point of view, we accumulate many different ideas about what a father is and what it means to father children. If you grew up with a father in your home, you may know him as someone who loves you, provides and cares for you, protects you and is present in many positive ways. But if you grew up with a father who walked out on your family or only showed up for weekend visits, or never showed up at all, then your picture of a father may be someone who is aloof or distant, unloving, weak, unfaithful, perhaps even evil. If that is your experience, then you will have negative ideas about what a father is.

The biblical witness to God as our Father transcends what we learn about fathers from our earthly experience. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, many verses speak about how God is a Father to Israel, to Jesus, and even to us. Naming God “Father” is more than merely distinguishing one part of the Trinity. Calling God “Father” speaks to a wonderful relationship we have with our loving God, a relationship that teaches us about fathering here on earth. Let’s explore what the scriptures have to say about our heavenly Father.

God as Father of Israel

There are many references to God in the Bible as a God who “fathers” Israel. Let us look at one example in the book of Deuteronomy.

Read Deuteronomy 1:26–33.

Here we find Moses and God’s people once again on the verge of entering into the Promised Land, the land God had promised his people when he rescued them from Egypt forty years earlier. The first time God instructed them to enter the Promised Land, they had refused, afraid of the inhabitants who already lived there. (See Numbers 13:1–14:45.) As punishment for not obeying God’s command, they had been wandering in the wilderness for all those years. Now, forty years later, Moses repeats God’s command to enter into the Promised Land, and he reminds the people that even though they were disobedient, God had cared for them in the wilderness.

Reread Deuteronomy 1:26–28.

Note the reactions of God’s people to his command. How do their reactions mirror how children sometimes respond to a parent’s instruction?

Reread Deuteronomy 1:30–31, 33.

How did God act as a father to his people?

An even more beautiful reference to God as a God who fathers his people Israel is found in Hosea 11.

God's message through the prophet Hosea is a call for his people to repent from their unfaithfulness. Throughout the book of Hosea, God pleads with his people Israel to return to him, to reject other gods, and to worship and serve him alone. God is so grieved by Israel's unfaithfulness that he instructs Hosea to give names to his own children which describe God's painful relationship with Israel: Loruhamah (not pitied) and Loammi (not my people). Yet, God predicts that there will come a day when his people shall become known once again as his children: "... and in the place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' it shall be said to them, 'Children of the living God.' " (Hosea 1:10)

In perhaps one of the most beautiful chapters in the scriptures, God speaks of his feelings for his people Israel.

Read Hosea 11.

List the phrases from this chapter that speak of God fathering Israel.

Note which ones refer to God's emotions and which ones refer to God's actions.

[MARGIN NOTE on *Israel and Ephraim: The prophet Hosea makes reference to Ephraim and Israel interchangeably in chapter 11. By the mid-8th century B.C., Ephraim was also used as the name of the Northern Kingdom of Israel.*]

Write down the ways in which Israel/Ephraim responds to God's fathering. Do you see a change in Israel's behavior at any point? If so, when does this change occur? Do you notice a change in God's behavior toward Israel?

There are two other Old Testament passages that need our attention. In both, there are direct references to God as Father of his people.

Read Jeremiah 31:9.

In the context of this passage, God is speaking about the future of Israel when he will lead them from their exile back to their homeland.

How does God refer to himself in this verse? to Ephraim?

How does this relationship between God and Israel give you insight into God's perspective on the Israelites returning to the Promised Land?

Read Malachi 2:10.

In this final book of the Old Testament the prophet Malachi is condemning Israel's unfaithfulness, particularly unfaithfulness in their marriages to the wives of their youth. They have given them up to marry Gentile women. Malachi reminds them that this profanes the covenant of their ancestors.

In verse 10, Malachi speaks first to the common factor all Israelites have with one another. What is the common factor? How does this commonality impact their faithfulness in marriage? How does the fact that God is our Father impact our interactions with others?

God as Father of Jesus

It is clear throughout the New Testament that the God of Israel is Jesus' Father too. At significant points in Jesus' life on earth, his Father proclaims this message.

Read Luke 1:26–35.

Who has sent the angel Gabriel with his message?

What are some of the names/titles mentioned for Jesus?

Which phrases speak directly to Jesus as Son? Specifically whose Son will he be?

Read Mark 1:9–11.

What event is spoken of in this passage?

Where is the voice coming from? What is the message?

Read Matthew 17:1–8.

