

THE FATHERHOOD OF GOD SERIES

**Bible
Studies
For Small Groups**

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THE FATHERHOOD OF GOD SERIES

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Beth Crawford, General Editor
Small Groups Ministry
Vineyard Church of Columbus
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Introduction to The Fatherhood of God Series

Dear Small Group Leaders,

In this series of studies, we hope that you and your group members will grow closer to God. He has revealed Himself in Scripture not only as Creator, Savior, and Lord, but also as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. His Son, Jesus of Nazareth, came to earth to reveal God as His Father and as the Father of all who put their trust in Jesus' saving work. Therefore, those of us who trust and follow Jesus are invited to relate to God as our Father.

Overview of God as our Father

The Bible refers to God as Father in both the Old and New Testaments. Since God is the Creator of all life, especially humans made in His image, it is natural to think of Him as the Father of all humanity. However, His Fatherhood seems restricted to a privileged relationship first with Israel, then with Jesus who fulfilled Israel's calling, and finally with all who are reconciled to God through faith in Jesus (Finlayson, p. 477). Although Jews might address God as "Father" even two centuries prior to Jesus' time on earth, it is clear that calling God "Father" was much more frequent in the Synagogue after His earthly life (Schrenk, "Later Judaism," p. 978). And it is really through Jesus that this family image becomes more prominent (Finlayson, p. 477). When Jesus refers to God as *abba*, a word used by a babbling infant, it indicates a much more intimate relationship with God than the Jews would find comfortable. Jesus' address to "Abba, Father," indicates intimacy, dependency, simplicity, and yet always maintains a proper respect for God the Lord and Judge (Schrenk, "New Testament," p. 985).

It may be surprising to some, but nowhere does Jesus teach that all of humanity can call God "Father" nor can we call ourselves "God's sons and daughters." Jesus limits calling God "Father" to those who are born again by faith in Him. In fact, Jesus says those not believing in Him belong to "your father, the devil" (John 8:44; Finlayson and Jensen, p. 420). Please understand that we are not endorsing a condemning attitude towards those who have not yet trusted in Jesus. Instead, we are clarifying that only those who have begun a relationship with God through Jesus have "the right to become children of God" (John 1:12–13).

Barriers to Knowing God as our Father

Many do not grow up with correct views of God the Father. Due to lack of Biblical teaching on this, poor or absent father figures, hardness of heart, or painful life experiences, some of us may not have a clear picture of the loving and generous Father that Scripture portrays. At the same time, some of us may have developed an overly indulgent view of God that does not reflect His purity and holiness. Our hope is to provide some materials for discussing and clarifying whom God is as revealed in His Word. And our prayer is that His Spirit will meet you as you study and pray so that each person experiences the privilege of being parented by God.

Our culture sends conflicting messages about fatherhood, and these may greatly impact your group members and their families. Currently media stars and other in the spotlight seem to find parenthood in vogue, but stable, lifelong relationships between fathers and their children are hard to find. Out of wedlock births have escalated in the past few decades for almost all socio-economic groups. While it takes both a biological father and mother to conceive a child, too

often fathers buy into the lie that what defines a dad is insemination not investment (Blankenhorn, p. 3). Additionally, in reaction to absent, distant, or abusive fathers, some endorse the single mom's ability to raise a family on her own, creating the myth that a father is unnecessary after conception (Blankenhorn, pp. 67–76). Some psychological studies now downplay the importance of a father, while other find that fathers help provide for, protect, and guide children especially in forming mature character, healthy sexual identities, and separate identities from their mothers (Blankenhorn, pp. 25, 30–31, 45–46).

In reality, fatherless kids are at a greater risk than children in two-parent families for almost every sociological threat: poverty, childhood sexual abuse, adolescent pregnancy, domestic violence, crime (Blankenhorn, pp. 1–2); suicide, behavior disorders, rape, dropping out of high school, chemical abuse, and prison (Miller and MacMurray, p. 201). For those who do not experience a loving father in childhood and youth, a quest to know their fathers and to receive their fathers' blessings may haunt them their entire lives (Trent, pp. 144–145).

Getting to Know God Intimately as Father

Obviously the church has something to say to those who have never felt their father's blessing: there is a Perfect Father Who opens His arms wide and is willing to lavish His unconditional love and acceptance on all who turn in faith to Him. Some seek substitute parent figures within the church family; God may provide caring mentors who communicate His Fatherly love well. Small groups can be a place of healing where fellow Christians convey to one another God's special blessing (Trent, pp. 202–207). "The Family Blessing," described by Smalley and Trent, includes the following components to help a person receive and learn to pass on God's love and affection (Trent, p. 30):

- Meaningful Touch
- A Spoken Message
- Attaching High Value to the One Being Blessed
- Picturing a Special Future for the One Being Blessed
- An Active Commitment to Fulfill the Blessing

Whether mentors are available or not, whether others practice "The Blessing" or not, we who are alive in Jesus can know God as Father by turning to Him, believing His Word, and trusting that He will reveal Himself as Father to us. We certainly will benefit from the encouragement and prayer of other believers, but it is ultimately up to us to repent of defective ideas of fatherhood that we often project onto God and replace those with Biblical truths of His Fatherly love, faithfulness, care, provision, etc. (Powlison, pp. 8–16). This series of discussion Bible studies is designed to help your group grasp and live out of those truths more fully.

In order to illustrate that we can know Father God personally, we have included a testimony from one of our church members who has grown to know God as her Father in a powerful, life-changing way. We hope that through her story others may realize the privilege we all can have of knowing our Heavenly Father. We want to thank her for sharing the intimate details of her life and walk with God. You may want to read this testimony aloud at a meeting or copy and distribute it to group members.

Before you lead the studies in this series, please review the following sections:

- Testimony of Getting to Know God as Father
- Preparation for Leading Inductive Bible Studies
- People First Language

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A Testimony of Getting to Know God as Father

The following is a testimony from a member of our church who has a mature, close relationship with God that most of us would like to experience. You may want to share it with your small group members in order to impart hope or a vision for what knowing God as Father can be like. We want to thank our sister in Christ for sharing very personal details of her secret life with God.

For over twenty years, God has taught me how to relate to Him as my Father. Here is the story of how our intimate relationship began to grow.

Understanding My Past:

Prior to starting a family, my mom and dad were involved in ministry through the Roman Catholic Church. I grew up with three brothers and three sisters; I was the second to the youngest. Because of some differences, my parents separated when I was about seven years old. They never divorced, but they never reconciled either.

My mother raised us. She was a strong woman of faith, so I grew up going to Catholic school and mass. But I had a sense that both God and my earthly father were very distant. In middle school, I switched to public school. At sixteen, I left the church to find my way in the world through education. Because my mom had very modest economic means, I decided going to college would be my strategy for obtaining what I wanted in life.

When I was sixteen, life started to get tougher. My mom suffered ten cardiac arrests in two weeks and was not expected to live. Fortunately, she recovered and was in the hospital for a year. (She lived another twenty-three years.) At this same time I was deciding where to go to college. I wanted to be a medical doctor and was accepted into a medical program in Cleveland, Ohio. I soon discovered that I didn't have the disposition to be a physician, so I decided to major in chemistry instead. Then in January of my freshman year, my dad passed away.

At this point, I decided to transfer to the same school my sister attended near Cleveland, to be close to someone in my family. My time at this Catholic college went well, although I struggled to make sense of my life. It was a good school and it thoughtfully presented issues of faith. I even had a chance to meet Mother Teresa. But I only attended chapel once during my three years there. Being away from the rest of the family and losing my dad made me feel somewhat abandoned, like an orphan. And God didn't seem personal or very real— except for the time I had an unusual encounter with Him.

Preparing for Relationship with God:

Early in my senior year, I was sleeping in my dorm room, when all of a sudden a brilliant light shone directly in my face. I still had my eyes closed, but an intense light like the sun enveloped me. It was so bright I couldn't see anything except the shape of a face. I could see eyes, a nose, and a mouth, but I couldn't see much else because the light was almost blinding. A voice spoke to me, asking why I was so sad. I shared that my dad had died, my mom was sick, I was away from my family, and I felt like my world was coming apart. The voice said, "You will be okay. Go out and enjoy life." When I heard these words, a peace came over me. I opened my eyes to see the bright rays of the sun shining through my window directly on my face. As I arose, I realized the emotional burden weighing me down was gone. I was no longer sad, but thrilled about life! I started to have some fun, and this became one of my best years in college.

After graduating, I started working as a research chemist for a large petroleum company in Cleveland, Ohio. I worked, had fun, and did not go to church for several years. I traveled, attended parties, dated but avoided what I considered serious trouble (drugs, illicit sex, and criminal activities). Nonetheless, I was still in sin, separated from God, because I didn't have a personal relationship with Him. I justified my choices by trying to be a good person, but I definitely was not seeking God.

Establishing Relationship with God:

In my quest to find a graduate school, I traveled to another part of the country to visit a campus. However, I was disappointed and disturbed by the attitudes and lifestyles of people I met there. I returned home confused. Wanting to help, a coworker invited me to her home. I agreed, and attended a small group meeting of women who gathered weekly to encourage each other in following Jesus. For six months I stayed at her home every Friday night asking questions and hanging out. This woman had her PhD from MIT, and I gradually realized I could be a Christian without sacrificing my scientific background. Finally I asked her about the born again experience, and she told me how to meet Jesus. So, I received Christ as my personal Lord and Savior.

Accepting Jesus was very real for me—as if a light bulb went off inside me. My co-worker taught me to pray and read Scripture daily and to go to Christian bookstores for resources. I tried to go back to the Roman Catholic Church, but it felt dead. So I stopped attending. I didn't feel like I fit in at her Protestant church, either. No one in the Catholic Church or my Catholic college had taught me how to know God personally. So I was leery of institutionalized religion and regular church services.

Getting to Know God as Father:

With the support and prayer of my women's group, I decided to enroll at an out-of-state, graduate business school. In my second year there, God first revealed Himself as my Father. Here is how He did it:

I needed help desperately. I was at school on scholarship. In my second semester, I took two classes that brought my GPA below the mandatory 3.5 GPA I needed to maintain my scholarship and living stipend. If I did not raise my grades, I would have to pay for school out of my own pocket.

I followed the wise counsel of a close friend who advised me, "Ask God to help you with your schoolwork." I thought this was a novel idea. Since I was desperate, I gave it a shot. I went to the local Christian bookstore and purchased Charles Stanley's book, *How to Listen to God*. I read the book and followed the suggestions: Get in a quiet place, share your heart with God, and wait. I did this, and within minutes a quiet voice spoke to me. I still remember the exact words. He said, "I love you with an everlasting love, and I will never leave you or forsake you."

When I heard these words, it was as if a thunderbolt from heaven pierced my soul and gave me strength. I was overwhelmed with a sense of love, peace, and comfort. I didn't realize until then that I had felt so isolated and alone. I was trying to make life work by myself. I was in Michigan, away from family again. Although I was meeting new people, all of my old friends were in Cleveland or at other graduate schools. So it was a wonderful gift to hear Him speak to me, so that I could clearly know that I was not alone. He was with me, living inside of me. This

revelation brought tremendous joy and confidence. It helped me to no longer feel like an orphan, all alone in the world.

I went to church infrequently, yet I continued to spend quiet time with God. Because of His great mercy, I got to hear God's voice. He taught me how to spend time with Him. He told me to get up in the morning and read the Word for an hour. Then I was to jog, shower, and go to class. While I was in class, He began directing me how to respond to the professor's questions. At first I didn't know what to do. I kept hearing Him tell me what to say, but I didn't say anything. After all, this was a new experience! I had never heard of the Holy Spirit, let alone His gifts, so I was clueless about what was happening. But as I listened to the professor restate key points at the end of the class, his words included the very ideas that God told me to share! Thus, I gained courage and started to speak up in class. At first, the professor would look at me and keep on talking without responding to my comments. But at the end of the discussion, his summary would include comments I had made. I started to get credit for my class participation. I also learned to pray over my tests and assignments.

The Lord also restructured my study time. He directed me to do my reading and analysis during the weekdays and be in bed by 11 pm. I was to do most of my project work and other demanding schoolwork on Saturdays and leave Sunday for Sabbath rest and light reading. As a result, I had more balance, more reserves in every way, enabling me to think more clearly and get more rest. This brought balance in my life and my grades improved immediately. In that first semester, I got a 3.5 GPA or higher in all my classes.

The Lord then proceeded to teach me to pray for the professors, faculty, and fellow students. I also started to pray about where the Lord wanted me to work and about various relationships. I carried this practice over into all areas of my life: family, friends, cars, etc.

Daily Walking with God My Father:

I continue to invite God into every area of my life today. Seeking God's face and asking Him for help is a concrete way for me to receive God the Father's parenting. His presence and response to everything I yield to Him makes and keeps our relationship real, relevant, and intimate.

Looking back on that time in my life, I realize that God Almighty was revealing Himself and showing me how to have a relationship with Him. He was also teaching me some basics of the spiritual disciplines before I ever heard of them. He taught me how to have quiet time with Him for prayer and Bible reading. I learned to pray, fast, and intercede for others as well. I also learned the art of simplicity. I was not a churchgoer, so I didn't know anything about the Holy Spirit and His gifts. Yet God gave me prophetic insight, wisdom, and discernment to do His will in various dimensions of my life. Of course I faithfully participate in church life now and appreciate the value of serving in the Body of Christ.

To me the key factor for growing in close relationship with my Father was my desperation for God's help and then responding to His grace humbly and obediently. I really didn't know anything else to do. I learned that God is not only with me, living inside me by His Spirit, but that He is also for me. He wanted to help me succeed in my goals and He showed me how to do it. It was a wonderful example of a Father who wanted to help His child grow up and succeed in the important goals. And He didn't make it really hard to do this. I just needed an open heart to seek Him out, make room in my life for more of Him, do what He instructed me to do, and continue to worship Him.

God the Father showed me He is a Father who cares, who is there and concerned about everything. And this concern was backed up with His power and willingness to do something about it.

My intimacy with God changed from an image of a distant God that I prayed to for help when I needed Him. It grew into an image of God who is a loving Father interested in every dimension of my life. I realized that every invitation or prayer I lift up to God is creating space in my relationship with Him, the All-sovereign creator of the universe who loves me and reveals Himself to me in awesome ways. When I take time to pray, listen to Him, and obey His directions, I see that God is my heavenly Father. He made me, loves me, and cares for me. His presence in me and His moving in my midst affirm that He is real and is with me. His desires for my life and His powerful answers to prayer show me He is for me and intends only good for me. And the fruit of all this is a peace, joy, and love that is wonderful. We share an intimacy that keeps me coming back for more. What an awesome God that I have! And what a kind, wonderful Abba Father He is to create me to know and love Him. Isn't this abundant, eternal life? It is the kind of life He wants with all of us!

Of course there have been struggles hearing God's voice. No one hears the Father perfectly all the time. It's a process, but at least I have learned to be oriented to Him and to be listening on a daily basis. And that makes a huge difference in my walk with Him.

Preparation for Leading Inductive Bible Studies

These Bible studies are written as Inductive Bible Study Discussions. “Inductive” means you begin with a text and ask a series of questions to discover the truth in that passage. The leader encourages the group members to find answers in the Scripture and then apply God’s truth to their lives. Usually the leader poses to the group a series of questions that ask the following:

1. What can I detect in the text about the people, their situation, and events that take place? What kind of literature is this? What words or ideas stand out or are repeated?
2. What did the text mean when it was written? Why were certain themes addressed in it? How would this text impact the original audience?
3. How does the meaning of the text apply to me today? What is God saying to me personally from this passage of Scripture? How should I respond to Him?

The authors of this series suggest you read over the notes on “How to Teach the Bible in Small Group” and “Some Practical Suggestions for Leading a Small Group Discussion” in Vineyard Church of Columbus’ Small Group Leadership Training Manual if you feel your inductive study skills are rusty. Or, you could visit our web site:

<http://www.vineyardcolumbus.org/resources/sgresources/PDFs/HowToTeach.pdf>.

Before you go over the Scripture text, pray that God will teach you something relevant for your group. Then, read through the passage, keeping an open heart and ear to the Lord. Finally, work through the Bible study notes and questions below.

These studies contain more background material and information on the passages than your group will cover in a meeting. Therefore, use each written Bible study as a framework for the discussion you lead in your small group meeting. This means you will need to:

1. Go over the questions and **choose** those you want to emphasize and those you might eliminate since your time is limited.
2. The application questions are now marked with a **smiling light bulb symbol!** Rather than leaving all of the application activity until the end of the study, ask one or two of these questions as you work through the passage. This will help people develop the habit of reflecting on and applying God’s Word to their lives.
3. Pace yourself. If you find you are falling behind schedule and need to move ahead, you could **summarize** some of the passage and then go to the final questions.
4. Select **one** application question you will use with your group at the end. The question may have more than one part, but focus on the vital Biblical truth you want to encourage your group to implement in your final question.
5. Feel free to suggest that your group **continue** a discussion at the next meeting or at another informal get together. Depending on the kind of meeting you are leading, you might want to leave time for worship, listening to God, and prayer ministry, so

don't feel you must cover every nugget of truth in a passage or allow each group member to share a mini-sermon on every question!

