

PAUL'S THEOLOGY

Lesson 3

God (Part 2)

I might be a history freak. No, I did not admit to being a freak of history; I admit only that history is something I enjoy immensely. I like it on many levels. I like personal history, hearing my mom and grandmother tell me about their lives. I like reading history of the 20th century or any other century for that matter. I routinely watch the history channel. I love to collect antiques and learn about their history and background.

As I study and think about historical times, I frequently find myself transported to the era I am studying as I try to imagine my life if lived then. Find a time travel show on television and I will watch it! Invent a time machine and I will try it out!

If you could time travel, what would be the best part? I cannot put my finger on any one thing I would most like about being in another age. Experiencing historical architecture, the ancient ways of doing things, food from another time and place, manners and behaviors, all these things would certainly be thrilling. Near the top of the list for me would be experiencing first hand the differences in culture and lifestyle.

Our lesson today, to some extent, involves a bit of time travel. Last week we developed the theological idea of “anthropomorphizing” God. By that, we were referring to God’s usage of humanized traits and ideas to communicate to humans his character and nature.¹ We take that into more detail this week as we discuss Paul’s usage of the term “Father” to refer to God. For us to understand Paul’s usage of “Father” more fully we need to put ourselves into Paul’s time and culture as best as we can to understand what Paul’s concept of a Father was. This will certainly shed light on why Paul thought “Father” was an appropriate way to express the believer’s relationship with God.

So we start looking at “Father” in its context. We will then consider Paul’s verses that reference God as Father and try to make theological sense of them.

¹ All of our lessons from any series are available for downloading (reading or listening) at www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

FATHER IN CULTURAL CONTEXT AND OLD TESTAMENT USAGE

We know from our earlier studies that Paul, a Hebrew, was brought up in a solid Hebrew home. Paul reminded the Philippians he was “a Hebrew of Hebrews” (Phil 3:5). Paul was able to tell the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem that he was a “Pharisee, a son of Pharisees” (Acts 22:6). It seems reasonable and fair, then, to consider what we know of the “father” in a Hebrew home, knowing that was the formative setting for Paul learning the term.

The Hebrew word for “father” is *ab* (אב). Scholars generally think the word came from the sound an infant will often make when first learning to associate sounds to objects.² This is the word that took the affectionate form in Aramaic of *abba*. In this sense, Aramaic followed English in reducing, for example, “Dad” to “Daddy.” We see Jesus using both forms in his Gethsemane prayer where he said, “*Abba*, Father, all things are possible for you” (Mk 14:36). Paul uses the affectionate *abba* twice in his writings:

- “You have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” (Rom 8:15).
- “And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” (Gal 4:6).

We will look at those verses of Paul in greater detail later.

The Hebrew *ab* (“father”) is found in numerous passages in the Old Testament as well as in other Jewish literature that was contemporary with Paul. From those places we are able to draw some decent understandings of what went into Paul’s consideration of “Father” as appropriate. Here we select a few more useful examples:

- *Ab* was not always what we today consider a genetic or birth father. In the Old Testament we read the word used many times as a reference to **one who started a movement or occupation**. In Genesis 4:20, for example, Jabal is called the, “father [*ab*] of those who dwell in tents and have livestock” while in the next verse Jabal’s brother Jubal is called the “father [*ab*] of all those who play the lyre and pipe.” Similarly we read in Jeremiah 35:6, 8 of “Jonadab the son of Rechab” as the “father” [*ab*] of the Rechabite movement.

² See the references to *ab* as an onomatopoeia for an infant’s babbling sounds in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 1 at 1 (Eerdmans 1974).