Which event is described here?

Where does a voice come from? What does the voice say?

Jesus referred to God as his Father many times. In the gospel of John alone, he refers to his Father 107 times. We observe Jesus calling God Father especially in times of prayer and extreme suffering.

Read John 14:1–14.

How many times does Jesus refer to God as Father?

In verses 1–7, Jesus talks about a place where he is going. What does he call this place?

Where is this place? Who will be there? How do people get to the Father?

In verses 8–14, Jesus responds to Philip’s request, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” How does Jesus say people see the Father? What must we do to see the Father?

Read Luke 11:1–4.

Which event is described here?

What is the specific reference Jesus makes to the One to whom we should pray?

Read Mark 14:32–36.

What is the scene?

To whom does Jesus pray? What is the significance of the term “Abba?”

Read Luke 23:32–34.

What is happening in these verses?

How does Jesus address God here?

There is another significant reference to the relationship between Jesus and God as Father and Son.

Read John 1:14–18.

Here, the incarnation of the Word is described.

Which verses express the relationship between Jesus (the Word) and God?

In verse 14, what are the common characteristics Jesus and his Father share?

In verse 18, what do we learn about Jesus’ relationship with his Father? How does the Son relate the Father to us?

God as our Father

God is considered to be not only the Father of Israel and the Father of Jesus, but he is also our Father through our faith in Jesus, his Son.

Read Romans 8:15–17 and Galatians 4:6–7.

What do these passages say about our relationship with God?

How do God's children cry out to God?

Read 1 Corinthians 1:3, Ephesians 1:2, and Colossians 1:2.

What do these verses of greeting share in common?

Look specifically at Galatians 3:23–26.

Through whom do we become children of God our Father?

How do we access this relationship with God our Father through Jesus the Son?

Reflection Questions

1. Thinking back on how God is a Father to Israel, how does that help us in our relationship as children of God today?
2. Considering how God is the Father of Jesus, what does Jesus' life as God's Son teach us about how to be God's children?
3. Has the Bible study in this lesson revealed anything that deepens your relationship with God? with Jesus? with brothers and sisters in the faith?
4. What new insight did you have about God as your Father?

ABBA: Reflection

Through this Bible study, we have seen that God is the Father of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Because we have been redeemed by Jesus, we too can cry out to God as our “heavenly Father” and know that God, our perfect parent, will always care for us and protect us, just as an ideal parent would. Christians worship a personal God who longs to be in loving relationship with us, who works his will in our lives for good. God is powerful enough to use even our disobedience and sin to draw us closer to him.

There are some who would say that to refer to God as Father is exclusionary and harmful to women. But these criticisms assume that to call God Father is to say God is male. Imposing human forms on God is unbiblical. The God we worship is immense beyond our imaginings. We can only use humanity’s imperfect and limited language to describe God’s glory and goodness, majesty and might. While all language is inadequate to describe God, we can rely on the inspired words of the Bible to reveal a trustworthy image of God. “Father” was the way Jesus chose to refer to God. In the Old Testament, only the nation of Israel could consider God as Father. In Jesus, a new relationship between God and humanity is forged, and the term “Father” is a profound expression of this new reality. Now we as individuals can cry out to God as “Abba, Daddy.” To call God Father is to acknowledge and glory in this new relationship through Christ. It is not a statement about God’s gender. God is Spirit and does not have a body. To identify God with human sexuality is to impose the limits of creation upon our transcendent God.

If God is not male or female, then why not embrace female images for God? Again, biblical language is precise. Jesus calls God his Father. God is referred to in feminine terms only indirectly. God is said to be like a nursing mother or like a mother hen. To have a “father god” without a female counterpart was unheard of in the ancient world. The creation story of the Bible is uniquely asexual. God speaks the world into being. Other creation stories invoke sexual images and birthing. To be birthed implies that one is of the same substance as the mother. Thus, to be birthed by a female deity is to be, at least in part, divine. Our Bible is clear that we are creatures and only God is divine. We must be careful not to remake God in our own image.

This is not to say that God the Father does not possess maternal instincts. Imagine the best parent ever—the tenderness of a mother, the strength of a father, the complete security of unconditional love—and then multiply that beyond your imaginings. This is God the Father. God can only be our Father through Jesus Christ whose atoning blood brings us into relationship with the Father. God is not some distant father figure. He is the Father of Jesus. The Bible never refers to God as a universal father, only as the Father of Jesus, and through him the Father of Christians. To call God Father signifies a unique and special relationship. It is an honor and a great freedom for both women and men to worship the Father.