6. You may want to create your own **introduction** by using a personal example or current event that illustrates the point of the study. Your introduction and any background material shared should help lead the group members' thoughts from the present moment into the text.

The authors of this series are providing these questions and accompanying material for the leader's benefit—to help reduce your study and preparation time; to supply resources for possible questions group members may raise; and to clarify some gray areas of doctrine that may be in your mind as you prepare. Obviously, we cannot exhaust any one subject in a document like this, so you may want to do further reading and discuss doctrine with your pastor.

We highly recommend *The New Bible Dictionary* or *The New Bible Commentary* as excellent resources for further study.

Also note that some studies advise the leaders to make copies of a handout or bring some helpful communication tool, etc.

People First Language

In several of these studies, Jesus meets people with different physical needs. Some words, used in the past to label individuals with various disabilities, are now considered offensive. In order to remove any barriers to persons coming to know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, we want to show sensitivity and respect to everyone. It is good to remind ourselves that sin has made all of us less-abled than God originally intended for us to be; thus we all struggle in life. Because some have "invisible" or not readily noticeable disabilities or illnesses, we may unknowingly offend someone if we are not considerate at all times.

Please use language that models the following principle: speak about the person first, and then refer to the disability second, if the disability even needs to be noted. For example, rather than saying "the blind man," use "the man who was blind," or "the man who was visually impaired," or "the man who could not see clearly." This will help remove some of the offense and labeling that can occur when discussing any form of disability. Also, the word "mute" should never be used. Replace it with "speech impairment," "inability to speak clearly," etc. You may even need to politely suggest alternatives to anyone in your group who might unknowingly use inappropriate terminology. Additionally, ask yourself if an individual's condition needs to be mentioned at all. Try to communicate what has to be said without referring to anything that makes the person seem different. At the same time, recognize that language usage varies and changes, so we may offend people no matter how careful we are.

THE FATHERHOOD OF GOD

Study 1

THE FATHER'S UNIQUE SON

Hebrews 1:1—14

By Michael Karoly

Jesus answered, "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work."

John 14:9—10

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: "I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God." That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else He would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

C. S. Lewis

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AIM

- To grasp Jesus' uniqueness and to better understand how His unique character and work enable us to become sons and daughters of the Father.

KEY VERSES

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. ... For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father?" Or again, "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son?"

Hebrews 1: 3, 5

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Before you lead this study, please review the following sections in the *Introduction to the Fatherhood of God Series*:

- *Preparation for Leading Inductive Bible Studies*—helpful hints on how to prepare for and lead this group of studies.
- *People First Language*—guidelines about using sensitive and considerate language when referring to people who are physically, mentally, or emotionally impaired.

OPENER

In his book, *From Orphans to Heirs*, Mark Stibbe relates his experience of being adopted by Philip and Joy Stibbe. This couple already had a biological son, but was counseled not to go through any more pregnancies due to health issues. So they chose to adopt Mark and his twin sister, Claire. In one of the chapters, Mark describes his older brother, Giles, the Stibbes' natural, biological son. Rather than being jealous of Giles, Mark praises the wonderful qualities of his older brother and appreciates that he reminds him of their beloved father who has died (p. 64):

He looks like Dad—a full head of black hair, slightly crooked nose, same height. He sounds like Dad—indeed, people often used to mistake him for my father when he answered the telephone. Like Dad, Giles has an extraordinarily generous spirit and is respected by everyone. ... My brother Giles is so much like Dad that he is a constant reminder of what my father looked like and the kind of man my father was.

Mark Stibbe then compares this father-son relationship to God the Father and Jesus, His unique Son (p. 65):

If we want to know what our Father in heaven is like, then we need to look at Jesus. Jesus is the human face of Yahweh. He is the living likeness of God the Father. Just as Giles is a constant reminder to me of my adoptive father, so Jesus is an exact reflection of our Father in heaven.

As we'll see in this study, Jesus is unique—unequaled in all creation. Jesus was with the Father from the beginning, and Jesus is part of the Trinity: one God in three persons. Yet God saw fit to give Him a title: the Son. The author of Hebrews spells this out in the first chapter very clearly and defines what that title "Son" means.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This is background material for leaders. You may decide what to share with your group.

Some Bible scholars classify Hebrews as a letter; others consider Hebrews a written sermon. *The New Bible Commentary* puts it this way (Peterson, p. 1321):

Hebrews is an orderly and systematic treatment of the person and work of Christ, based on the exposition of certain key passages from the OT [Old Testament]. ... Each text is used to show how OT ideals and institutions find their fulfillment in Christ.

Scholars estimate that Hebrews was written before the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70, because that event ended the Jewish sacrificial system. But Hebrews does not include any “reference to that state of affairs” (Peterson, p. 1322). Hebrews’ authorship is unknown, and the book itself does not include an author’s name. Some attribute authorship to Paul, others to Barnabas or Apollos—men who were associated with Paul. The letter is “addressed primarily to Jewish converts who were familiar with the Old Testament and who were being tempted to revert to Judaism or to Judaize the gospel,” and its theme is “the absolute supremacy of Jesus Christ as revealer and as mediator of God’s grace” (Hughes and Burdick, p. 1895).

STUDY THE PASSAGE: HEBREWS 1: 1—14

Pray that God will use this study to reveal the truly unique characteristics and work of Jesus. Pray that we will see Jesus as the unique Son, who makes it possible for us to be sons and daughters of God the Father.

1. How did God speak to us in the past (v. 1)?

God spoke to our ancestors in the past, at many times and in various ways. Examples of the various ways God spoke in the past include “...dreams, visions, and angelic messages” (Peterson, p. 1325); rituals—such as the sacrificial system; objects—such as the temple and its fixtures; and prophets.

Optional: name examples of prophets God used to speak to His people.

Some examples of prophets are Moses, Samuel, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. In a sense, prophets were “middle persons” between God and man. Prophets were in contact with God, received His word, and delivered that word to the people. They also called God’s people to repent and obey the words God had already revealed.

2. How does God speak to us in these “last days” (v. 2)? What does using the term “Son” imply about Jesus?

In these last days, God is speaking *directly* through his Son, Jesus. Jesus, who is fully man and fully God, speaks the words of the Father *directly and unfiltered* to us (Richards, “Companion,” p. 855).

The term “Son” distinguishes Jesus from everyone else. It is a title that belongs uniquely to the Lord Jesus Christ. While angels can collectively be called “sons of God” (Job 1:6), there is no angel that individually can have the title of Son; only Jesus is given that name

(Wiersbe). Grudem points out that “Son of God” was “a title often used of Jesus to designate him as the heavenly, eternal Son who is equal in nature to God himself” (p. 1254).

It may be surprising to some, but nowhere does Jesus teach that all of humanity can call God “Father” nor can we call ourselves “God’s sons and daughters.” Jesus limits calling God “Father” to those who are born again by faith in Him. In fact, Jesus says those not believing in Him belong to “your father, the devil” (John 8:44; Finlayson and Jensen, p. 420). Please understand that we are not endorsing a condemning attitude towards those who have not yet trusted in Jesus. Instead, we are clarifying that only those who have begun a relationship with God through Jesus have “the right to become children of God” (John 1:12–13).

You may want to distinguish “Son of God” from the title, “Son of Man.” This second term is what Jesus used most often in talking about Himself. “Son of Man” is found in Daniel 7:13 referring to the one who rules eternally over the world (Grudem, p. 1254). In case you are asked about the term, “*only begotten* Son” (John 3:16 et al. in some versions), that is a mistranslation of the Greek word *monogenes*. It should be translated “unique” or “one of a kind,” reinforcing the point that Jesus is in a category all His own and does not support the heresy that Jesus was a created being less than God (Grudem, p. 1249).

3. List five phrases that describe the Son (v. 3)? Take a moment to reflect on each one.

- “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory” (see Ezekiel 1:27–28; John 8:12). The Greek word for “radiance” is *apaugasma*, which refers to “a brightness shining from within, and a brightness caused by an external source” (Richards, “Companion,” p. 855). In other words, Jesus radiates the glory of God from within and without. Jesus spoke to His disciples about letting their “light shine before men” (Matthew 5:16), and Jesus Himself said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the *light of life* [emphasis added]” (John 8:12). Ezekiel described the radiance of God in Ezekiel 1:27–28 and 10: 3–5 as well.
- He is “the exact representation of his being” (see Matthew 8:24–27; Mark 2:7–12). The Greek word *charakter* is the word translated “exact representation of his being.” *Charakter* referred to an imprint on a die or an impression on a coin. “Jesus ‘bears the stamp’ of the divine nature itself” (Richards, “Companion,” p. 855). This means that Jesus is exactly equal to the Father—an exact duplicate of the nature of God ([the Greek] *hypostasis*, meaning “nature” or “being,” Grudem, p. 547).

Jesus shares many characteristics that are unique to God, including the following (Grudem, pp. 547–549):

- Jesus is omnipotent. In Matthew 8:26–27, Jesus rebuked the storm and it subsided. The disciples were amazed that “the winds and waves obey him.” Jesus, like His Father, has authority over all things (Matthew 28:18).
- Jesus is eternal (Revelation 1: 18, 22:13).
- Jesus is omniscient. He knows people’s thoughts and knows all things (Mark 2:8 and John 16:30, respectively), just as the Father does.
- Jesus is omnipresent (Matthew 28:20).

- Jesus has divine authority and sovereignty (Matthew 28:20; Acts 2:36; Acts 5:31; Acts 10:36). Jesus is able to forgive sins, something only God can do (Mark 2:5–10).
- Jesus is immortal (Revelation 1:18). In John 2:19, Jesus says, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” While it is true that God the Father was active in raising Jesus from the dead (Acts 2:32), Jesus also had an active role in His resurrection as well (John 10:17–18).
- Jesus is worthy to be worshiped, just like the Father (Matthew 28:17; Revelation 5).
- He “sustains all things by his powerful word” (see John 1:1-5; Hebrews 11:3). Jesus is the “Word” (Gk. *Logos*) from the beginning (John 1:1–5, 14); He always speaks the words of the Father (John 14:10).
- He “provided purification for sins” (see Isaiah 53:4–6; Romans 3:25–26; 1 John 2:2). Jesus’ uniqueness enabled the Father to accept His sacrifice in our behalf.
- He “sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven” (see Acts 2:32–33; Philippians 2:6–11). It is because Jesus humbled Himself and provided purification for our sins by dying on the cross that “God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name...” (Philippians 2:11).

In light of verses 1 to 3, what can we say about Jesus compared to prophets, angels, and everything else in creation?

Jesus is superior: He is superior in name (character, essence of being) and titles (Son and heir). He is the exact representation of God’s being. He created all things, has dominion over all things, and will inherit all things. No one has a name greater than Jesus. His name describes not just His relationship with the Father but His Kingship as well, establishing His right to rule and reign over all things.

- **Which of the five phrases makes the strongest impression on you? Which have you not thought of before?**

4. In verses 5–14, the author quotes Scripture to point out how Jesus is superior to all of creation. In verse 5, in what way is Jesus superior?

Jesus has a superior *Relationship* to God the Father (Richards, “Study 156,” p. 993). As discussed earlier, Jesus receives the title of “Son,” which is an individual title given only to Him. Jesus sits beside God the Father on the throne (verse 3), not below Him or in another room. Jesus’ unique relationship with the Father enables us (through faith in Him) to become sons and daughters of God (Galatians 3:25–27).

5. In verses 6–9, how is Jesus superior to creation? What is He entitled to as a result of this superiority? Optional: Compare this text to Exodus 20:2–5 and Matthew 4:10.

Jesus is superior as *Deity* (Richards, “Study 156,” p. 993). As a result, He is entitled to worship and the angels are commanded to worship Him (v. 6). Verse 6 can also be translated as “and when He again brings the Firstborn into the world” (Hodges, p. 781). The Greek for “firstborn” is *prototokos*, which “is frequently used as a technical theological term, applied only to Jesus. It affirms His supreme rank and His unique relationship with the Father and His unique position within the family of God” (Richards, “*Companion*,” p. 855).

When Scripture applies Psalm 45:6 to Jesus in Hebrews 1:8, it is calling Him God (Ladd, p. 624).

Jesus is superior because His throne will endure forever. Interestingly, the author cites Psalm 45:6–7 as what God says about His Son. God set His Son above His companions because the Son “loved righteousness and hated wickedness” (Hebrews 1:9). God says that Jesus’ throne will endure forever and it will be a righteous reign and rule. So He sits on the throne as God’s anointed ruler (Wiersbe). This definitely sets Him apart from the rest of creation!

Optional: Compare this text to Exodus 20:2–5 and Matthew 4:10.

6. In verses 10–12, in what ways is Jesus superior to creation?

Jesus is superior as *Creator* (Richards, “Study 156,” p. 993). Earlier in the Hebrews passage it said that God made the universe through the Son (v. 2). Here, the author cites another passage from Psalms (Psalm 102:25–27) and applies it as a means of expressing what God says about His Son. This time, He calls Him “Lord” (Greek *kyrios*). The word *kyrios* was used to address a superior politely, but it was also used in the Septuagint [a Greek version of the Old Testament used by the ancient world] as a translation of the Hebrew word *Yahweh*—“the Lord.” In that context, “Lord” specifically refers to the Creator, and here it is applied to the Son (Grudem, pp. 544–545). It all points back to Jesus being the “exact representation” of God the Father and all that has been discussed so far.

Jesus is superior because He is eternal, unlike all of creation. Jesus’ reign will be eternal and He does not change. Jesus “remains the same” (Hebrews 1:12), and while the old creation will “wear out” (Hebrews 1:11), Jesus will bring in the new creation (Wiersbe).

Optional: Read Colossians 1:15–20 to more fully understand this aspect of His superiority.

7. In verse 13, how is Jesus superior to creation? What does it mean to sit at the “right hand” of God?

Jesus is superior in *Destiny* (Richards, “Study 156,” pp. 993–994). Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father; the right hand was used to designate “the traditional place of power and authority in the biblical world” (Richards, “*Companion*,” p. 855). So as the Son, Jesus’ destiny is superior. He not only has a relationship with the Father but a Kingship and the authority to reign and rule over all things.

8. List the key things from this study that answer the question, “Why should I listen to the Son?”

Reasons we should listen to Jesus include:

- God appointed Him “heir of all things.”
- Jesus is the exact representation of God’s being
 - God made the universe through Him.
 - Jesus is to be worshipped—something reserved for God.
- As an “heir,” Christ holds “title to the property of the one who appointed him heir” (Keener). The Son has absolute authority and power—He has a position that is unique and superior to anything we know since God appointed Him.

APPLICATION

Select one of the following application questions to finish your discussion time.

- **How does Jesus’ uniqueness validate Scripture’s claims that He is the only way to God?**
- **How does Jesus help us get to know God as our Father?**
- **Have you ever seen someone “radiate” God? How can we receive and reflect more of our Heavenly Father’s nature in our lives?**

WRAPPING IT UP

Jesus is unique because He shares God the Father’s deity. The title of “Son” shows that Jesus is superior to everything else in creation. He is the exact representation of God the Father and radiates His glory. As God’s representation on earth, Jesus made God known to us. He also became our representative by dying in our place on the cross and paying the penalty for our sin. He then rose from the dead as the first to rise and never die. God honored His Son, declaring Him heir and ruler of all things. Jesus’ actions enable us to become children of God when we put our faith in Him. As God’s children, we are co-heirs to God’s kingdom. As adopted sons and daughters, we can experience the love of God our Father, begin transforming into the likeness of His Son, and radiate the glory of God in our lives, impacting those around us for His kingdom.

Have you come to the point of accepting Jesus’ unique role as Savior and Lord? If you’re not sure, or if you want prayer or further discussion, please speak with your group leader.

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THE FATHERHOOD OF GOD SERIES

Study 2

LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON

John 14:1—14

By Elizabeth B. Crawford

“I and the Father are one. ...The Father is in me, and I in the Father. ”

John 10:30, 38b

Religion is falling in love with God; and it is impossible to fall in love with an abstract God. He must have a name.... The Christian faith says boldly to mankind, “Come, let us introduce you to God. His name is Jesus, and he was a carpenter by trade.”

G. A. Studdert Kennedy

Have you ever wondered about the intensity of the Father’s love for you? ... In Jesus’ final prayer before the cross, he prayed to God the Father, “I have made you known to them, and will make it known, so that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them” (John 17:26). In other words, Jesus came to give us the same life He experienced, a life lived out of the awareness of being totally and completely loved by His Father.

Ed Tandy McGlasson

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AIM

To grasp how Jesus the Son uniquely reveals God the Father to us, and to better understand how our relationship to God the Father differs from Jesus’.

KEY VERSES

Jesus answered, “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.”