- *Ab* also was used to refer to a **man who merited special honor or respect**. David, while King Saul sought to kill him, still referred to Saul as father [*ab*] in 1 Samuel 24:11. We find in 2 Kings that a prophet was referred to with the term “father” [*ab*]. (2 Kings 2:12 – Elijah; 2 Kings 6:21; 13:14 – Elisha). In Judges we read of *ab* used for a priest (17:10; 18:19).
- *Ab* is used in a number of places to reflect **one who takes extra care for those in need**. In places like Psalm 68:5 we read of God as a “Father [*ab*] of the fatherless.” Job called himself a “father [*ab*] to the needy” (Job 29:16). While rescuing Pharaoh and the Egyptians from a devastating famine, Joseph calls himself, “a father [*ab*] to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house” (Gen 45:8).

Those passages shed some light upon the ideas behind “father” but they are only a minor part of the story. Most usage of *ab* involves someone that in modern terms is genetically related. This is typically a birth father, but the term is used also of ancestors (see Gen 28:13 for usage for a grandfather; also there are many references to founders of various tribes³ as well as to ancestors of earlier generations⁴).

This brings us to the core usage of *ab* referencing the birth father. As we consider these passages we are in a position to better understand the role of the father in the family. These passages are part of the time warp that provide insight into Paul’s likely perception not merely of the word, but of the role of the father at least in his Jewish family.

- “In the Israelite family, the **father has almost unlimited authority**. He is master of the house.”⁵ In support of this proposition, Professor Helmer Ringgren, cites: Micah 1:6 which indicates that **children are taught to honor the father**; and Isa 64:8 where the **father is considered one who shapes the family** as a potter shapes clay. Important to this, though, is Helmer’s quote of J Pederson set out in the next bullet point.
- “He [the father] is **not an isolated despot, but the centre from which strength and will emanate** through the whole sphere which belongs to him

³ Gen 10:21; 17:4f; 19:37f; 36:9, 43; Dt. 1:8; 6:10; 9:5; 29:13, etc.

⁴ Ex 3:15; 20:5; Nu 20:15; 1 K 14:15; Isa. 51:2; Jer. 7:22; 16:11f, etc.

⁵ *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* at 8.

and to which he belongs.”⁶ Pederson notes that any usage of *ab* in Hebrew always denotes authority.

- The father was **responsible for protecting** his children. (In Job 5:4 we read of the children of a fool being crushed and having no safety or protection).
- The father had the principle **responsibility for training** his children. Proverbs 19:18 teaches a father to “discipline your son” lest there be no hope for the boy. The father is to teach his son wisdom, for in that the father himself finds joy. (“He who fathers a wise son will be glad in him” Pro. 23:24). Sons are taught to learn from their fathers, “Hear, O sons, a father’s instruction, and be attentive, that you might gain insight” (Pro. 4:1). This responsibility of fathers extended to dispensing necessary discipline also for, a father disciplines “the son in whom he delights” (Pro. 3:12).
- The father also took the primary role in **teaching and educating the children**. From Deuteronomy 6:7 we read of the need to teach the love of God “diligently to your children.”⁷ Isaiah 38:19 teaches the role of the father in making known God’s faithfulness, “the father makes known to the children your faithfulness.” This is seen indirectly also in passages like Joshua 4:21, “When your children ask their fathers in times to come, ‘What do these stones mean?’ then you shall let your children know ... the LORD your God dried up the waters.”

Before we develop Paul’s passages on this aspect of God, we should examine where in the Old Testament we read references to God as a Father. Professor Ringgren notes “Yahweh [the “LORD” in most translations] is called father very rarely in the OT [Old Testament].”⁸ There are a few passages where God is compared to a father (as one who pities his children in Ps. 103:13 or one who corrects a man he loves as a father would a son in Pro. 3:12). But in reference to being called the “Father” of any certain person, that is a rarity. There are certainly references to God as the Father of Israel a nation. God has Moses proclaim to

⁶ Ringgren here is quoting from J. Pederson’s famous work, *Israel. Its Life and Culture*, Vol. 1 at 63. This is especially important to note because we live in a culture where some have experienced the tragedy of abuse from fathers who fail to understand their responsibilities or to control their actions. Abuse is never condoned in scripture, from fathers, mothers, or anyone else.