The Westminster Confession of Faith puts it this way:

All those that are justified, God vouchsafeth, in and for his only Son Jesus Christ, to make partakers of the grace of adoption: by which they are taken into the number, and enjoy the liberties and privileges of the children of God; have his name put upon

them; receive the Spirit of adoption; have access to the throne of grace with boldness, are enabled to cry, Abba Father; are pitied, protected, provided for, and chastened by him as a father; yet never cast off, but sealed to the day of redemption, and inherit the promises as heirs of everlasting salvation. (6.074)

In the assurance of God's love we too can joyfully cry out the words of Ephesians 1:3–5, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ according to the good pleasure of his will.”

ABBA: Lesson 1

Taking It Home

PRAY Pray that Abba, God our Father, will be glorified in and through your life.

READ

John 1:14	2 Corinthians 9:10
John 17	2 Corinthians 12:10
Psalm 29:2	2 Peter 4:16
Psalm 86:12	Matthew 5:14–16
Deuteronomy 6:5	John 15:8–17
Psalm 50:23	Galatians 5:22
Romans 4:20	1 Corinthians 6:12
Romans 15:5	1 Peter 2:12

The first question in the Westminster Shorter Catechism asks, “What is the chief end of man?” and answers, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”

What is Jesus’ role in glorifying the Father?

How do we glorify our heavenly Father?

WRITE In your journal write the insights the Holy Spirit has revealed to you about God as your Father, Jesus’ role in glorifying the Father, and the ways in which you can glorify your heavenly Father.

SHARE What insights have you gleaned from these texts? Share with a friend, neighbor, coworker, or child.

EXAMINE In your everyday life, are you living in a manner that bears fruit and, therefore, glorifies your heavenly Father?

REFLECT Reflect on your relationship with God, Abba Father. Is your chief goal in life to glorify God and enjoy him forever? How is this evident to others? What obstacles in your life might be preventing you from glorifying God and enjoying him forever?

PRACTICE Live each day in a manner that glorifies God.

1. Set aside time each day to offer praise, worship and thanksgiving to God. Give God first place in your thoughts.
2. Are you living (and working) in harmony with others? Take action to repair broken relationships.
3. Love God **exuberantly** and give him your best in everything you do.
4. Identify the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23) that are not evident in your life. Think of ways to cultivate these.

Leaders Guide

ABBA: Lesson 1 Heavenly Father

Start with prayer. Ask the Lord to open each person's heart and mind to receive God's revelation through this lesson.

Ask your group: What are some characteristics of a good father?
What are some characteristics of a bad father?
How did you come up with these characteristics?

Introduce this first lesson by informing the group that there are many names given to God, and this lesson focuses on calling God our "Father."

You will be exploring portions of the Old and New Testaments that refer to God as Father or describe how God fathers his children.

Call attention to the three sections of this lesson: God as Father of Israel, God as Father to Jesus, and God as our Father.

God as Father of Israel

Ask the group to discuss what they learned through the Bible study about God as the Father of Israel. Suggested questions that might help discussion:

1. How did Israel act like a typical child with God?
How does Israel's behavior help us to identify one of our chief sins toward our heavenly Father?
What do we notice about how God fathers disobedient children?
2. How does God act like a human father?
What about God's fathering of Israel surprises you?
3. If we heed Malachi's proclamation that all believers have one Father, how might that affect how we live with brothers and sisters in our own congregation? with brothers and sisters of other Christian denominations?

God as Father of Jesus

In what ways would you describe the relationship between God the Father and God the Son, based on the passages you read in the Bible study section?

God as our Father

Ask your group members to consider the characteristics they think of when they think of their earthly fathers.

How does believing that God is our heavenly Father impact how we think of our earthly fathers?

As Christians, we believe that through Jesus we become children of God. What effect does have on you as you consider your life in this world?

Pass out the words to the song “Behold What Manner of Love,” or ask your group to look up 1 John 3:1–3 and read it aloud together.

Close with prayer

Our heavenly Father, thank you for your son Jesus whose death and resurrection opened the way for me to become your child. Whether we’ve been in your family a long time or a short while, we have more growing to do. Grant us your Spirit, Abba Father, that we may grow in love for you and for our sisters and brothers in Christ Jesus our Lord. Alleluia! Amen.