John 14:9–10

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Before you lead this study, please review the following sections in the *Introduction to the Fatherhood of God Series*:

- *Preparation for Leading Inductive Bible Studies*—helpful hints on how to prepare for and lead this group of studies.
- *People First Language*—guidelines about using sensitive and considerate language when referring to people who are physically, mentally, or emotionally impaired.

OPENER

You can use the following question to get discussion started before you begin the study.

We’ve all heard the expression, “Like father, like son.” Whom in your family do you seem to resemble in features, expressions, or other characteristics?

Or you can use the following information to create your own opener.

An old expression states, “Like father, like son.” No doubt we could also comment, “Like mother, like daughter.” We often observe that children reflect physical and emotional traits of their parents. Some even seem to mimic their parents’ voices and mannerisms. In centuries past, and in some parts of the world today, children have traditionally followed in their parents’ footsteps and entered the same job field. Not everyone who joins the family business or line of work does so willingly. Children of parents who have achieved some recognition or fame often find it challenging to carve out a life apart from famous parents. Some may never find a separate identity, and others may self-medicate or self-destruct in an effort to escape the pain of unmet expectations. Others, after fighting the inevitable, may actually surpass their parents in skill or accomplishments.

Some famous father-son relationships include musicians Johann Sebastian Bach and Karl Philip Emmanuel Bach; actors Lloyd Bridges and sons Jeff and Beau; baseball player Sammy Hairston, his son Jerry, and Jerry’s sons, Jerry Jr. and Scott; or baseball’s Ray Boone, son Bob Boone, and grandsons Bret and Aaron Boone (“Baseball Grandfathers”); presidents John Adams and John Quincy Adams; and George H. W. Bush and George W. Bush. One famous example of a son following in his father’s footsteps is Franklin Graham, who now preaches to audiences worldwide in a manner similar to his father, evangelist Billy Graham.

Franklin Graham grew up the fourth of Bill and Ruth Graham’s five children. It was tough to have a famous father who traveled away from home so much. Franklin was a bit wild compared

to the rest of his family, and rebelled against the family name and legacy. It wasn't until he was 22 that he surrendered his life to Jesus Christ. Soon after that, he went on a six-week mission trip to Asia with Dr. Bob Pierce, founder of the relief agency, Samaritan's Purse. Graham felt God's call to help those impacted by war, famine, and natural disasters. In 1978, Pierce died. A year later, Franklin assumed leadership of Samaritan's Purse ("Franklin Graham"). But he was still reluctant to preach—especially after no one responded to his first attempt in 1983. Finally, in 1989, he agreed to speak in Juneau, Alaska, and God made it very clear he was to continue preaching. He began to devote 10 percent of his time to his father's ministry ("Graham Festival"). In 2002, he became president of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. He continues to oversee Samaritan's Purse and also preach around the world ("Franklin Graham"). His facial features, height, voice, and diction clearly remind people of his father (Grossman). Now one of Franklin's sons, William Franklin Graham IV, has begun speaking in small city crusades, too ("William (Will) F. Graham").

Jesus followed in His human father's footsteps by becoming a carpenter. Yet He left that trade and took on the "work" of His heavenly Father when He was about 30 years old. He spoke and acted in such perfect unity with God the Father that He claimed if you had seen Him, you had seen the Father. In this study, we will examine that claim and see how Jesus promises to connect us to His Father and support us as we follow in His footsteps.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This is background material for leaders. You may decide what to share with your group.

The Gospel of John is distinct from the other three Gospels. His writing style and content set him apart from the three Synoptic Gospels (Carson, p. 23). "Synoptic" refers to seeing Jesus from a similar viewpoint (Fee and Stuart, p. 267). John, one of Jesus' twelve disciples, authored his Gospel around A.D. 90–95, making it the last of the four. By that time, persecution and heretical teaching threatened the church, so John wrote to reassure his readers that Jesus was God in the flesh, that Jesus fulfilled the Messianic prophecies, and that Jesus continued to dwell with His disciples through His Holy Spirit (Fee and Stuart, pp. 304–305). Although John was an early eyewitness, he omitted familiar stories about Jesus' birth, the devil's temptation in the desert, Jesus' Transfiguration, and the Last Supper ceremony. Unlike the other three Gospel accounts, John's writing revealed Jesus' identity from the beginning and focused on Jesus Himself, not the Kingdom of God. John included no parables, did not show Jesus casting out demons, and does not always clarify when Jesus stops speaking and John starts commenting (Fee and Stuart, pp. 305–307). Still, it is a much loved and often quoted work. Most people know John 3:16 by heart (Carson, p. 21).

John emphasized Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem and Samaria, while the other three Gospel writers included more material on Jesus' ministry in the northern region of Galilee. John depicted Jesus as the fulfillment of the Jewish holy days and ceremonies and gives seven signs and statements, which confirm Jesus' identity (Fee and Stuart, pp. 305–307).

John's Gospel can be divided into these main sections:

- Prologue: 1:1–18
- Jesus' Seven Signs and Self-Disclosure: 1:19–12:50
- Jesus' Passion and Vindication: 13:1–20:31
- Epilogue: 21:1–25

STUDY THE PASSAGE: JOHN 14:1—14

Pray that group members might “see” God more clearly through His Son, Jesus, during this study and ministry time.

- 1. Jesus has just told His disciples that one of them will betray Him, that Peter will deny knowing Him, and that He, Jesus, will be leaving them (John 13). How does Jesus try to reassure the disciples now (v. 1)?**
- 2. Why should the disciples be able to trust Jesus at this point in their relationship? How is Jesus suggesting that He and the Father are alike?**

3. Why is Jesus leaving (v. 2)? What does He promise (v. 3)?

Jesus is going to the Father via immense suffering, death on the cross, and resurrection. His “going” will open the way for us to have a relationship with the Father. Jesus speaks vaguely about His going and coming again. Some think that He refers to His immediate death, rising, and appearing to them. Others believe He may also speak about His Second Coming at the end of history to take all His followers to live in heaven with Him. Carson prefers the Second Coming interpretation and says the emphasis should be on the comfort believers will experience spending eternity with God (Carson, pp. 488—489).

4. What confuses Thomas and the others (vv. 4—5)?

Since the disciples don’t really understand where Jesus is going, they don’t feel they know the way to get there either (Carson, pp. 490—491).

5. What does Jesus reveal (vv. 6—7)? What does He mean by the “Way,” “Truth,” and “Life”? Why is Jesus uniquely able to claim this?

John writes that Jesus is the truest revelation and reflection of God we will ever see (1:1, 14, 18). He states that Jesus is the life of God (1:4; 3:13—16). Thus the way to encounter God is through knowing Jesus, “God’s gracious self-disclosure” (Carson, p. 491).

Why is Jesus uniquely able to claim this?

Jesus is the supreme revelation of God the Father. This exclusive claim is His alone to make (Carson, p. 491).

- **How readily do you proclaim that Jesus is the only Way, Truth, and Life? Why?**

Today our challenge is to balance this claim with authentic demonstrations of love. If we could serve others in the lowly, heart-felt way that Jesus demonstrated as He washed His disciples feet and as He forgave His persecutors, perhaps His words about being the only way to God might seem less arrogant to others (Wright, p. 60).

6. **What does Philip ask (v. 8)? When have you wanted to see or speak to God face to face?**

7. **What startling claim does Jesus make about Himself (vv. 9–11)? How have you pictured Jesus and God the Father? How closely do those images match each other? Why?**

In John 10:30, Jesus claims, “I and the Father are one.” Here in chapter 14, Jesus states, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father,” and, “It is the Father living in me doing His work.” Jesus speaks of complete unity with the Father without obliterating their unique personalities. John 5:19–20 makes it clear that Jesus sees and does what the Father is doing—but is not the Father Himself (Carson, p. 494). Nevertheless, Jesus is the best and truest revelation of the Father, so knowing Jesus is the way we can know the Father.

8. **What startling promise does Jesus make (vv. 12–14)? Why?**

Carson argues that the “greater works” the disciples will do are “greater” because after Jesus goes to the Father, the works His followers do will be part of the new Kingdom age. By asking Jesus in accordance with all He wants to do, they will perform mighty deeds and also glorify the Father (Carson, pp. 496–497).

APPLICATION

Select one of the following application questions to finish your discussion time.

- **How does Jesus uniquely help us know God our Father? What do you now see more clearly about God as our Father?**
- **How is Jesus’ relationship with God the Father similar to ours? How is Jesus’ relationship to God the Father different than ours?**

- **How well do you know your Heavenly Father? How well do you know your Older Brother, Jesus? What might help you enjoy your relationship with the Father and the Son more?**

WRAPPING IT UP

“If you have seen me, you have seen the Father.” Jesus fully identified with His Father’s life, love, truth, and methods. He only did what the Father gave Him to do, and never failed to do what He was asked. Whenever we wonder what our Heavenly Father is like, we can simply turn to the Gospel stories and read about what Jesus said and did. Jesus perfectly revealed Father God’s thoughts and intentions then and He still does today since God never changes. And Jesus’ statement that He is the way to spend eternity with the Father reassures us that we, too, will have a place with Him one day.

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THE FATHERHOOD OF GOD

Study 3

OUR CONSISTENT FATHER

Isaiah 63:7—19

By John Ebert

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

James 1:17

[God] cannot change for the better, for he is already perfect; and being perfect, he cannot change for the worse.

A. W. Pink

It is no strain of metaphor to say that the love of God and the wrath of God are the same thing, described from opposite points of view. How we shall experience it depends upon the way we shall come up against it: God does not change; it is man's moral state that changes. The wrath of God is a figure of speech to denote God's unchanging opposition to sin; it is His righteous love operating to destroy evil. It is not evil that will have the last word, but good; not sorrow, but joy; not hate, but love.

R. J. Campbell

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AIM

- To show that God the Father is a consistent and good Father. His actions may vary depending on how His children behave, but He always loves them and intends the best for them.

KEY VERSE

But you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us or Israel acknowledge us; you, Lord, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name.

Isaiah 63:16

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Before you lead this study, please review the following sections in the *Introduction to the Fatherhood of God Series*:

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- *People First Language*—guidelines about using sensitive and considerate language when referring to people who are physically, mentally, or emotionally impaired.

OPENER

Some of us grew up with difficult or absent fathers. Here's one woman's story of how God showed her His Fatherly love through another father figure.

I know it may sound strange to say that someone close to my own age fathered me, but that is how God chose to do it. I consider my friend and former counselor, Gary, my spiritual father. Through his consistent acceptance, practical help, and encouragement, I finally began to believe that God the Father actually loved me, too. Until I knew Gary, my picture of God was of a mean old man in the sky, constantly shaking His head at me as if to say, “what a loser you are.” God apparently didn’t like my warped view of Him, so He sent Gary into my life when I was 35. My female counselor was moving out of town. She thought I should counsel with what she called a “healthy man.” At that time I had never met one, so I was intrigued and told her I wouldn’t mind seeing a male therapist.

Gary didn’t take long to impress me as ... different. On my second appointment, he appeared in the lobby to take me back to his office dressed in plaid shorts, a polka-dot tie, and bunny slippers. I looked at the receptionist in shock. She just smiled and shook her head, seeming to say, “Well, that’s just Gary.” I asked him why he was dressed so foolishly. He informed me that God had told him that someone was going to need a laugh that day, so he dressed in such a way as to bring the laughs for everyone. Rather than seeing Gary as healthy then, I thought he was a bit weird. But I liked him. There was something about him (besides his silly clothes that day) that made him different from anyone I’d ever known.

Shortly after I began counseling with Gary, I felt drawn back to the Bible. As I read, I turned my heart back to God and asked Him to help me live for Him. Until then I’d been turning away from God for a number of years. When I let Gary know the news, he welcomed me to “the club” (what he called the family of God). Soon after, he closed out my case file and started to invite me to his home, where I got better acquainted with Gary and his wife, Deb.

Believe me, I was pretty rough around the edges at that point in my life. Nevertheless, Gary and Deb never once judged me or put me down. They were certainly unlike any Christians I had known up to that point. There was an air of peace and acceptance in their home. When my car broke down, Gary was there to help me find a place to get it fixed. When I needed to talk, Gary was there to encourage me! I had never had any people so consistently love and care about me. It was through Gary and Deb's care and kindness—but especially Gary's—that I began to believe that God actually could love me.

When Gary and Deb had children, I babysat as they went out on weekly “dates.” This was one more way they involved me in their lives and demonstrated trust in me. It also allowed me to see a man who reflected God's character while parenting. When I moved to Columbus, I went back to visit with them on weekends because it felt like home.

Gary and his family moved to Germany and I've only seen them once since 1997. Nevertheless, they continue to “parent” me in practical and spiritual ways. Once, in 2004, I was hurt by someone's superficial but well-meaning response to my emotional wounds. I shared with Gary and Deb the contents of a blazing email I had sent in return. They prayed and responded gently but lovingly to correct me and address some areas of needed growth. They wrote in a way that identified with my pain but pointed me towards Jesus' humility when mistreated by others. They acknowledged my destitute circumstances, revealed similar times they had been poor, but then gently reminded me of Proverbs' warnings about the tongue. They pointed out the relational pain that could come from continuing to react that way, and urged me to change. Their loving confrontation allowed me to admit my wrong and seek God's forgiveness. It also helped me improve patterns of relating to others. And I loved and respected them even more when they praised my new response and seemed to want to grow along with me.

I have learned so much from Gary and Deb—especially through Gary's consistent care and encouragement. I now realize that the God Who sent them into my life also loves me.

As we study this passage from Isaiah 63, let's look for indications that God is our consistently loving and good Father, too.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This is background material for leaders. You may decide what to share with your group.

The prophet Isaiah lived around the time of King Hezekiah of Judah (2 Kings 19–20; 2 Chronicles 32:20, 32; Isaiah 1:1), that is, around 740–700 B.C. However, some scholars have noticed that the messages recorded in Isaiah 40–66 seem particularly relevant to the circumstances of the Jews in Babylon after the exile (580–540 B.C.) or to those who returned to Judea after the exile (540–400 B.C.). As a result of this observation, some have speculated that the latter part of the book of Isaiah may have been written during one or both of these later time periods (Oswalt, p. 616). While the passage for this study refers to the events that occurred in the time of Moses, it does not contain any specific historical references that would tie its origins to a particular time period. Consequently, this text invites us to apply it to any situation that fits its mood, including our own (Alexander, p. 421).

The mood of this passage is complaint or lament. The passage is a prayer to God recounting what God has done in the past (Goldingay, p. 356), and complaining or lamenting that God is no longer doing those kinds of things (Oswalt, p. 603). While it begins as the prayer of an individual (“I will tell,” v. 7), the plural pronouns (“us,” “we”) in verses 15–19 show that it is offered on behalf of a community. So this is a communal lament (Oswalt, p. 594; Watts, p. 897) complaining that God is no longer taking care of this group of people, and asking God to take notice and do something (v. 15).

STUDY THE PASSAGE: ISAIAH 63:7—19

Pray that the Holy Spirit would reveal how consistently loving God the Father is and how much He deserves our love, gratitude, and obedience.

1. This passage is a prayer. What is the first topic of this prayer (v. 7)?

The phrase “I will tell” in verse 7 might be more literally translated as “I will cause to be remembered” (Alexander, p. 417) or “I will bring to remembrance” (Watts, pp. 897, 900; Young, p. 480). Therefore in the first half of this prayer, the person remembers the things that God has done in the past—“the many good things he has done for the house of Israel” (v. 7).

2. What kind of relationship does God want with His people (v. 8)?

In verse 8, the prayer recalls that God chose the people of Israel as His people—“they are my people” (Alexander, p. 418; Oswalt, p. 605; Young, p. 480). This reflects the language of the covenant relationship [sacred agreement] that God made with one group of people on the earth (Exodus 19:3—6). Through His relationship with Israel, He demonstrates His love, faithfulness, kindness, goodness, power, forgiveness, provision, protection, etc. In return, He expects grateful worship and obedience. He hopes to draw others away from their idols to Himself as they watch how He treats His own people.

God also describes Israel as His children whom He hopes will be loyal to Him—“sons who will not be false to me.” Thus God puts Himself in a parent-child relationship, which again implies His loving, intimate care for His people. Finally, He says He became their Savior referring to when He delivered them from slavery in Egypt.

- **How do you usually picture God relating to you? Why?**

3. How did God respond to their distress (vv.8—9)?

God shared the distress of His people when they suffered as slaves in Egypt. Because of His empathy and faithfulness, He saved and redeemed them, bringing them out of that bondage. Lifting them up and carrying them might refer to God’s care of them in the wilderness while they traveled from Egypt to the promised land of Israel (v. 9; Oswalt, p. 606). Verse 9 also might help us imagine God as our loving Parent since the image can refer to a parent carrying a child (Goldingay, p. 357; Young, p. 482). Isaiah says this has happened “all the days of old,” reminding us that God has shown this kind of support and help on an ongoing basis. The text should encourage our faith in His loving concern when we are in the midst of trials.