⁷ While the passage does not itself say this was the father’s responsibility most scholars understand that from the context. It is several verses earlier where the context is set of what sons, son’s sons, and so forth are to do.

⁸ *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* at 17.

Pharaoh “Israel is my firstborn son” (Ex. 4:22). Similarly in Dt. 32:6 Moses tells Israel “Do you thus repay the LORD...? Is not he your father, who created you, who made you and established you?”

PAUL ON GOD AS FATHER

In all, we have 28 passages in Paul’s writings where he refers to God as Father. These can be divided into two separate groups: those that refer to God as the Father of Christ, and those where Paul refers to God as “our Father.”⁹ We will address the “our Father” passages first.

Unlike the Old Testament, which rarely refers to God as “Father” and then usually within the framework of the Father of Israel, Paul does so with great regularity. Consider simply the opening greetings of many of Paul’s letters:

- **Romans 1:7** □ To all those in Rome who are loved by **God** and called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from **God our Father** and the Lord Jesus Christ.
- **1 Corinthians 1:3** □ Grace to you and peace from **God our Father** and the Lord Jesus Christ.
- **Ephesians 1:2** □ Grace to you and peace from **God our Father** and the Lord Jesus Christ.
- **Philippians 1:2** □ Grace to you and peace from **God our Father** and the Lord Jesus Christ.
- **Colossians 1:2** □ To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from **God our Father**.
- **1 Thessalonians 1:1** □ Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in **God the Father** and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.
- **2 Thessalonians 1:1** □ Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in **God our Father** and the Lord Jesus Christ:
- **2 Thessalonians 1:2** □ Grace to you and peace from **God our Father** and the Lord Jesus Christ.
- **1 Timothy 1:2** □ To Timothy, my true child in the faith: Grace, mercy, and peace from **God the Father** and Christ Jesus our Lord.
- **2 Timothy 1:2** □ To Timothy, my beloved child: Grace, mercy, and peace from **God the Father** and Christ Jesus our Lord.
- **Titus 1:4** □ To Titus, my true child in a common faith: Grace and peace from **God the Father** and Christ Jesus our Savior.
- **Philemon 1:3** □ Grace to you and peace from **God our Father** and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁹ There are also several passages where it might be open to debate as to whether Paul means God as our Father or the Father of Christ. Those passages do not materially change the discussion here and so we will give them treatment above as we consider the other groupings.

This is really quite remarkable. Paul reference to God as a personal Father was clearly ordinary for him. Yet if we cannot find the root for this in the Old Testament, where did it come from? Did Paul originate this now normal Christian practice of calling God our Father?

The origination is easy to find if we remind ourselves of certain things. First, even though Paul emphasized that, “the gospel that was preached by me is not man’s gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Gal 1:11-12), Paul still spent time with the other apostles. Paul would have had spiritual input from revelation, as well as the constant teaching of the indwelling Spirit.¹⁰ Paul also would have had spiritual input as well as historical knowledge of Christ, his life, and his teachings from his interactions with others. In 1 Cor. 15:6 Paul references over 500 brothers who could confirm the resurrection as eyewitnesses. No doubt Paul had considerable interaction with many who had been touched by Jesus’ ministry and teachings.

With such a level of interaction with those who walked with Jesus, we should never be surprised at Paul’s constant usage of the term “Father” as a personal term for the believer. It was, after all, Jesus who taught his disciples to pray, “*Our Father in heaven*” (Mt 6:9). It was Jesus, not the Old Testament, who brought the concept of God as Father to the front and center for every believer.

So we are not to give Paul credit for the church’s ready embrace of God as a personal Father, as if he inaugurated the idea in the church. Paul was merely living out, in language and understanding, what Jesus had already taught. God, in the sense of the Jewish concept of Father, is our *Ab*, our Father, in heaven.

In light of this, we fairly ask how God fills the role of *Ab*, and how Paul likely understood it and meant it in his references. In doing so, as we consider the role and responsibilities of an *ab* in Hebrew culture and throughout the Old Testament usage of the word we find *ab* a natural term for Paul to use. For in Paul’s theology, God is a perfect fit for wearing such a label in the life of a Christian.

