

THEISM

The Fatherhood of God

A father is a male ancestor, a progenitor and founder of a family or race. The term father may also apply to one who originates or establishes something, such as being the father of a country or of a profession. Since fatherhood consists of the state of being a father, then the standards and qualities descriptive of ideal fathers may be used to evaluate the fatherhood of God.

Inasmuch as God created all humanity, he is sometimes declared to be father of all people. Isaiah acknowledged “You are our Father; We are the clay, and You our potter; And all we are the work of Your hand” (Isaiah 64:8). Malachi asked, “Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us?” (Malachi 2:10).

The fatherhood of God is seldom mentioned in the Old Testament, but when it is, it is usually declared in terms of God’s corporate relationship with his people. In the Old Testament, God’s fatherhood is expressed in relationship to groups, such as to orphans and widows. Psalms 68:5 declares that God is “father of the fatherless, a defender of widows.” The Israelites are corporately considered as sons or children of God (Exodus 4:22, Deuteronomy 14:1; 32:5-6; Isaiah 1:2; Hosea 1:10; 11:1). God is considered to be the father of the Israelites as a group (1 Chronicles 29:10; Isaiah 63:16; Jeremiah 3:19). That the fatherhood of God was commonly recognized by the Israelites is indicated by such personal names as “Joab” which means Jehovah is Father, or “Abijah” which means Father is Jehovah. To only two individuals – David and Solomon – does God explicitly declare his relationship as that of a father (2 Samuel 7:14; 1 Chronicles 28:6, Psalm 89:26). These declarations, however, are within the context of David and Solomon being kings over Israel. In the Old Testament, God is not generally described as father of individuals, nor do individuals generally express their understanding of God as a father to them individually.

In the New Testament, with the teachings of Jesus and the apostles, the imagery of the fatherhood of God is enlarged in two ways. First, God is recognized to be the Father of Jesus Christ, distinct from others since Jesus is uniquely the Son of God (Matthew 11:25-27; Mark 14:36; John 20:17; 2 Peter 1:17). Second, God is designated as the Father of individual believers, by virtue of adoption or redemption. (Luke 11:2, 13; Romans 8:15; Galatians 3:26; 4:6).

In the New Testament, of all the concepts presented about God, the fatherhood of God is the most dominant. Without exception, every document of the New Testament presents God as father. All the gospels declare the fatherhood of God. John mentions the fatherhood of God more than twice that of any other gospel writer. The significance of God as father is indicated by the apostle Paul’s declaration of God as either “our Father” or “the Father” in the salutation of every letter.

New Testament descriptions about the nature and functions of God as father are best understood as they relate to ways in which God is designated as father. God is the father of our Lord Jesus Christ in a sense in which he is not our father. Unlike other beings, Jesus is the divine Son of God. Jesus is the “only begotten of the father” (John 1:14). “For to which of the angels did He ever say: “You are My Son, Today I have begotten You”? And again: “I will be to Him a Father, And He shall be to Me a Son”? (Hebrews 1:5). Christ was “in the bosom of the father” (John 1:18). Everyone who “has heard and learned from the Father” comes to Jesus (John 6:45). Jesus claimed, “I am with the Father who sent me” (John 8:16). God and his son, Jesus, are associated together in the mission of saving the world from the eternal consequences of sin (John 3:16-17). Jesus “gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father” (Galatians 1:4).

In addition to being the “father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 15:6; 2 Corinthians 1:3; 11:31; Ephesians 1:3, 14; Colossians 1:3; 1 Peter 1:3), God is the father of believers. (In the New Testament, description of the father-child relationship between God and man is generally confined to those who are believers.) In the Gospels, Jesus often described God as “your father,” “your father in heaven,” and “your heavenly father.” Other New Testament writers describe God as “father of mercies” (2 Corinthians 1:3), “father of glory,” (Ephesians 1:17), “father of spirits” (Hebrews 12:9) and “father of lights” (James 2:17). Adopted sons of God may refer to him intimately as “Abba, Father” (Romans 8:15, Galatians 4:6-7).

As human fathers ideally exercise paternal care over their minor children by being protector, provider, ruler and teacher, so also does God. In the role of a protecting father, God sent “the Son as Savior of the world” (1 John 4:14). In the role of a providing father, God “has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ” (Ephesians 1:3). Peter says that as a father, God “has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you” (1 Peter 1:3-4). In the role of a ruling father, God is explicitly declared to be a judge. The Apostle Peter observed that the Father judges everyone impartially according to their works (1 Peter 1:17). As father, God chastises believers for their own good, just as human fathers chastise their children (Hebrews 12:5-9). Even so, sinners “have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous (1 John 2:1). In the role of a teaching father, God draws people to Jesus. Jesus said, “It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Therefore everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me” (John 6:45, quoting Isaiah 54:13 and Jeremiah 31:34).

In these fatherly roles, God operates through love. Jesus demonstrated God’s fatherly love in the parable of a concerned father who rejoices when his prodigal son returns home (Luke 15:11-32). Paul noted that God, the Father “has loved us and given us everlasting consolation and good hope by grace” (2 Thessalonians 2:16). James declared the love of God as father when he said that “every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning” (James 1:17). John wrote, “Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!” (1 John 3:1).

As children go to their fathers with requests, so also believers go to their heavenly father with their petitions (Matthew 6:9-13). “If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!” (Luke 11:13). In response to God’s fatherly care, believers are thankful. Paul noted that his sense of gratitude was expressed to “the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 3:14; Colossians 1:3); to “the Father” (Colossians 1:12); to “God the Father” (Colossians 3:17; Ephesians 5:20).

Because God is the great and powerful Father that he is, Paul can express benedictions upon the Thessalonian brethren regarding Him. Paul desired “that He (Christ) may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints” (1 Thessalonians 3:13). Paul also said, “Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and our God and Father . . . comfort your hearts and establish you in every good word and work” (2 Thessalonians. 2:16-17).

May our growing understanding of God as Father lead us to conduct ourselves as children who honor their Father by living faithfully according to His righteousness. As our God and Father is perfect and holy, so also we are to be perfect and holy (Matthew 5:48; 1 Peter 1:15-17).