4. How did the people act despite God’s deliverance (v. 10)? How did that impact the Lord? How did He respond to them?

Verse 10 recalls that the people rebelled against God despite His care for them. We read that this grieved His Holy Spirit. Since we are told here that God the Father feels grief when we sin, we should think of sin and obedience in light of our relationship with Him, not merely in terms of laws we are breaking or keeping.

In response to their rebellion, God punished them (Goldingay, p. 357; Oswalt, pp. 607–608; Young, p. 483). Thus, God the Father allowed His rebellious children to experience consequences for their actions. It is not a sign of His hatred for them but of His consistency in training and correcting them. Another aspect of His good parenting is that He had clearly spelled out the blessings that come when His people obey and the punishment they could expect when they disobey. So the trials Israel experienced should not have surprised them (Deuteronomy 28).

Optional: How does the verse 10 recollection compare to verse 17?

Verse 17 accuses God of making the people wander away and of hardening their hearts. However, according to verse 10, God turned against the people because they rebelled against Him and grieved Him (Goldingay, pp. 356–357; Oswalt, p. 607).

It is clear in this prayer that the relationship between God and the person praying has broken down somehow. It seems that the person praying would like to blame this breakdown on God—“you make us wander from your ways and harden our hearts” (v. 17). However, the prayer concedes that it was not really God who changed, but the people who turned away from God (v. 10; Oswalt, p. 608; Young, p. 483).

5. What did the people do when God opposed them (vv. 11–14)?

When God turned against His rebellious people, Israel remembered when God rescued them from slavery in Egypt and brought them to the Promised Land. God had divided the Red Sea so they could walk through on dry land to escape the Egyptian army (vv. 11–13; Oswalt, p. 608). According to verse 14, God gave the people rest and guided them to the Promised Land (Oswalt, p. 609; Young, p. 486).

After recalling these dramatic events from their history, they asked themselves where God was since they did not see His deliverance now (Young, p. 487; Watts, pp. 901–902). Even in their questioning, the people of Israel reflect the expectation that God will be consistent, that He will act to deliver them again.

6. How could remembering the past help in the present situation?

Our view of a person’s character is often formed by our past experience with that person. When we consider how people will act in the future, we typically recall what they have done in the past. So the person offering this prayer looks to memories of what God has done before as a guide to what God might do again (Oswalt, p. 603; Watts, pp. 901–902).

7. In the second half of the prayer, what does the person ask God to do (vv. 15, 17)?

In verse 15, the person asks God to “look down from heaven and see.” This indicates a belief that since the people have turned away from God, God has withdrawn to heaven, and He is no longer paying attention to what is happening to them (Watts, p. 902). The one who prays wants God to see the problems they are facing and to be distressed “in all their distress” again (v. 9). Those praying with the person hope that God will do something about their difficulties, just as He did for the people of Israel when they were enslaved in Egypt.

In the middle of verse 17, the prayer simply requests God to “return.” This might seem odd, since the question right before this request accuses God of making the people wander away. One would think that if the people had wandered away, then either the people should be the ones to return or God should be asked to bring them back. “Return” in this case is probably a request for God to return to the way He treated them in the past, when He saved them from their distress (v. 9).

Optional:

A paraphrase of the prayer for God to “return” might be:

God, You are now our enemy because we have rebelled against You. However, we are not able to overcome our rebellious inclinations and return to You (Oswalt, p. 611). So we are crying out to You to return to the ways of compassion and kindness that You showed to the people of Israel when You delivered them from slavery in Egypt. In the same way, have compassion on us, show kindness to us, and deliver us from slavery to sin (Oswalt, p. 612). Only if You return to us can we be saved from our own rebellion and return to You.

8. What reasons does the person use to persuade God to do this?

In verse 15, the person praying reminds God of His zeal, might, tenderness, and compassion. God has the power to save His people and His love for them should motivate Him to save them. This prayer supposes God will be as good to Israel today as He was in the past. Thus, the nation of Israel is counting on God’s consistent kindness.

Verse 16 twice appeals to God as “our Father.” This is one of only two verses in the whole Old Testament that directly addresses God as Father (the other is Isaiah 64:7; Goldingay, p. 359; Watts, pp. 902–903). The appeal bypasses Abraham and Israel—not relying on the promises that God made to Abraham and the people of Israel (Young, p. 488). Instead of claiming to be descendants of God’s chosen people, this prayer claims a direct relationship to God as their Father (Alexander, p. 425). Since God is “our Father,” the people expect God to care for His children and help them in their difficulties (Goldingay, p. 359). Israel turns back to and prays to God because they have known God’s consistency as a loving and powerful Father.

Finally, in verse 19, the person says, “we are yours from of old.” This could be saying that they are descendents of Abraham and are therefore God’s chosen people. In that case, God might be expected to act on their behalf because He had chosen them to be His people (Young, p. 490). Or it might serve to remind God of what He has done for them in the

past. Since God has previously acted on their behalf, God could be expected to do it again. The people expect God to be consistently faithful and not fickle in the relationship.

9. The key reason the prayer gives is “you are our Father” (v. 16). What characteristics does this prayer attribute to God as Father? How would these characteristics lead God as Father to respond to this prayer?

Verses 7–9 describe God’s love and care for His people. Each verse points to His expressing concern in some benevolent action. God is not someone who merely talks or exhibits wishful thinking. His actions are consistent with His words and reveal His loving heart.

- Verse 7 remembers the compassion and kindness of God and “the many good things he has done.”
- Verse 8 states God is “their Savior.”
- Verse 9 says that God was distressed about the difficulties suffered by His people. As a result of this concern, God saved them from their troubles.

Verse 10 reflects God’s fatherly discipline. When His people disobeyed and turned away, God did not let them get away with it. He did not accept their rebellion, but fought against them, punishing them in order to turn them back from their evil ways. God’s love does not mean that He lets His people do whatever they want. Showing His Father’s heart, God wants His people to choose good things and reject the bad so that life may go well for them. His discipline is not only consistent, but also consistently good. Someone who disciplines any other way may lose the respect of others and destroy trust since the person being disciplined would not know whether to expect any consequences, some punitive action, or very harsh treatment.

Verses 11–14 show God’s fatherly leadership.

- He brought His people through the sea (v. 11).
- He used His power to help them (v. 12).
- He led them (v. 13).
- He guided them to a place of rest (v. 14). God did not just let His people wander, but He brought them out of where they were suffering and led them to a place where things could go well for them (Oswalt, p. 601).

Verse 15 attributes zeal, might, tenderness, and compassion to God. Tenderness and compassion describe the love that motivates God as Father to take care of His people. Zeal and might indicate God’s fatherly strength and power to accomplish what He decides to do (Watts, p. 902).

Verse 16 contrasts the close relationship between God as Father and His people with more distant relationships with Abraham and Israel (Alexander, p. 425; Goldingay, p. 359; Oswalt, p. 611). Abraham is ancestor of the Jewish people, so he might represent other family members. While others in our family might not recognize us, God our Father always knows us. Israel is the name of the country that was the Jewish homeland. As such, it might represent the government or cultural institutions. Even if our nation or the society in which we lives refuses to acknowledge or accept us, God will always stand by us (Oswalt, p. 612; Watts, p. 903).

Finally, God as Father shares His name with His people (v. 19). Those who belong to God are called by His name, so what happens to them reflects on God's reputation (Oswalt, p. 613). As a result, God will act on behalf of His people "to gain for himself everlasting renown" (v.12) and "to make for [Him]self a glorious name" (v. 14). Just as a father cannot deny a connection to the children who share his name, Father God binds Himself to His people by identifying them by His own name (Goldingay, p. 359).

APPLICATION

Select one of the following application questions to finish your discussion time.

- **What have you learned from this passage about God as your Father? What have you learned about God's consistent goodness towards His children?**
- **How consistent were the people who raised you? How might that impact your view of God as your parent now?**
- **Do you feel that God relates to you like a consistent Father? Why or why not? Who would like us to pray that you could see the consistent goodness of God our Father more clearly?**
- **What "kindnesses of the LORD, the deeds for which He is to be praised" can you share with others this week so that they may come to know and trust Him, too (v. 7)?**

WRAPPING IT UP

This prayer describes the all-embracing relationship between God the Father and the people who are His children. When the people were in distress, God rescued them. When they rebelled against Him, He did not abandon them, but He did oppose them. Yet His purpose was loving: He hoped they would humble themselves and turn back to Him. As Father, God has forged an unbreakable link with His children. He has given them His name, so whatever happens to them reflects on Him. Therefore, as God's children, we can be confident that no matter what our situation is, we can always ask God our Father to "look," "see," and "return" to save us from our distress and rebellion and to carry us to a place of rest. Our faith is built on God's consistent character—His consistently good, loving, wise, and powerful nature. This week, we may walk with God and have things go well. Perhaps some things will not go as we expect. However, if we turn away from God, let's remember that God has not changed toward us. We are the ones who have gone from walking along side Him to fighting against Him. So, instead of blaming God for not following us and doing what we want, let's take responsibility for our actions, turn around in repentance, and walk humbly with Him again.

ADDITIONAL LEADER'S NOTES:

Here is additional but optional information on this passage. This prayer does not tie in closely with any particular historical event (Alexander, p. 421). The references to the situation that led to the prayer are rather general. The people praying have wandered from God (v. 17). Their hearts are hardened and they do not revere God (v. 17). In the past, they were connected to God's holy place, but now their enemies have taken control (v. 18). They wonder why God is helping other people—people who have never known God or obeyed Him—instead of them (v. 19).

The reference in verse 18 to enemies trampling down God's sanctuary suggests the Babylonian exile when the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed and most of the Jews were taken away to Babylon (2 Kings 25:8–11, 2 Chronicles 36:17–20, Oswalt p. 616). However, long before the temple was destroyed, there were various incidents when the temple was desecrated, either by foreign armies (1 Kings 14:25–26; 2 Chronicles 12:9, 2; Kings 14:13–14; 2 Chronicles 25:23–24) or by the kings of Judah (2 Kings 16:7–16; 2 Chronicles 28:19–24; 2 Chronicles 33:1–7). Even today, the temple of God has not been rebuilt in Jerusalem and this prayer could also refer to that.

Note that the historical references in this prayer to the “days of Moses” (v. 11) refer back to earlier times—not the situation of the person praying. The prayer remembers these past events because of what is happening in the present.

The lack of any specific historical reference in this prayer invites us to make this prayer our own. When we feel that we have wandered away from God, we could pray this prayer. When we feel that things are going badly for us, this prayer might express our feelings. When it seems that God is unfairly rewarding people who have not known Him instead of taking care of us, we could utilize this prayer to gain a Biblical perspective again.

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THE FATHERHOOD OF GOD

Study 4

OUR COMMITTED FATHER

Hosea 11:1—11

By Mary Youtz

If we don't understand the reason for the difficulties in our lives, we will always come to the wrong conclusion. It causes us to determine that God is not meeting our needs after all. We falsely assume God is not a just God. Such confusion is fertile soil for a rebellious spirit. We turn away from God & His blessings. When we do, Satan has us exactly where he wants us.

Kenn Gividen

The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. 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 103:8—14

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AIM

- To grasp how committed God our Father is to love us, and to encourage us to keep turning back to Him when we sin.

KEY VERSE

“I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them.”

Hosea 11:4

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Before you lead this study, please review the following sections in the *Introduction to the Fatherhood of God Series*:

- *Preparation for Leading Inductive Bible Studies*—helpful hints on how to prepare for and lead this group of studies.
- *People First Language*—guidelines about using sensitive and considerate language when referring to people who are physically, mentally, or emotionally impaired.

OPENER

Briefly describe a situation when a child, an employee, or another person you were trying to help rejected or rebelled against you. How did you react? How did you feel when you had to confront or discipline the person?

Keep the sharing brief and then use the paragraph below to transition to the study in Hosea.

The Bible tells us that we are no different than others who callously or ungratefully reject our love and help. All of us turn away from God when we try to be in control or go our own way. Our self-directed living offends the King of Kings who alone has the right to rule over us since He has made us, provides for us, and preserves us. More than that, God loves us as a good parent; He is always near, always listening, always ready to respond. Despite all the expressions of His love and care, we continue to live as if we were entitled to call all the shots in life. Our pushing Him aside or outright rejection of His rule over us is sinful.

People in the past were no different than we are today. God initiated a loving, caring relationship with the people He called “Israel,” asking that they remain true to Him and His ways. However, they often sought out the idols of other nations as ways to gain protection and provision. They ignored God’s holy commands and put their own selfish needs above those of anyone else. This injured their relationship with the Lord, Who had never let them down. He sent His prophets to warn them to turn back, obey, and trust in Him alone. Sometimes they listened, but they often strayed again. In the book of Hosea, God sends a message to His people to say that they have ignored His warnings for so long that now they cannot escape judgment for their sin. Yet He will not utterly reject or destroy them due to His compassionate Fatherly love.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This is background material for leaders. You may decide what to share with your group.

Historical Overview

Hosea's prophecy covered the last 30 years of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. (Israel divided into 10 northern tribes and 2 southern ones after the death of King Solomon.) After enjoying a period of prosperity, Israel began to decline when King Jeroboam II died (753 B.C.). Israel not only mixed worship of idols with worship of Yahweh, but also tolerated corrupt legal and political practices (Hosea 4, 5).

During the reign of Tiglath-pileser III of Assyria (745–727 B.C.), his armies threatened Israel and her neighbor to the north, Syria. Assyria demanded tribute money, so King Pekah of Israel (740–732 B.C.) formed an alliance with Syria and rebelled (Isaiah 7). Nevertheless, Syria's capital, Damascus, fell to the enemy in 732 B.C. Assyria also invaded Israel, annexed her Galilean territory, and took many captive (Hosea 7:8–9). Later, King Hoshea of Israel (732–723/2) turned to Egypt (2 Kings 17:4) in an attempt to throw off Assyrian domination (Hosea 9:3; 11:5; 12:1). The attempt failed, Hoshea was captured, and his capital of Samaria fell in 722 after a siege of three years.

Israel did not wholly repent, despite the worsening political situation and prophetic warnings (Baldwin).

Overview—Hosea 10

The name of Hosea means “salvation” in Hebrew (Boice, p. 77). Hosea's life displays the long-suffering love of God for His unfaithful people. In chapter 1, the Lord commands Hosea to marry a woman who may have already been a prostitute and who will not remain true to their wedding vows (1:2). She gives birth to three children, each of whom bear names related to God's pending judgment (1:3–9). She apparently leaves Hosea and turns or returns to prostitution. In chapter 3, the Lord commands Hosea to show love to his wife who is being sold as a slave. Hosea obeys, buys her freedom, and tells her that she must be faithful to him (3:1–3). These personal details parallel God's faithful love for His people, who break their covenant vows by trusting in other gods.

James Boice has suggested the following outline of chapter 11: (pp. 73–76):

1. Verses 1–4 deal with Israel's past.
2. Verses 5–7 show Israel's present situation.
3. Verses 8–9 show the conflict in God's heart over judging Israel.
4. Verses 10–11 explain the extent of God's judgment and promise of future blessing.

Note: Some commentaries and Bible translations do not include verse 12 with the rest of chapter 11. Instead it is included with chapter 12. The study follows this division.

STUDY THE PASSAGE: HOSEA 11:1–11

Pray that the group will more fully grasp the immense love of God the Father. And pray that in seeing God's constant love, those who have turned away from Him will repent and desire to follow Him more closely as obedient children.

1. How do verses 1–4 describe the relationship between God and His children? How has God helped them?

God calls Israel His son, so the relationship is one of a parent-child. In Exodus 4:22, God calls Israel His firstborn son. However, the idea of God as Father was infrequently used by

the Jewish people of this time, and individual Jews never thought of God as a parent. But when Jesus came, He spoke of God as His Father quite frequently and taught His disciples to call on God as Father, too (Boice, pp. 74–45).

In Hosea 11, God represents His actions towards the Israelites as a parent tenderly caring for His children.

- Verse 1—God loved Israel and called Israel as a son.
- Verse 3—God taught them to walk, taking them by the arms. He also says He healed them.
- Verse 4—God led them with kindness and love. He removed the yoke from them [as most translations say] or carried them [TNIV], and bent down to feed them. *Be sure your group recognizes what a tender word picture God uses here to talk about His interaction with His people.*

The “yoke” refers to a piece of wood that required two animals to walk together with a plow behind it. Other passages that refer to God removing yokes are Isaiah 10:27 and Galatians 5:1. The idea here is the easing of heavy burdens and freeing from harsh conditions.

Who initiated the relationship? Why is this important?

God initiated it. Like a Father, He chose and adopted Israel as His special people (v. 1). Deuteronomy 7:7–8 explains this idea. God set His love on Israel and maintained that love not because they were worthy or better than anyone else, but simply to demonstrate His faithful love for them. In doing so, He loves as a father loves his child, even when that child rebels. Israel’s rejection hurt God deeply. Parents who have suffered through rebellious times with their children can identify with that pain.