Let us reconsider the Old Testament ideas set forth earlier in this less. We saw in the Old Testament usage of *ab*, a reference to **one who started, or gave birth, to a movement**. While we might want to lay claim to an idea that God “started” the Christian movement, that would not really resonate with Paul’s thinking or writing. For Paul, Christianity was not a “new movement.” It was, rather, the fulfillment of the promises of God to Abraham and the Jewish people. Christianity was the final age (or “last days”) of the Jewish movement. Consider in this light Galatians, a book Paul begins wishing the church grace and “peace

¹⁰ This work of the Holy Spirit was assured and pointed out by Jesus as one where, “The Holy Spirit... will teach you all things ... [and] he will guide you into all the truth” (Jn 14:26, 16:13).

from God our Father.” In Galatians, Paul writes that God had called out Abraham with the promise, “In you shall all the nations be blessed” (Gal 3:8). Similarly in Romans Paul emphasized the Old Testament passage that God made Abraham “the father of many nations” (Rom 4:17).

We have also seen the Hebrew *ab* referencing one who **merited special honor or respect**. In this sense, Paul, no doubt, sees God as the ultimate *Ab*. There are many passages in Paul’s writings where he expresses overwhelming honor and respect that appropriately flows to God. We also see it in one of his “Father” passages. In what scholars consider one of Paul’s most profound passages in Philippians, Paul sets out the incarnation of Christ as an act of humility. Paul then adds that as Christ was emptied, humbled, and obedient to the point of death on a cross, God exalted Christ supremely with a name above all others. God exalted Christ so every knee will bow before him acknowledging his Lordship, “to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:5-11). The crucified Messiah was an historical deed that brought glory and honor to God the Father. God was easily worthy of the title *Ab* in this sense.

A third way we saw *ab* used in the Old Testament was for **one who takes extra care for those in need**. While the Old Testament used the term to refer to Job and Joseph in this sense, it also was one of the few times the term was applied to God. We referenced Psalm 68:5, which proclaims God as a “Father [*ab*] of the fatherless.” Paul saw God as a Father to all, whether fatherless or not. For Paul there was “one God and Father of all” (Eph 4:6). Paul frequently referenced God as seeking to aid and to help the helpless. Paul drives home this point forcefully in reference to the sending of Christ. In Romans 5:8 Paul wrote, “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” It was God the Father from whom Paul sought help in coming to see the Thessalonians. “Now may our God and Father himself ... direct our way to you” (1 Thess 3:11).

Having considered those Old Testament uses of *ab* that meant something other than specific paternal parenting, let us now consider the application of parenting uses of *ab* that Paul would have known intimately from his study of the Old Testament as well as his rearing in a devout Jewish home.

Even a cursory reading of the Old Testament reveals that the major usage of *ab* is in reference to a physical father. As we showed earlier, in the home, the father (*ab*) had almost **unlimited authority** as master of the house. Paul’s view of God fit well into this usage of *ab*. Paul referenced the church as the “household of God” (Eph 2:19) and ascribed to God ultimate authority. As we will see next week, Paul not only ascribes to God all authority, but upon that authority, God will judge the world.

As in the Old Testament, children are taught to **honor the father**, so Paul expects the believer to honor God. We are to give “thanks always and for everything to

God our Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph 5:20). It is “to God our Father” that Paul ascribes “glory forever and ever. Amen” (Phil. 4:20).

Further, as the Old Testament considered the father as **one who shapes the family** as a potter shapes clay, we see Paul using this very same image of God. Paul challenges the readers of Romans who might question God’s sovereignty,

“But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, ‘Why have you made me like this?’ Has the potter no right over the clay?” (Rom 9:20-21).

We have also noted that in the Old Testament, the role of the father included **protecting** his children. In this role, Paul undoubtedly saw God fulfilling it perfectly. God’s protection is not, for Paul, simply an earthly protection. God has gone beyond the confines of this life and insured us of eternal protection. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians of “**God our Father**, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace” (2 Thess 2:16).