The reference to Egypt in verse 1 initially refers to the Exodus under Moses. The later reference in verse 5 probably represents Israel’s pending slavery under another foreign nation, Assyria (Kirkpatrick).

2. How has Israel responded to God’s parental love (vv. 2, 5–7)? What is the present situation between them and God?

Israel has turned away from God, like an errant child who rejects the teachings of his father. Throughout chapters 4 through 10, and again in 11:12 and chapters 12 and 13, we see some of the sins that have offended God: lack of knowledge of God and unfaithfulness to God. As a result, they also curse, lie, murder, steal, commit adultery, have sex with shrine prostitutes, worship idols, and rely on foreign powers for protection. They are arrogant and stubborn. And the problem is not only these current sins, but that the nation will not repent of them (Boice, p. 75). If you are a parent, try to imagine your own children shamelessly participating in such activities and shunning your efforts to love and guide them.

Other sections of Hosea show how Israel’s refusal to repent and ignorance of God’s ways damaged their relationship with Him at the time. Joyce Baldwin makes the following points:

- In Hosea 6, we read they performed public rituals, but their worship did not result in good fruit or transformed lives. [We also read of murder, theft, and political instability in chapters 6 and 7.]
 - If the people of Israel had really known God, they would have seen their tremendous need for forgiveness and a new appreciation for the Lord's longsuffering love.
 - "Israel did not in fact know the Lord, though they claimed to know Him (Hosea 8:2). For this reason, they misunderstood His dealings with them."
- **When have you, like Israel, turned away from God despite His loving care? Why?**

3. What will Israel's immediate future be like (vv. 5—6)?

Verses 5 and 6 show the immediate future of Israel; the country will be attacked by Assyria and be enslaved again if it does not repent. Assyria will take some into exile. Some will flee the conflict by going to Egypt, the very place from which God delivered them once before. In both cases, the people will end up oppressed under the foreigners they have relied on instead of experiencing freedom by trusting in God alone (Boice, p. 75).

4. How does God react as He contemplates judging Israel's sin (vv. 8—9)?

Verses 8 and 9 show God's emotional reaction to having to deal with Israel's sins. God reveals the conflict He feels between needing to judge Israel for their sin and wanting to show them His mercy (Garrett, p. 229). Like a good father, God must discipline His unruly, rebellious children and not bless them, as He would like to do. No good parent enjoys disciplining their children, but knows they must do so to help stop the child's willful ways. Since we do not have to offer blood sacrifices for our sin, we may fail to understand how much God hates sin and the fact that He cannot ignore it. But, because of His righteous wrath towards sin and those who commit it, God ultimately sent His Son to be a sin sacrifice. Jesus took all God's wrath on Himself when He was brutally punished and painfully died. Thus, God judged the sin and paid the penalty at the same time (Romans 3:26; Boice, p. 76).

No one is capable of such great love, not even the best earthly parent. Allow your group to consider the profound mystery of God's Fatherly love that maintains His holy standard—and therefore is a pure love—while at the same time is an extravagant, merciful love that removes our sin barrier at His own expense so we can have relationship with Him again.

The references to Zebayim and Admah refer to Genesis 14:2. These are other cities of the plains that were destroyed with Sodom and Gomorrah. Verse 9 suggests that God will not show the full power of His fury over sin again, as He did at Sodom and Gomorrah. "Giving them up" and "handing them over" refer to totally destroying something (Boice, p. 76).

5. What does God promise for the future (vv. 9–11)?

In verse 9, God says He will not carry out His fierce anger. In verses 10 and 11, He promises a restoration or re-gathering of Israel. Because He has set His love on Israel, God will not let go of this people. After a time of exile, in which He hopes they will repent, God will call His scattered children back to Himself. While Hosea does not foretell how God will remove sin from His people, we know that this is why God sent His Son to die on a cross (Boice, pp. 76–77).

APPLICATION

Select one of the following application questions to finish your discussion time.

- **How does sin enslave us? Why is being a slave to righteousness and obeying God our Father different than slavery to sin or someone else?**

Other Bible passages that show the effects of sin include Proverbs 5:22 and Ezekiel 33:10. Sin is compared to a trap or a cord. In Ezekiel, sin is described as weighing a person down. Other ideas are that sin is repeated, and that giving in to sin becomes a habit. We feed the part of our soul that is in rebellion to God and that desires self-gratification. Another effect of sin is that it removes us from God's power to help us until we repent. Finally, sin is spoken of in the Bible as something that blinds us. We are unable to see the enormity of our sin and its impact on others and God.

Unlike our slavery to sin and other addictions, our "slavery" or service to God will never destroy our souls. God is the perfect Father Who never stops loving us, and choosing to obey Him will always work for our own—and others'—ultimate good. Like an obedient child who acknowledges a father's advanced wisdom and authority, we glorify and honor God as our Father and Creator when we choose to repent, submit to and obey Him. We also open ourselves up to His protection and blessings.

- **List other things/people that we can trust for our provision, deliverance, and for meaning in life. Why won't these things totally solve the problems we have?**

If there is someone in the group that has overcome an addiction or habit, the leader may choose to have this person briefly share a testimony, including how God provided a way of escape in the situation.

We can turn to money, status, our own strength, pleasure and other people instead of trusting God as our Father. Each of these things is limited because it cannot fully protect/provide for us as God can. He is the only One Who never leaves or fails us. Also, by using external sources, we are not forced to examine our beliefs or our motives. God, the perfect Father, works from within to bring about His solution. This can include dealing with past hurts, revealing lies we believe, and providing us with His strength to resist temptation.

- **How can people in rebellion against Father God come back into a relationship with Him?**

Understanding the fatherly nature of God, as revealed in this passage, may motivate us to turn and receive His forgiveness. Seeing the constant love God has for us, even during our rebellion, can help us repent and submit to His will. However, we must make this choice for ourselves since God respects our free will.

God's divine and fatherly love can powerfully draw and change the human soul. G. Campbell Morgan writes, "For his redemption of the human soul is not a pity that agrees to ignore sin; but a power that cancels it and sets it free from its dominion. Through him the loved one is regained, restored, renewed..." (qtd. in Boice, p. 77).

WRAPPING IT UP

This week, let's thank God for His divine, longsuffering love that will not give up on us. We can show gratitude that God not only wants to be our Father but pursues relationship with us when we rebel. Even when He must judge sin, God does so to remove the sin barrier so He can draw us back to Himself. He provides total forgiveness through the Cross of Jesus so He can restore us to Himself. Through faith in Jesus' sin sacrifice for us, we can truly enjoy God's mercy and blessings that reveal He is the Father Who never gives up on us, even when we are at our worst.

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THE FATHERHOOD OF GOD

Study 5

OUR ADOPTIVE FATHER

Galatians 3:26—4:7

By Anna M. Weaver

God sent his Son... that we might receive adoption to sonship.

Galatians 4:4—5

The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father."

Romans 8:15

If you are someone who has been born again, then you are a member of that eternal family. God is your Father. Jesus Christ is the brother who introduced you to the Father. The Holy Spirit is the one who enables you to relate to the Father as a son or daughter. This is the greatest privilege in the universe—to receive the blessing of adoption that the Father has lavished upon us.

Mark Stibbe

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AIM OF STUDY

- To understand that the gospel is more than salvation from eternal judgment; through faith in His Son Jesus, God generously offers us the privilege of being adopted into His family and experiencing His eternal love.

KEY VERSES

So also, when we were underage, we were in slavery under the elemental spiritual forces of the world. But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father."

Galatians 4:3–6

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Before you lead this study, please review the following sections in the *Introduction to the Fatherhood of God Series*:

- *Preparation for Leading Inductive Bible Studies*—helpful hints on how to prepare for and lead this group of studies.
- *People First Language*—guidelines about using sensitive and considerate language when referring to people who are physically, mentally, or emotionally impaired.

OPENER

Mark Stibbe, an influential pastor, speaker, and author in Great Britain, shares the following story in his book *From Orphans to Heirs*:

After the difficult birth of their son, Giles, Philip and Joy Stibbe learned they should not try to conceive more children of their own. Several years passed and the Stibbes decided to adopt. At an orphanage in Hackney [North London], England, they heard about infant twins. Originally the Stibbes intended to adopt only one child, but when they saw the twins, they felt they could not separate this brother and sister. So Philip and Joy chose to call both Mark and Claire their own (p. 47). Philip Stibbe was a wonderful Christian father (p. 58) who delighted in all three of his children. He repeatedly said that he had great joy in adopting the twins, never indicating regret even when they were not behaving as model children (p. 53). And Philip assured his adopted children that they would receive an equal inheritance with his natural born son, Giles (p. 159).

When Mark Stibbe reflects on Philip and Joy's decision to adopt, he believes they may have spared his sister and him many hardships: life in an orphanage; possible separation from each other; loneliness and grief; and perhaps a life of crime (p. 53). In addition, their choosing Mark helped provide the foundation for him to later pastor a vibrant church, write books, travel and lecture, and help others discover the joy of *spiritual adoption* as God's beloved children.

In this study, we will examine the great truth that God has done more than save sinners—He has chosen to include us in His family. All who trust in Jesus Christ for salvation are joined to Him and have intimate union with Him. Because of this, we too can call God our Abba, or Papa. Jesus, our perfect Elder Brother, makes it possible for us to enjoy the loving intimacy that He

has with God the Father. Let's examine the Scriptural base for this claim so we can learn to celebrate our status and inheritance as God's sons and daughters.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This is background material for leaders. You may decide what to share with your group.

There is little dispute that Paul authored the book of Galatians; however, there is a dispute over when he wrote it. Traditional scholarship suggests Galatians was written in A.D. 52 or later, before Paul's third missionary journey. More recent scholarship favors an earlier authorship — around A.D. 48 or 49. This earlier date falls shortly before the meeting of the Jerusalem council. There is significant evidence for the earlier date, including the following:

- Barnabas, Paul's traveling companion on his first missionary journey, is mentioned in Galatians 2:13 without introduction. This implies the Galatians knew him. If the churches were planted during Paul's second missionary journey, when Silas was Paul's traveling companion, the churches would not have known Barnabas.
- There is no reference to the Jerusalem Council in Galatians. This council, recorded in Acts 15, addressed the issue of whether or not Gentile converts are required to obey Jewish Law. This is the exact topic of the book of Galatians. The council determined that Gentile converts are not required to follow Jewish law. The fact that Paul makes no reference in Galatians to the decision made at this meeting implies Galatians predates the Jerusalem Council.

These points, and others, support the theory that Galatians was written sometime before the Jerusalem Council—during Paul's first missionary journey. This theory places Galatians' authorship between Acts 15:2 and 15:3 (Cook, *Introduction to Galatians*, pp. 1–5; Douglas, p. 401).

Galatians examines the relationship between God's law and God's grace in the context of a Jewish/Gentile conflict. In the infancy of the Christian church, Jewish Christians were slow to accept Gentile converts into the church even though the gospel had obviously spread to the Gentiles. God had granted Gentile believers the Holy Spirit upon conversion, and confirmed their conversions with signs and wonders. Through Paul and Barnabas, the number of Gentile believers was growing. Still, the Jewish Christians were suspicious of Gentile converts. Jewish Christians were disgusted by the lifestyles of the Gentiles. The Gentiles had pagan spiritual backgrounds and inferior moral lifestyles, in comparison to the Jews. Jews worried that the Gentiles' debased morality would ruin the church, so they taught Gentile converts to follow Jewish law. In Galatians Paul tackles this controversial issue by writing a theological treaty on law and grace (Cook, *Introduction to Galatians*, pp. 1–5).

In the chapters of Galatians preceding Galatians 3:26–4:7, Paul teaches that:

- Salvation is by faith alone and not by works of the law. Galatians 3:6 says, "Consider Abraham: 'He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.'"
- The law cannot save any soul. Galatians 3:10 says, "All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.'"
- The purpose of the law was to expose transgression and hold mankind accountable for their sins. Galatians 3:19 explains, "What then was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come."

Galatians 3:26—4:7, introduces the topic of spiritual adoption:

- All are saved by faith alone.
- Upon salvation, the saved are adopted into God's family.
- All converts, regardless of backgrounds, are equally adopted into God's family, and share equally in the blessings and love of God. We are all children of God who cry out "Abba, Father."

Romans 8:12—17, the parallel passage on adoption, teaches that our adoption as sons and daughters of God gives us a new identity that is marked by and made possible by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The presence of God's Spirit in us is the key to walking in righteousness. Through the leading of the Holy Spirit we have the power to choose not to sin. Romans 8:12—13 says it this way: "Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation—but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live."

STUDY THE PASSAGE: GALATIANS 3:26—4:7

Pray that group members recognize they are chosen by and belong to God. Pray that they hear and follow the voice of His Holy Spirit. Pray that group members understand that God is a loving intimate Father. Pray for God to heal painful memories from bad family relationships or earthly adoption experiences. Pray that group members experience freedom from unbelief, lies, and sin that hinder a close relationship with God.

1. In the context of Galatians chapters 1—3, Paul addresses the issue of settling disputes between Jewish and pagan converts. The Jews still were looking down on the Gentile converts for their perceived immorality and former pagan religious practices. In Galatians 3:26, what new identity does Paul say Jews and Gentiles share?

Paul says whoever has put faith in Christ Jesus are "children of God."

2. In Galatians 3:26—29, how does Paul describe someone who is a child of God?

The key points are:

- We are "in Jesus Christ," through faith (Galatians 3:26). This means that we trust Jesus as the full payment for our sin, and as the One who opens the way to have relationship with God the Father. By putting our faith in Jesus, we are joined to Him, and His Spirit comes to reside in us. Paul makes clear the importance of faith in Jesus when he writes, "we...know that a person is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ" (Galatians 2:15—16a).

It is also imperative to understand that human beings cannot claim God as their Father unless they are "in Jesus Christ." God is the Creator of all living things and the Sovereign ruler of the universe He has made. But the Bible does not teach

that He is Father to all people. Thus, knowing Him as Father comes only when we repent of our sin, yield our lives to Him, trust in Jesus, and receive adoption (Stott, p. 99).

- We are “baptized into Christ” (Galatians 3:27). Being baptized symbolizes that we are dying to our selfish, sinful life and rising to live a new, Christ-centered one. Going under the baptismal water and coming back up is a picture of being buried and raised with Jesus. As we are immersed in water, it is also a picture of our sins being washed away (Grudem, pp. 968–969).

John Cook explains it this way (“Galatians 3,” p. 5):

There is a mystical, spiritual union between Christ and those who put their faith in Him. Verse 27 does not suggest that baptism is a second means of salvation, rather is a picture of ... the incorporation of the believer into Christ.

- We are clothed in Christ (Galatians 3:27). John Cook writes, “In Paul’s mind, ‘you are what you wear’” (“Galatians 3,” p. 5). So as we identify with Jesus, we take on more and more of His character.
- We “belong to Christ” (Galatians 3:29).
- We are Abraham’s seed (Galatians 3:29).
- We are heirs of the promise made to Abraham (Galatians 3:29).

This is a good time to ask your group if there are any who are unsure about their salvation. Ask if anyone is confused about why Christ died on the cross for our sins and how this truth applies to each of us personally. If any express uncertainty, offer to pray and discuss their salvation with them after the study.

How would this new identity help resolve the differences they used to have?

It provides a foundation for unity that was not previously available. Galatians 3:26–29 summarizes key points related to the unity that should resolve divisions:

- Jesus Christ is the basis of our unity.
- Through Christ, we are all heirs—as Abraham’s seed.

Keep in mind the significance of verse 29, where Paul says all believers are “Abraham’s seed.” The Jewish people took great pride in their heritage as the chosen people of God. It is radical for Paul to teach that Gentiles can lay claim to being the descendants of Abraham. Paul is referring to a spiritual lineage, not a birth or physical lineage. Compare this passage to Galatians 3:7–9 where Paul explains that the Gentiles are descendants of Abraham on the basis of faith—not heritage.

3. Our salvation by faith seems to be a simple concept. However, Paul writes extensively on this topic in the beginning chapters of Galatians. He also mentions it five times in this passage. Why would it not seem simple to Christians in the first century?

Salvation by faith in the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ was a formerly hidden truth occasionally referred to by Paul as the “mystery” in his epistles (see Romans 16:25, 26). The mystery is resolved by revelation of the Gospel: the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The fact that God’s chosen people did not have to be ethnic Jews was a new concept also referred to by Paul as part of the “mystery” (see Ephesians 3:6). When Galatians was written, Christians were still discovering the full implications of the revealed mystery.

Jesus refers to this new truth in the parable of the wine skins. The church would be like new wine, which could be held only in a new wine skin (see Mark 2:22). Likewise, Christ’s first coming, death, and resurrection replaced the law—for those who are “in Christ”—with the better law of grace (see Romans 3:19–23 and 6:14). In Jesus, the final blood sacrifice had come (Hebrews 10:12), making the Law obsolete. The permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit facilitated personal communion with God for those who are in Christ. Believers of Old Testament times were not able to experience this level of communion with God. All these and many other changes in theology had to be worked out and clearly communicated by the apostles and leaders of the early church. What seems simple and clear to us was revolutionary to those in the first century (Hayford, p. 710).

4. According to verses 28 and 29, how would you describe the family God is building?

One way of summarizing possible answers is to say that the family is not based on race, religion, position, or gender—it is based on all types of people becoming one in Jesus Christ. We see this truth again in Revelation 5:9–10. When we become one in Christ, we are all brothers and sisters of Jesus, and children of God. In verse 29, Paul calls us all “heirs” of the promise God made to Abraham.

5. According to Galatians 4:1–7, by what method is God building His family? What key points about God’s method do you see in the passage?

The method God is using to build His family is adoption. It’s the only method that could work, because we are unacceptable to God due to the sin that is in the world and in each of us.

Key points related to God’s chosen method include:

- Slaves are not heirs (Galatians 4:1).
- From the time we are born into the world, we are slaves “under the elemental spiritual forces of the world” (Galatians 4:3). This phrase is ambiguous, but may refer to both the demonic powers behind the world’s ways that influenced the Gentiles and also the Mosaic Law, which heavily influenced the Jews (Cook, “Galatians 4,” pp. 2–3).
- We cannot make ourselves God’s children, so God had to choose to act in our behalf. He acted by sending His Son to redeem us, to buy us out of slavery and to pay our adoption fee (Galatians 4:4–5a). In Paul’s day, a slave could be purchased and then adopted which set the person free from slavery and gave him the right to inherit the adoptive father’s wealth (Cook, “Galatians 4,” p. 3).

- Christ’s redeeming work provides us with the possibility of receiving the adoption of sonship (Galatians 4:5b).
- When we are in Christ (when we trust in God’s redeeming work through Christ), we become God’s children and God puts the Spirit of His Son into our hearts. His Spirit enables us to have communion with God as our Father (Galatians 4:6).
- As sons (and daughters), we are God’s children and heirs of His Kingdom (Galatians 4:7).

6. Galatians 4:1–5 explains the difference between law and grace by comparing children who are heirs with people who are slaves. God sent His Son to redeem us (those in slavery) because we were under the law. How is the law insufficient to save human beings?

Since all of us have sinned and fallen short of God’s holiness, no one can achieve right standing with God. Nor can we claim that we belong to God as beloved children when we have rebelled and gone our own way. We cannot hope to approach God based on our character or our actions, no matter how many laws or ethical principles we try to follow. For Scripture examples to support the discussion, see Romans 3:20–26 and Hebrews 10:1–18.

Galatians 4:1–5 deals with the change from law to grace. Paul uses a metaphor of a child—whether an heir by birth (Jewish heritage) or a slave (Gentile heritage). Both are under tutors (the laws they observe) until the time comes to receive full rights as sons (redemption made available through Christ).

- **How does it make you feel to know that there is nothing in yourself that you can do to make yourself acceptable to God?**

7. What are the benefits of being adopted into God’s family? What do His heirs receive (vv. 6–7)?

Paul tells us that God sent His Spirit to live in us because we are His children. The Holy Spirit is called the Spirit of His Son—that is, the Spirit of Jesus, God’s perfect Son. We learn from Paul that the Holy Spirit helps believers call out to God the Father in an intimate way: “Abba, Father.” *Abba* is the Aramaic word a child used for his daddy (Morris, *Galatians*, p. 131), and is the expression that Jesus used when He prayed in Gethsemane (Morris, *Romans*, p. 316).

Paul also argues that we are no longer slaves but God’s children who are heirs of the promises. The outpouring of the Spirit is one of those promises we now enjoy.

Optional: Since Paul does not exhaustively describe what our inheritance includes, we have to look at other Scriptures to get the bigger picture. You do not have to cover all this material with your group, but you can summarize this information if someone asks for more clarity.

Nixon points out that the reference to heirs indicates that because God has adopted us, we share in His Son and Heir's inheritance. Obviously God graciously gives us this inheritance since it is nothing we have earned or deserved. The Holy Spirit is a deposit guaranteeing all we will receive in the kingdom of God one day (Ephesians 1:18, p. 563). The New Testament includes the following as our inheritance (Nixon, p. 563):

- The kingdom of God (Matthew 25:34; Galatians 5:21, etc.);
- The earth (Matthew 5:5);
- Salvation (Hebrews 6:12);
- A blessing (1 Peter 3:9);
- Glory (Romans 8:17–18);
- Incorruption (1 Corinthians 15:50);
- God's people (Ephesians 1:14);
- God Himself, since just as He was the Levites or priests' inheritance (Deuteronomy 28:3–5), so we who are now a kingdom of priests (1 Peter 2:9), have Him as our inheritance.

Morris also points out that because God never dies, being His heir has a slightly different meaning than being an heir of a mortal father. It primarily points to relationship with the Father rather than possession of His estate. It indicates the privilege of being in His family (Morris, Romans, p. 317), and co-reigning with Jesus in the Age to Come.

8. Looking at Galatians 4:6–7, summarize the kind of relationship God desires to have with His children.

He desires that we approach Him as children would their Father, in dependence and trust. We do not come to Him as slaves. We come to Him as those who are loved, fully accepted, and destined to share His Kingdom.

9. Read the parallel passage in Romans 8:12–17. What is the obligation Paul describes in verses 12–14?

Our obligation is to live by the Holy Spirit, not according to our sinful nature. We are to choose obedience to the Spirit who comes to live in us when we place our faith in Jesus. The indwelling Holy Spirit is a sign that we are now part of God's family. Since we no longer belong to the family of the fallen nature, Paul reminds us to live out our new identity as God's children and, therefore, as reflections of our adoptive Father.

- **Describe a recent victory over sin, which you achieved by walking in the power of the Holy Spirit. How do you feel as you reflect your Heavenly Father's character more?**

10. In Romans 8:15—17, what does Paul add to our understanding of being God's children?

Paul tells us that we don't have to live in fear of being enslaved. We are free in Christ from a life of rebellion and destruction, from the Law that led to our conviction, from sin, and from death. We are free to share in the blessings of being God's children and co-heirs with Christ provided we don't give up when we undergo suffering for Jesus' sake.

APPLICATION

Select one of the following application questions to finish your discussion time.

- **How does adoption by our heavenly Father compare to adoption by an earthly family? How can the fact of our adoption help us live out our new nature in Christ?**

In both situations, the parents choose the child they want to receive their love. However, in both cases, children may struggle to feel loved or doubt the parental commitment despite many words and demonstrations of love.

There can be both positives and negatives associated with earthly adoption since human parents are imperfect. Still, a child may prefer living with a flawed set of parents to being a foster child or an orphan. Human adoption is a process and involves consent of the birth parents. This can make finalizing the adoption difficult sometimes.

On the other hand, God is the Perfect Father. His adoption is immediate and everlasting, and He acts only out of loving motives towards His children. God's adoption is freely offered based on Jesus' life, death, and resurrection and not the worth of the child or the child's ability to earn it. When a child of God experiences the feeling of God's Fatherly love, it can be a life-transforming event, too.

- **How is our heavenly Father different from your earthly father? How easily do you relate to our Heavenly Father? What might we need to pray for you so that nothing hinders your sense of complete acceptance by God?**
- **As a group, how many blessings of being adopted into God's family can we list? How can we express our worship of Him this week?**

Be sure to take time to worship after you list these items.

- **For some, it is difficult to allow God to love us as a child. How can we become more available to receive His love? How can we live day-by-day more fully aware of His love?**
- **How could you draw on the common identity and supernatural power described in these verses in order to better relate to God's sons and daughters at home, at work, at church, and in service to the world?**

WRAPPING IT UP

Adoption into God's family is the immediate result of faith in Jesus Christ. Our everlasting relationship with God begins with our adoption. Adoption softens our prideful hearts, and comforts our weary souls. Without repentance and faith in Jesus, we are prideful, deceived into thinking we are self-sufficient. This can result in our turning away from God's leading, power, and forgiveness. Our weary souls try to be good people—trying to earn acceptance and love instead of receiving God's love and giving out of that love in response. Relationship with God must come first, followed by the good works of walking in the Spirit. God, in his Fatherly love, has relieved our spiritual burdens and answered our relational neediness by bringing us into His family. As we keep our focus on Him we will be blessed and be a blessing to others.

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THE FATHERHOOD OF GOD

Study 6

OUR FORGIVING FATHER

Luke 15:11—32

By Susan Pavilkey

One of the greatest challenges of the spiritual life is to receive God's forgiveness. There is something in us humans that keeps us clinging to our sins and prevents us from letting God erase our past and offer us a completely new beginning. ... Receiving forgiveness requires a total willingness to let God be God and do all the healing, restoring, and renewing. As long as I want to do even a part of that myself, I end up with partial solutions, such as becoming a hired servant.

Henri J. M. Nouwen

Although the parable is not an allegory (i.e., the father doesn't directly represent God...), the father's response to the son is a picture of the grace and graciousness of God. ... The father's compassion for his son and his joy over finding him alive overcome all the son's prior deficiencies. This is indeed a clear picture of the grace of God. "How much more" than this father's love and concern are the love and concern, and joy, of our heavenly Father when we return to Him?

John Cook

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AIM

To grasp the immense depth of the Father's unconditional love and forgiveness for His children.

KEY VERSE

So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

Luke 15:20

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Before you lead this study, please review the following sections in the *Introduction to the Fatherhood of God Series*:

Preparation for Leading Inductive Bible Studies—helpful hints on how to prepare for and lead this group of studies.

People First Language—guidelines about using sensitive and considerate language when referring to people who are physically, mentally, or emotionally impaired.

OPENER

One autumn afternoon, after a long period of turning my back on God, He used the story of a forgiving father to break my resistance to Him. Without purpose or forethought, I opened my dusty Bible and began reading the Parable of the Prodigal Son, always one of my favorites. When I read the verse about the father being overcome with compassion for his disgraced son, I instantly knew God was speaking to me, His wayward daughter. I began to weep uncontrollably. He was there, of course, just as He had been there throughout my life. He was there even months before in my hardened state when I literally shook my fist at Him, defiantly yelling, "Butt out of my life and leave me alone!" I had felt His Spirit wooing me in the past, but my disappointment and anger with God ran deep. However, like the father in the parable, God forgave me even after I'd insulted Him that day.

I was in counseling therapy at the time. Soon after my tirade at God, my therapist moved out of town. She referred me to another therapist—a man—whom she said I should get to know. As I began counseling with Gary, I realized he was like no other person I had ever met. And though he worked at a secular agency, he was not shy about keeping a Bible on his desk. Gary had been fired from other jobs for speaking out against his bosses practicing New-Age spirituality at the workplace. He was not afraid to look foolish for Christ, and even I thought he was a bit odd. But I liked him. I even admired him. What did he know about God that I did not? I wanted to get to know this God he knew. This prompted me to pick up my Bible that autumn day in 1991 and read the Luke 15 Parable of the Prodigal Son.

I shared with Gary later that week about my experience with the parable. When I said I had turned back to God, he responded, "Welcome to the club," and decided to close out my case file. He began regularly inviting me home for dinner with him and his wife, Deb. This couple soon adopted me into their family and became my spiritual parents. [Editor's note: We are not implying that every counselee who turns to Jesus should stop getting therapeutic help.]

I had never known Christians like these. They never spoke negatively of anyone and they never criticized me. Their home was filled with an overwhelming peace and acceptance I had never felt before. Their love challenged my long-held belief: I thought I had committed an unpardonable

sin by rejecting God and therefore could no longer be forgiven. As Gary and Deb mentored me over many years, bringing healing to my life, I was finally able to rest in my salvation and receive God's forgiveness.

Gary and Deb were my visible mentors, but I realized much later that they were merely instruments. Really, my heavenly Father loved me through them all along. He knew that I would not let Him love me directly, so He did it through this wonderful couple. You see, God loved me and longed to forgive me so much that even when I was at my worst, He devised a plan to win me back. Though my hateful rejection must have hurt God deeply, my redemption was already in His heart, even as I shook my fist in His face. This is grace. This is forgiveness. This is what my Father has done for me.

ALTERNATE OPENER

- **Have you ever done something that you thought God would not forgive? Or something that you think God cannot forgive now?**
- **Why did you think you could not be forgiven? Or why do think you cannot be forgiven now?**
- **Do you understand that if you have confessed and repented, God has forgiven you? Or that if you confess and repent now, God will forgive you?**

Allow for a few responses, making it clear that people do not need to share the specific act they thought was unforgivable.

All of us have done things we are ashamed of. But some of us really struggle to believe that we are indeed saved because of all the wrong things we have done in the past—or continue to battle daily. If we have been deep in sin or come from extremely shame-based backgrounds, God's total forgiveness can be particularly hard to accept. In reality, most of us have difficulty in truly receiving God's forgiveness. But the good news is: God not only can forgive—He longs to do so! No matter what we have done or how broken we may be, He welcomes us home whenever we return to Him, even a hundred times in one day! To return means to confess our wrongs and repent. Then the Father instantly and completely forgives!

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This is background material for leaders. You may decide what to share with your group.

Luke is the third of the four New Testament gospels. Since the late 18th century, Matthew, Mark, and Luke have been collectively called the Synoptic Gospels because they are very similar in their view of Jesus' ministry (Cook, "Introduction," p. 1). Luke likely began writing and researching his gospel around 56 A.D., while in Jerusalem, and later in Caesarea while awaiting Paul's release from a Roman prison (Cook, "Introduction," p. 13).

Despite many similarities, Luke's gospel differs from Matthew's and Mark's by mentioning prayer—particularly Jesus' prayers—more than they do (Cook, "Introduction," p. 17). Luke's gospel also differs by emphasizing God's blessing for women and the poor. Luke pays special attention to Jesus' disciples who are women and emphasizes that the good news is for society's outcasts (Cook, "Introduction," p. 18). Only Luke includes the parables of the Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan and several others (Cook, "Introduction," p. 20).

BACKGROUND TO THE PASSAGE

Luke 15 contains three parables: the Lost Coin, the Lost Sheep, and the Prodigal Son. Each emphasizes God's heart for the lost and His desire to include the lowly and outcast in His Kingdom (Evans, p. 231). Remember that a parable is a story with one main point; it is not an allegory in which every character represents someone else (Cook, "Luke 15," p. 5).

Jesus shares these parables after the Pharisees and teachers of the law mutter against Him for associating with tax collectors and sinners, whom the Pharisees loathed. Rather than endorsing their contempt for sinners, Jesus teaches we should rejoice whenever anyone who is "lost" becomes "found." Thus Jesus' parables show God's love and patience towards those He longs to restore to Himself.

The Lost Coin and the Lost Sheep parables include characters that the religious people of Jesus' day considered beneath them. They thought shepherds were religiously unclean and women were inferior (Cook, "Luke 15," pp. 4, 6). While the sheep and coins have to be searched for diligently, the lost son must repent and come back to his father (Evans, p. 231). The older son, too, must repent of his distancing himself from others and his hard heart. God and all of heaven rejoice whenever someone repents. God welcomes us back whether we are estranged through stubborn rebellion (like the younger son) or through proud self-righteousness (like the older son).

This is an excellent study for people who have emotional struggles concerning their human fathers. It also can help people who find it difficult to feel God's forgiveness and being welcomed into His Kingdom. In the beginning of the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32), Jesus vividly portrays the young man's rebellion, ingratitude, and degradation (Evans, p. 232; Wright, pp. 187–188). This negative beginning contrasts sharply with the father's positive response when the son returns. We likely expect, and even believe, that this son deserves a harsh reaction from his father. Instead, the father interrupts the son's confession. Filled with joy over his son's return, the father repeatedly kisses him and throws a grand party to celebrate.

STUDY THE PASSAGE: LUKE 15:11—32

Invite the Holy Spirit to come and teach you God's heart for forgiveness through this study. Pray that group members will recognize any areas where they struggle to feel forgiven by God, or any problems with their human fathers that may distort their attitude towards their Heavenly Father.

1. **Would someone volunteer to read Luke 15:11–32 aloud?**

What did the young man ask of his father? What was the father's reaction to his son's request and behavior (v. 12)?

Though this son's request may not seem so shocking today, Jesus' followers would have been horrified. The son's request for his share of his inheritance amounted to his cursing his father. It was as though the son wished his father were dead, especially since there is no indication that the father was near death (Cook, p. 9). In effect, the young man was telling his father, "I don't want to wait for you to die. I want my share of the estate now!"

The father, likely broken-hearted, bore the shame and stinging selfishness of his son without retaliation. The father gave him his share of the inheritance, allowed him to sell it off, and leave home (Wright, p. 187). Though the Pharisees would have felt comfortable

with this father, a wealthy, upstanding member of the community, they would have been alarmed by his gracious behavior toward his younger son. They would have expected the father to beat the son, or throw him out of the family (Cook, "Luke 15," p. 8). In Western culture, children customarily leave home to pursue their fortunes or to attend college. However, in Jesus' culture, the son's request and behavior were shameful; he was in effect abandoning his responsibility to take care of his father in his old age. The prodigal's "no" to his father's love echoes Adam's original rebellion and rejection of the Creator in whose love we are sustained (Nouwen, p. 43). Thus, in this parable, the father shows a depth of grace and forgiveness for his son even before he leaves home. Jesus illustrates the surprising role of grace in securing the return of the lost, and the astounding humiliation Jesus underwent in His crucifixion to accomplish their return.