Part of the protection God offers comes from the training he gives us in our lives. Just as the Father in the Old Testament had **responsibility for training** his children, so God trains us. Paul writes that it God who sanctifies the believer (1 Thess 5:23). Or as Paul put it to the Corinthians, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth” (1 Cor 3:6).

In this vein, the father also took the primary role in **teaching and educating the children**. We readily see Paul’s consistency in viewing God accordingly. Paul explained to the Corinthians that spiritual truths have come from God. “These things God has revealed to us through the Spirit” (1 Cor 2:10). Paul prays for the Ephesians to have “a spirit of wisdom and revelation” given to them by God, the “Father of glory” (Eph 1:7). As Paul told the Philippians, it was God who taught the mature how to think (Phil 3:15). Similarly when Paul was commenting on the great love the Thessalonians had for each other he explained, “Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another” (1 Thess 4:9).

We can see then why Paul finds the expression of God as our Father a natural fit for his understanding and revelation of God, his character, and his work in our lives. But what about the special bond of a father and his children? The bond of love and family tie? Do we find that bond in Paul’s mind? Absolutely!

This is the sense in which Paul writes, “And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Gal 4:6). Paul saw the believer’s relationship with God as one like that of children with the father in a most personal and close sense -- a usage that evokes not merely the title *ab*, but the most intimate title, *abba*. For Paul, God as Father was not simply one to

honor or one to teach us with authority. God is Father in a family sense of household. Paul writes of us as “no longer strangers and aliens, but ... fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Eph 2:19).

Paul also explores this understanding of our family tie with God our Father in Romans. In Romans 8:17 Paul writes of us as “children, then heirs – heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ.” The correlation between our son-ship (or daughter-ship!) and that of Christ is the key for Paul. For God is first and foremost the father of Christ. Paul writes of our need to “glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 15:6). God’s blessings to us, which would certainly include son-ship, are found in Christ. Paul blesses God as “the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (Eph 1:3).

POINTS FOR HOME

1. “There is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist” (1 Cor 8:6).

Pause for a moment and chew on that. One God. The Father. The Authority. The one who takes responsibility for training us, educating us. The one who calls us out of darkness into light. The one who blesses us with every spiritual blessing. The one who has eternal claim on us. Why would we ever refuse to humbly follow this God? Especially as Christian children, why would we run from the will of our Father who seeks our best? And yet all too often we do. Let us make a commitment right now, as we read this lesson or as we hear it. Let us commit to honor God as our Father as faithful and trusting children. Let us honor him in all we do, in what we say. “Let the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts and the direction of our feet and the works of our hands all be to our Father’s glory.

2. “God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline” (Heb 12:7).

While we have no way of knowing what role if any Paul played in the writing of the book of Hebrews, this point is certainly consistent with Paul’s message. As our *Ab*, our Father, God refuses to leave us to rear ourselves. That means that when discipline is needed, God stands ready to administer it! Now this is not fun to think about, talk about, or teach. It is hard to understand and difficult to accept. Yet there are times where God has to teach us a lesson the hard way! We must always be careful here, though. There are some who are so weighed down with guilt that they believe every hard time must be a discipline from God. Those need to remember that the rain falls on the just and unjust. We live in a fallen world where things are wrong and bad things happen. So that leaves us solidly to the same conclusion, whether we are being disciplined, or whether we are suffering

for some other reason. The conclusion is: God loves us and will not let us go. He loves us too much not to discipline when needed. And he loves us too much to ever let us endure pain and hardship without holding our hearts. SO take courage in the midst of hard times and know the love of God our Father!

3. “God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’”
(Gal 4:6).

How marvelous! Let me tell you about my Father! Let me tell you of one that hears my cries of childhood intimacy. Better yet, let me tell you of a Father who put those cries in to my heart! Who bought me and redeemed me and put me into his household with and by the power of Jesus! Let us never forget whose child we are!