2. What did the son do with his share of the inheritance once he received it (v. 13a)?

The Greek verbs in verse 13 say the son gathered all his things, went on a journey and wasted or squandered what he had. Although there is no reference to him selling his things or taking money on the journey, possibly he converted his inheritance into cash to make it easier to carry with him, especially if it was land (Ebert; Wright, p. 187). Deuteronomy 21:17 stipulates that the eldest son would inherit a double portion of the father's estate and the younger son would get one-third. However, the income from the property would still go to the father as long as he was living (Evans, p. 236). In asking for and taking his inheritance before his father died, the son showed no concern whatsoever for the well being of his father or family. This would have been another insult to his father. Respectable, first-century Jews would have considered this young man disloyal, selfish, and outrageous (Evans, p. 232). But this father lived by grace, rather than by law like the Pharisees.

The father's willingness to allow his younger son to go without accusing him shows God's respect for our free will to choose or reject Him. Even when we insist on making severe mistakes, God does not force us to do His will. He allows us to suffer the consequences of our actions. Even so, He is always ready to receive us back when we repent.

3. How does Jesus portray the degradation this young man suffered because of his rebellion (vv. 13b–16)?

Once he lost all his money on immoral living, the young man was starving because of a famine. So he hired himself out to a Gentile, who assigned him the job of feeding pigs. This would have been offensive to Jesus' audience on several levels. For one, this Gentile gave this young man a job no one else wanted. In the ancient world, this task conveyed the Gentile's desire to insult, humiliate or be rid of him. And for a Jew to feed pigs—there was no lower place to which the young man could sink, as far as the Pharisees were concerned. Jewish law considered pigs unclean, which means they were forbidden food and detestable. For this young man to be hungry enough to want to eat the pigs' food was equally repulsive. He would thus totally abandon his people's customs and Law. He was in complete degradation as a consequence of his sin (Evans, pp. 232–233).

4. What does the young man do in his total humiliation (vv. 17–20a)?

Finally, the young man realizes he is worse off than his father's servants and decides to go home. His rehearsed speech to his father (vv. 17–18) shows he is taking responsibility for his foolish behavior and is aware he horribly violated his moral and legal obligations to his father (Cook, "Luke 15," p. 10).

5. How does the father react to his wayward son's return (vv. 20b–24)?

First, the father sees his returning son while he is still far away. This implies he is waiting and watching—or at least hoping—for his son's homecoming. It seems that Jesus wants to say our Heavenly Father's heart shows the same yearning and desire for us to return to Him when we are lost and far from Him (Cook, "Luke 15," p. 11).

The father, overflowing with compassion, runs to his wayward son and repeatedly hugs and kisses him. The Pharisees, all listening to Jesus' parable, are likely outraged by the father's response. In the ancient world, it was extremely undignified for men of high status to run. His behavior would be seen as humiliating and shameful. Possibly the father wanted to be the first one to reach his son to protect him from the wrath of the Jewish community that had likely declared him officially dead (Cook, "Luke 15," p. 10). The father's kissing and hugging his son would also have been shocking because it implied they were equals. In the first century, it was expected that the returning son would kiss his father's feet when they met. Instead the father's kisses and hugs prevent the son from kissing the father's feet. Such kisses from the father, in the ancient world, conveyed forgiveness and reconciliation. Thus, the father shows the entire village that he has forgiven his prodigal son. He guarantees that the townspeople will not feel obligated to beat the boy to preserve the father's honor (Cook, "Luke 15," p. 11).

In this parable, Jesus clearly shows the father's response to the son as a picture of God's grace and graciousness (Cook, "Luke 15," p. 11). The son returns, repenting and asking forgiveness with deep humility. The father's compassion and joy in seeing his son overcame the son's deep deficiencies. Rather than being angry with his rebellious son, the father calls for him to be given the best clothing and for a great celebration in his honor. "The best robe was a sign of honor, the ring a sign of authority, and the sandals a sign of a free man (for servants went barefoot)" (Talbert, p. 150, cited in Evans, p. 237).

Optional Note: After 430 years, God delivered His people from a type of exile in Egypt (Exodus 12). Centuries later, God sent His people into exile for their rebellion. Then He mercifully spoke through the prophet Ezekiel of bringing dead bones to life out of the grave (Ezekiel 37). Since then, Jews used such resurrection imagery to represent a return from exile (Wright, p. 188). Therefore, to this first century audience, Jesus' story about a wicked son, lost in a foreign land, who later returns to his father, would echo God's promise through Ezekiel. In His parable, Jesus implies that whenever someone responds positively to His gospel message and turns back to God, they are returning from exile from God. How then can someone not celebrate such a grand event as a son's return from exile? Jesus' message to the grumbling Pharisees is clear: Jesus' association with the tax collectors and sinners invites them, the poor and the outcasts, to the Kingdom of God. In this, Jesus is doing exactly what the Father wills (Wright, pp. 188–189).

6. What is the older brother's reaction to the celebration (vv. 26–30)?

The older brother is very upset when the father welcomes back the wayward brother. The older brother refuses to refer to the prodigal as his brother and instead calls him, “your son,” to his father. This shows the older brother's resentment and utter contempt for his younger brother (Wright, p. 190).

The older brother's reaction is the punch line. Jesus shows His critics they are focused on the obvious deficiencies of the tax collectors and sinners and judging Jesus for eating with them. But in their judgment, they are missing the demonstration of God's love: people were being changed, healed and transformed. Even so, all the Pharisees could see was litter—the human garbage they normally despised and avoided (Wright, p. 190).

In the parable's original context, the two sons resembled two types of Jews (Evans, p. 233):

- 1) The younger son was like irreligious Jews, such as sinners, tax collectors, harlots.
- 2) The older son was similar to religiously strict Jews, such as the Pharisees, priests and teachers of the law. The Pharisees (Luke 15:2) reflect the same opinion as that of the older son.

7. How does the father respond to the older son (vv. 31–32)?

“Everything I have is yours,” says the father, reminding the older son he is as dearly loved as the younger brother. He reiterates the need for celebration: the younger brother who was dead is now alive, and who was lost is now found. Jesus shows that the Pharisees are wrong to grumble against His association with irreligious Jews. He also shows that God's love is reaching out to people whom the Pharisees see as undeserving, and still there is plenty of love left for the Pharisees, too (Wright, p. 191).

The older son remained with his father and served him without squandering his wealth in a binge of immorality. But his attitude reveals his own failures. In the ancient world, the older son was expected to do everything possible to heal the breach in his younger brother and father's relationship. He apparently failed to do this; he did not try to reconcile them when the younger brother originally rebelled nor when the younger brother returned (Cook, “Luke 15,” p. 9). Additionally, the older brother rebels against his father too, although less obviously. He refuses to come to the celebration and he lectures his father. Both actions show as little respect for his father as the younger son's wayward trip away from home. The older son also resembles the Pharisees' grumbling against Jesus and their refusal to celebrate that God's Kingdom was bringing resurrection life to Israel (Wright, pp. 190–191).

APPLICATION

Select one of the following application questions to finish your discussion time.

- **Which role in this parable do you identify with the most: the wayward younger son? The resentful older brother? The forgiving father? Why? Which role is God calling our small group to play? How can we live that out on a daily basis?**
- **In this passage, what does Jesus teach about Father God's forgiveness of us? What does that imply for our willingness to forgive others?**
- **How can we welcome and celebrate the return of younger-brother types, who have been deep in sin, and older-brother types, who thought they did not need to repent of hard hearts?**

WRAPPING IT UP

In this passage, Jesus shows us the heart of our Heavenly Father. He is the shepherd seeking, rescuing, and carrying the lost sheep. He is the woman diligently searching and happily celebrating when she finds the lost coin. He is the benevolent father quick to forgive both his younger and older sons. This week as we live in the presence of such a loving Father, take time to reflect and rejoice. And look for ways to extend His unconditional forgiveness to others that they might come to know Him as well.

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THE FATHERHOOD OF GOD

Study 7

OUR LOVING PROVIDER

Matthew 6:25—34

By Karen Prentiss

Overheard in an Orchard

*Said the Robin to the Sparrow;
"I should really like to know
Why these anxious human beings
Rush about and worry so."*

*Said the Sparrow to the Robin:
"Friend, I think that it must be
That they have no Heavenly Father
Such as cares for you and me."*

Elizabeth Cheney

Chorus from *Trust His Heart*

*God is too wise to be mistaken.
God is too good to be unkind.
So when you don't understand.
When you don't see His plan.
When you can't trace His hand.
Trust His heart.*

Eddie Carswell and Babbie Mason

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AIM

- To help us trust God who is our loving, caring, generous, faithful Father.

KEY VERSE

“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

Matthew 6:33

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Before you lead this study, please review the following sections in *Introduction to the Fatherhood of God Series*:

- *Preparation for Leading Inductive Bible Studies*—helpful hints on how to prepare for and lead this group of studies.
- *People First Language*—guidelines about using sensitive and considerate language when referring to people who are physically, mentally, or emotionally impaired.

OPENER

Can you think of a time when you worried about a situation in your life? (For example, you may have been worried about a loved one, finding a place to live, paying a bill, the future, etc.) Where did you think your help would come from?

Give the group a few minutes to think about the questions. You might ask them to wait before sharing. Then you could read the “Overheard in an Orchard” poem from page one and ask the group to answer this question: “Where did the sparrow and robin believe their help came from?”

Now ask the group: “In your answer to my opening question, where did you think your help would come from?” Let two to four members answer briefly. A typical response might be that they looked for help from something here on earth—themselves, their job or savings, another person or relative, etc. Then you can explain:

Oftentimes, we do not trust God to provide for our needs. We put our trust in earthly solutions, or emphasize material things, more than we trust or focus on God. This misplaced trust is why we worry. We forget, or do not trust, our heavenly Father to love, care, and provide for us.

In this study, we will consider the faithfulness of God to provide for our daily needs, as any good parent would. Instead of worrying about necessities, Jesus instructs us to make the expression of His kingdom on earth our top priority.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This is background material for leaders. You may decide what to share with your group.

Scholars generally believe that Matthew pulled together a variety of Jesus’ teachings on related topics He had delivered to different audiences over time. Scholars also agree “Jesus preached hard to the religiously and socially arrogant, but his words come as comfort to the meek and brokenhearted” (Keener, p. 104).

With that in mind, Jesus' ministry begins with the words, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 4:17). In the chapters that follow (5–7), Jesus teaches about the King and how His children are to live in His kingdom (Stedman, p. 495).

- The Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus teaches the Beatitudes, is described in Matthew 5:1–12. Here Jesus describes the characteristics of true disciples of Christ.
- Jesus then continues in Matthew 5 and 6:1–18 to teach the disciples about righteousness, i.e. "the way of living in the kingdom" (Fee, p. 273).
- In Matthew 6:19–24, Jesus teaches that the things of heaven should be the focus of our heart, not the treasures of earth. He ends that teaching with "You cannot serve both God and Money" (v. 24).
- In Matthew 6:25–34, Jesus reveals what our attitude toward our daily living ought to be. Jesus tells us why we do not have to worry about the things of this earth—because God loves us and He knows our needs (v. 32).

STUDY THE PASSAGE: MATTHEW 6:25—34

Pray that the Holy Spirit will open hearts to believe and trust the Father when He says that He will provide for every need; that the Holy Spirit will heal barriers that keep us from trusting; and that the Holy Spirit will inspire all to glorify and serve Him regardless of circumstances.

1. Read Matthew 6:25–34 aloud. What single word is repeated most often in the passage? Based upon that one word, what is Jesus warning against?

In many of the modern Bible translations, the word "worry" appears most often. However, the King James Version uses the phrase "take no thought" instead of "worry." The word "thought," as translated from the Greek, means to "take thought" or to "have care." The root meaning in the Greek is to be "divided" or "distracted."

Jesus warns against being worried, anxious, or distracted by the cares of this life. This includes worrying about food and clothing for today, as well as what tomorrow will bring.

Jesus also warns not to forget how much the heavenly Father cares for His children. He does this by describing how God takes care of the birds and perishable flowers. Jesus then asks in verse 26, "Are you not much more valuable than they?"

2. Re-read verses 25–32. Discuss the reasons why we are not to worry.

- Life (with eternal value) is more important than food or clothes (v. 25).
- The Father provides for our needs (vv. 26, 30, & 32).
- The Father cares and provides for birds and flowers—all of creation (v. 26).
- We are more valuable to God than birds or flowers (vv. 26 & 30).
- Worry does no good; it does not change our situation or circumstance (v. 27).
- The richness of what God creates and cares for is so much greater than even Solomon's splendor (v. 29).

- Those who do not acknowledge God as Creator or Father worry (v. 32).
- The Father knows what we need (v. 32).

3. How does God care for birds and flowers? How do birds and flowers react to God's care? What should humans learn from this?

Birds do not sow or reap; yet God makes sure they eat. Birds seemingly take no thought about where their next meal will come from or how their daily needs will be met. Birds sing amidst the branches of the trees. Flowers “do not labor or spin” to make their colorful garments. In fact, flowers perish yet God takes care to make flowers beautiful and fragrant.

The following are things that humans can learn from this.

- Keener states, “Jesus draws a lesson from God’s care for birds and flowers. People are worth much more than birds and flowers. Jesus believes that the God who cares for unemployed animals will care still more for His children” (p. 54).
- Humans, when burdened by the cares of this life, find it difficult to sing praises to our Lord (Henry, p. 3). If we were as carefree as the birds, how much easier would it be to praise God in all that we do and say?
- Humans have to work to earn wages sufficient to feed, clothe, and house themselves. Sometimes it feels like we do not have enough. On the other hand, lilies do nothing at all but display their God-given beauty to the glory of the Father. Jesus argues that if God clothes the temporary flowers so splendidly, will He not also provide appropriate clothes for His beloved children? Like the lilies of the field, we are to trust in our heavenly Father to provide for our needs. Trusting the Lord to meet all of our daily needs reveals how mature our faith in Him really is (Henry, p. 5).

4. Why should we trust God?

Main reasons we should trust God from the passage include:

- The Father provides for His creation (vv. 26 & 30).
- The Father knows what we need (v. 32).

God is a faithful Provider and Father. He knows our concerns and has adequate provision for them. As any earthly father would, God cares for us and therefore provides for us. When we fail to trust Him to meet our needs, we doubt His goodness, love, and concern for us. Our main aim ought always to please Him before pleasing ourselves (Henry, pp. 5–7).

You may encounter people who believe “God’s too busy to pay attention to my needs. He has wars and earthquakes and things like that on His mind.” Tom Wright has an excellent reply (p. 73):

If he is a father, let’s treat him as a father, not a bureaucrat or dictator who wouldn’t want to be bothered with our trivial and irrelevant concerns. It’s up to him to decide if he is too busy for us. The fact that there may be a war going on in one country, a famine

somewhere else, earthquakes, tragic accidents, murder and pillage all over the place, and that he is grieving over all of them—this might be a problem for a high-ranking authority at the United Nations, but it's still no problem whatever for our loving father. When he says he's still got time, space and love to spare for us, we should take him at his word.

5. According to verse 33, what should we do instead of worrying? Why?

Jesus instructs us to seek (look for and ask for) God's kingdom and righteousness. The Bible does not define **the kingdom of God** in only one dimension. God's kingdom is expressed and experienced wherever He is King. As Creator, Owner, and Sustainer of all things, God is also the unequalled Ruler. Wherever He is honored and obeyed, His kingdom is manifest. Currently the kingdom of God may be evidenced in a person, in a group of people, or in His power bringing order, healing, and blessing.

There is an opposing kingdom of darkness that resists God's rule. The power of this evil kingdom was broken at the cross and empty tomb, when Jesus defeated death and rose again. When He returns to earth, Jesus will destroy all that opposes Him and usher in His kingdom fully. All that exists will be subject to God's reign, and that will be the full expression of His kingdom.

In the New Testament, **righteousness** refers to living obediently in keeping with the covenant relationship with God (Kelly, p. 194). Because Jesus lived a perfectly obedient life, His right relationship with God fulfilled the calling on God's people from the beginning of time. Because no one else has ever lived in perfect compliance with God's commands, Jesus is the only hope we have if we are to be counted right with God. When we put our faith in Jesus, God transfers our sin to Jesus and grants us the same right standing that Jesus has with Him. That is the only righteousness we can call our own. God also gives us His Holy Spirit to live in us. As we cooperate with Jesus' indwelling Spirit, we will more and more reflect His righteousness in our lives, too.

Just as God has clothed the flowers of the field, He has gifted human beings with talents, skills and abilities to reflect His goodness and glory. The Father cares for all of creation (including birds, flowers, and humans), and He is glorified when every created being becomes all that He created it to be (Henry, p. 5).

When we worry about obtaining the things we need, we lose focus on serving God (Barton et. al, p. 33). Jesus scolds that pagans "run after all these things"—implying that believers can do better than worrying about food and clothing. As Keener points out, "Pagans seek their own needs; God's children should seek instead God's agendas, assured that God will also care for them in the process" (p. 154).

6. What "things" will be added when we seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness first?

The "things" that the Lord speaks of in this passage are primarily those things that are not of eternal value (Henry, p. 8). This can include basic needs like food, clothing, and a place to live. But God also enriches us with relationships, security, peace, and joy. Rather than being anxious about the things of this world, Jesus encourages us to make the expression of God's kingdom on earth our first priority. When we put God's kingdom first, our Lord

promises that the Father will take care of the “things” that would keep us from being about His business (Wright, p. 66).

- **What “things” keep you from helping with God’s kingdom business?**

APPLICATION

Select one of the following application questions to finish your discussion time.

- **What do you need to believe about God’s heart towards you in order to fully trust Him for your earthly needs?**
- **What insecurities or fears do you struggle with that might block your ability to trust God?**
- **How can you apply Jesus’ teachings to the things you need or the things that cause you to worry? (Consider not only food and clothes but also safety, health, relationships, the future, etc.)**
- **How can we express dependence on God as we use our faith to trust Him for our daily needs?**

WRAPPING IT UP

If we are filled with care about our own circumstances, we may never do what God has called us to do. Therefore, we must heed Jesus’ warning not to be overly concerned about having our daily needs met. Instead, Jesus encourages us to trust our heavenly Father to take care of whatever else concerns us. Jesus also encourages us to make the expression of God’s kingdom on earth our first priority. When we do this, Jesus assures us that the Father will handle everything else that concerns us.

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FATHERHOOD OF GOD SERIES

Study 8

OUR FATHER'S LOVING DISCIPLINE

Hebrews 12:1—13

By Jane Flewelen

Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.

1 Corinthians 9:25

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 3:12—14

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AIM OF STUDY

- To embrace our Father’s loving discipline as training to mature us in righteousness and faith.

KEY VERSE

But God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.

Hebrews 12:10b

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Before you lead this study, please review the following sections in *Introduction to the Fatherhood of God Series*:

- *Preparation for Leading Inductive Bible Studies*—helpful hints on how to prepare for and lead this group of studies.
- *People First Language*—guidelines about using sensitive and considerate language when referring to people who are physically, mentally, or emotionally impaired.

OPENER

You may use the following question to start a discussion leading into the study, or you may skip it and use the story below it to consider the topic of discipline.

Have you ever engaged in a stringent training program or serious discipline? How did you stay motivated when you wanted to give up? How rewarding was it to reach your goal?

Here are some facts to help your group consider the topic of discipline.

Maurice Clarett and Troy Smith were both extremely talented Ohio State University football players. Each made national sports headlines. Each is famous in his own way.

Maurice Clarett had dazzling talent. He averaged 10 yards a carry and scored 22 touchdowns his final year of high school. He was also named Ohio Associated Press “Mr. Football” and USA Today’s high school offensive player of the year (“Timeline”). As a freshman at Ohio State University, he was listed as starting running back, something that had not happened since 1943. He helped OSU win against archrival Michigan, sealing his team’s trip to the Fiesta Bowl. In that January 2003 championship game, Maurice dove into the end zone to help OSU defeat Miami in double overtime. OSU had its first national title in 34 years (“Timeline”).

Sadly, Maurice did not follow that first collegiate season with the same success. Even before the Fiesta Bowl, he had denounced OSU officials for preventing him from flying to a hometown funeral. They replied he had not filed the proper paperwork to get emergency funds. He was again in the headlines that summer when a teaching assistant claimed he got preferential treatment in his courses. He and other teammates were cleared of any academic charge by the end of the calendar year. But only a few weeks after those initial charges, he claimed that \$10,000 in items had been stolen from a car he had borrowed from a dealership. Then, just before fall quarter had begun, he was charged with misdemeanor falsification for the police report on that alleged theft. The next day, the OSU athletics director suspended Maurice for the

season. Clarett had received benefits from sponsors and misled investigators about it (“Timeline”).

Within weeks of his suspension, Maurice decided to sue the NFL. He challenged the rule that a player must be out of high school three years before he is eligible for the draft. Nine months later, after many legal maneuvers, Clarett lost his case and had to wait another year before entering the draft (“Timeline”). He was selected by the Denver Broncos in 2005, but was cut four months later after multiple incidents that turned the team against him. He seemed arrogant, profane, and was thought to be abusing alcohol. He injured a groin muscle and never carried the ball (Friend). Maurice’s troubles escalated and his prospects for success disappeared. He was accused of robbery in January 2006 and arrested in August of that year with three handguns and an AK-47 assault rifle in his car. He was near the home of a witness in the robbery trial. Ultimately Clarett was sentenced to at least 3.5 years (Friend).

Why did Clarett’s bright beginnings end so badly? Shortly before his arrest in August 2006, he admitted he used to think that money was everything. He confessed to being cocky and avoiding taking responsibility for his actions. The trainers who tried to help him prepare for a professional career said he preferred to take short cuts and enjoyed hanging out with Hollywood stars. But the lack of serious training left him in no shape to be a professional ball player. After the birth of a daughter in July 2006 and with the financial and legal problems he faced, Maurice began to mature. He spoke of several men in his life who had shown him tough love, and he sounded a bit more humble. He was now grateful to the people who had spoken the truth to him even when he didn’t want to hear it (Friend). Sadly he was soon on his way to jail.

Clarett’s Ohio State teammate, **Troy Smith**, was also a brilliant football player. But he overcame personal struggles and ended up with an amazing career as an Ohio State quarterback and a Heisman Trophy winner. Troy was kicked off a high school basketball team after decking an opponent and transferred to Glenville High in Cleveland (Musselman). There Ted Ginn Sr. coached him in football. During his senior year, he led his team to the state playoffs, threw for 969 yards and 12 touchdowns. He also lettered in football, basketball, and track (“Prospect Profiles”).

Smith spent his freshman year as a “redshirt” [someone who does not play in games but may practice with the team and remains eligible to play for 4 additional years]. In 2003 he played infrequently as a running back (“Prospect Profiles”). And he was charged with disorderly conduct for participating in an off-campus fight (Musselman). All of these incidents might have made a proud young man want to quit.

Then, in 2004, he began to play as a quarterback and ended up as the starter for five of eight games when the regular quarterback was injured (“Team Player Bio”). Before the team played in the Alamo Bowl, Coach Jim Tressel suspended Smith for accepting \$500 from a Booster. Smith missed that victory and the opening game of the following season. But he went on to play the rest of the season and was the first OSU player to throw for more than 2,000 yards and run for 500 in one season (Musselman). Finally, as a senior, Troy led his team to another championship game, won several national awards including the prestigious Heisman Trophy, and graduated with a communications degree. Troy was selected late in the 2007 NFL Draft by the Baltimore Ravens heralded for his poise and leadership as well as his ball skills (“Team Player Bio”).

What brought about such a noticeable change in a talented but unruly kid? He credits the coaching staff at OSU for much of his maturing. Head Coach Tressel both disciplined him for and talked with him about his violations and misconduct. Troy knew he had let his team down and worked hard to earn their respect. Tressel believes that struggling made Troy mature. Troy also took responsibility for his actions, and his teammates looked up to Smith not only as a great quarterback but also as a great leader (Musselman).

We can often measure a person's character by how that individual responds to difficulty and discipline. Most of us don't enjoy facing discipline or serious training until we have reached our goal. Scripture tells us that no discipline is pleasant, but rather painful. But God does promise that cooperating with His discipline will produce righteousness and peace—qualities that we see in His Son. This study will help us consider the loving motives behind our Heavenly Father's discipline.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This is background material for leaders. You may decide what to share with your group.

Purpose: Hebrews is a letter of encouragement. In light of God's supreme revelation spoken in Christ, we are encouraged to faithfully persevere in living for Him (Fee, p. 390).

Author: The author is not identified. Biblical scholars widely agree that it wasn't Paul.

Recipients: Hebrews was written primarily to a specific group of Jewish Christians who knew the Old Testament (Hughes, p. 2050). Quite possibly, they were a house church in Rome (Fee, p. 390).

Occasion: The original recipients had been insulted, persecuted, and had property confiscated because they openly confessed Jesus (Hebrews 10:32–34). They “endured in a great conflict full of suffering” (10:32). They were “discouraged because of suffering...and perhaps from doubts about whether Jesus really took care of sin” (Fee, p. 390). They were being tempted to either revert to Judaism or to impose Old Testament Jewish practices on the Gospel (Guthrie, p. 667). The author encourages them to be confident in Christ and to persevere (Fee, p. 390).

Themes: Christ is God's final and supreme revelation to us. The letter masterfully shows that Christ is superior to all Old Testament revelation: to angels, to Moses, to the Law, the priesthood, and priestly sacrifices. It concludes that the new covenant is greater than the old. Christ, the perfect high priest, was sacrificed once for all. Through Christ believers can confidently enter God's Holy Presence. The author therefore emphasizes we need to faithfully persevere in following Christ, not throwing away our confidence in Him. He explains the practical implications of living by faith (LASB, pp. 2050–2051).

STUDY THE PASSAGE: HEBREWS 12:1–13

Pray for open hearts and minds to embrace the Father's loving discipline as good training for our maturing in righteousness and faith.

1. In verses 1–4, the author vividly compares persevering in a foot race with following Jesus. What clues in these verses indicate why the author might be writing about this?

2. What is the point of the Proverb the author quotes in verses 5 and 6?

The author quotes Proverbs 3:11–12 in order to help them see that God, in His Fatherly love, could use their suffering to mature them.

3. What comes to mind when you think of discipline? How might we misinterpret the Father's discipline?

For some, discipline has a negative or emotionally painful connotation, especially if they have been treated harshly or abused. And for most of us, discipline does not seem pleasant at the time we experience it (v. 11). However, the author of Hebrews wants us to think of God's discipline as training in maturity rather than punishment. God, as our running coach, is using discipline to help us run a better race.

We might mistakenly think discipline means God doesn't accept or love us. We may assume "good" Christians aren't disciplined. Thus, we may be confused or discouraged rather than encouraged by discipline. The author of Hebrews cites faithful believers from the past (Hebrews 11), the Lord Jesus (Hebrews 12:1–3), and this proverb to encourage his audience to recognize they are not alone in undergoing such trials (Lane, *Hebrews*, pp. 428–430).

4. What does the Father's discipline prove to us (vv. 6–8)?

Take heart! Discipline is a good sign! God's discipline means we are His children, that He deeply loves us. He is committed to us, wanting our very best. Remember, the Father loves us too much to withhold His discipline. "When God corrects you, see it as proof of His love and ask Him what He is trying to teach you (LASB, p. 2657)."

5. What does God commonly use to discipline us (v. 7)?

The author of Hebrews advises us to "endure hardship as discipline." "Hardship" means suffering or deprivation (Webster's, p. 553). Thus, the normal hardships of life are part of God's discipline—to train, teach, guide, and test us. God purposely has us endure hardships to further our training as His children (Stibbs, p. 1214). Our sufferings are not meaningless but play a significant role in our maturing as believers.

God also uses Scripture to discipline us: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that all God's people may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

6. How should we respond to hardships or discipline (vv. 7–9)?

We are to endure hardships. Doing so, we persevere in our race, lasting rather than quitting. Enduring means remaining firm under suffering or misfortune without giving in (Webster's, p. 412). Hardships test our faith and stamina with God.

7. Why does our Heavenly Father discipline us (vv. 10–11)?

The Father disciplines us only for our good. God is always a loving, perfect parent. However, He is not an indulgent parent (Davids, "Why Does," pp. 44–45). Thus we do not have to guess why He disciplines us.

The Father's goal is for us to share in His holiness (v.11). "Holy" means, "set apart." Our Holy God is set apart from and above all creation; He is morally perfect (Harrison, p. 729). Yet God's people are to share in His holiness. How is this possible? Though forgiven in Christ, we are not yet completely free from sin. Davids writes ("Hebrews 10:14," pp. 688—689):

We keep sinning and God must continue to confront us and bring us to repentance over and over again. We are in the process of being made truly holy, not just forgiven for our failure to be holy.... God is producing holiness in each believer, but it is a process that takes discipline.

8. How do we practice holiness?

"Holiness" means being set apart to God by being separated from evil and dedicated to serving Him. Jesus is the only person who has fully loved and obeyed God. He not only has satisfied God's requirements for holy living and for revealing holiness to the watching world, but also Jesus has imparted His holiness to us (Hebrews 10:10). Our job is to embrace our status as holy children who reflect their heavenly Father's character (1 Peter 1:14—16). The Holy Spirit who lives in all believers desires to cultivate His holy character in us all (2 Corinthians 3:18).

We demonstrate holiness these ways:

- By living a distinctive lifestyle of high moral behavior that reflects God's own character .
- By rejecting idolatry—we practice idolatry when we give our ultimate allegiance to anything other than God—things, values, beings, or powers (Davids, "2 Corinthians 6:14," p. 625).

God's love and holiness are inseparable, like the pedals on a bicycle; they both need to be operating at the same time in order for the bike to keep moving.

- **God's Love** — In the U.S. church today, we tend to focus more on the Father's unconditional love and acceptance than His Holiness. If we overemphasize His love, we may forget He is holy and treat sin lightly. The author of Hebrews reminds us, "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our 'God is a consuming fire'" (Hebrews 12:28).
- **God's Holiness** — If we overemphasize His holiness, we may distort Him as an unmerciful Judge, impossible to please. "We may wallow in guilt and feel alienated from God" (Davids, "Hebrews 10:14," p. 689). Praise God that His holiness and love meet perfectly at the Cross!

9. What do we miss by responding poorly to our Father's discipline (v. 11)?

By responding poorly, we are not trained by His discipline (v. 11). Thus, we miss His good purpose for us. We avoid an opportunity to learn from discipline and mature more in our relationship with God.

10. What do we gain by responding well to the Father's discipline (v. 11)?

Those who have been trained by His discipline reap a harvest of righteousness and peace (v. 11).

The Greek word for “to train,” is *gymnazo*. It also means “to exercise” (Zondervan, p. 1182)—like in a gymnasium. This athletic metaphor builds on the one found in verse 1 about running our race. A well-disciplined athlete trains hard, runs with perseverance, and finishes well. “No pain, no gain” is an oft-quoted athletic training motto that applies to the believer's life. Paul tells us, “...anyone who competes as an athlete does not receive the victor's crown except by competing according to the rules” (2 Timothy 2:5). Good training with God involves discipline.

The more we mature from discipline, the more we grow in righteousness and peace. Our reaping a harvest of righteousness and peace is a picture of fruitful bounty. Righteousness means being in a right relationship with God and doing what agrees with His moral standards (Zondervan Concordance, p. 1542). Only then can we have true life and peace—peace with Him, with others, and with ourselves.

Over time, we can even learn to accept discipline gratefully, as the appropriate response we owe our Loving Father (LASB, p. 2658). This comes with maturity and wisdom.

11. How do we overcome weakness and exhaustion (vv. 12–13)?

We gain strength by drawing on the Lord's grace and power (Ephesians 6:1; Isaiah 40:28–31; 2 Corinthians 12:9). We are refreshed through time alone in His Presence, through worship, trusting His word, and being in community with other believers (Hebrews 10:19–25).

“‘Make level paths for your feet,’ so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed” (v. 13). The meaning of this verse is not obvious. “Making level paths” implies making an effort to live righteously (Guthrie, *Letter*, p. 256). “That the lame may not be disabled” may mean that strong believers should help their weaker brothers and sisters. The lame may be wavering in their faith. The strong are good examples of faith and life with Jesus. Thus they help rather than hinder others spiritually and morally (Hughes, p. 2069). By extending love, compassion, and comfort, they help heal the weak and broken.

APPLICATION

Select one of the following application questions to finish your discussion time.

- **To be more holy and set apart to God, is there a lifestyle change you need to make? Is there anything distracting you from pursuing God that you need to turn from?**
- **Do you have a negative or defensive reaction to discipline? What can you apply from this study to help you embrace the Father's discipline?**

- **How can you respond better to discipline and hardships in your life? Do you need to change how you pray about them?**

WRAPPING IT UP

The journey through life with God is like running a marathon. Continually re-focusing our attention on Jesus helps us persevere. We all will experience hardships and the Father's loving discipline. How we respond and pray reveal our attitude toward sin and our desire for holiness; our expectations of God and life; our faith and trust in God; and our willingness and heart to submit and endure.

Be encouraged! In the Father's wise and loving hands, hardship and discipline are His training. His goal is to mature us in righteousness, peace, and faith. He is always ready to give us grace and power to run well. As believers, we are to help and encourage each other as we run together towards the prize of complete Christ-likeness and eternity with Him!

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