

# A Father to the Fatherless

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[ 0 : 00 ] Welcome again to Church of the Advent. My name is Thomas, one of the pastors here. Happy Father's Day to those of you who are fathers. Also, we all have fathers. We're going to talk about that a little bit more this morning. Father's Day, I think probably like Mother's Day, can bring a complicated array of emotions to the fore.

For some of us, when we hear the word father, that brings feelings of warmth and security and good memories and laughter. It's a good, positive word.

But I think there are also a lot of people for whom the word father conjures painful memories. It's a word associated with grief. Maybe your father was absent or cruel or impossible to satisfy. Maybe he was physically present, but he was emotionally unavailable.

I remember one person at one point talking about the cereal stare where he and his father would have breakfast in the morning, and he would just sit there staring at his father. And his father would just eat, but just have this far-off stare.

And how he longed as a kid to know what to say to connect with his father and never could. Maybe you never knew your father at all. Maybe your father has passed away. Any of these could be reasons why the word father is emotionally complex.

[ 1 : 23 ] The point is, I think fatherhood is something that affects us all. We all have a father or a place where a father should have been. And that's why we're going to look at Psalm 68, which I think gives us one of the most beautiful descriptions of God in all of Scripture.

A father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation. A father to the fatherless and protector of widows.

So we're going to look at this verse, which is loaded with meaning. And we're going to consider fatherhood and the way it affects us all in three parts.

We're going to talk first about the ache of fatherlessness, and then the love of God the Father. And then we'll consider what this means for us. Please join me as we pray. Lord, Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word, and we thank you that we can come to you as our father and pray.

And ask that you would illuminate your word, that you would open our hearts. Lord, we are in your hands. We place ourselves into your care this morning, trusting that because of your loving kindness, because of your promises to us, we can hear you and receive from you what we need this morning.

[ 2 : 39 ] We pray that for our good, but chiefly for your glory. And in Jesus' name, amen. So first of all, I want to talk a little bit about the ache of fatherlessness. In the ancient world, to be fatherless was a very big deal because a father provided a lot of extremely important things.

So the author of Psalm 68 and those who would have first heard this verse, when they thought of fatherless people, they would think of a father as being someone who provided all of the financial support.

They protected you from being exploited. They gave legal representation in courts and disputes. So if you had any kind of issues that needed to be resolved legally, your father would represent you.

There was a whole world of inheritance rights that you needed a father for. The father provided you with social identity and status within your clan or tribe.

And so in the ancient world, to be fatherless, and in the Old Testament, when the Old Testament refers to a class of people, the fatherless, we're talking about people who are especially vulnerable.

[ 3 : 51 ] Financially, vulnerable to exploitation, vulnerable to being taken advantage of and trodden on by the strong and powerful. The fatherless were a very vulnerable people. Now I would argue that even though we live in a very different time and place and culture, fathers are every bit as important, even if they play different roles than they did in the ancient world.

We know that a father helps children develop all kinds of things. Fathers help their kids develop identity. And a sense of security in the world, a sense of belonging.

They're extremely important for helping people develop a sense of self-confidence, for helping children develop a moral imagination. Now I want to say this clearly. None of what we're going to talk about this morning diminishes the importance of mothers or women.

They are every bit as vital, every bit as important. But since the theme is fathers, that's what we're going to focus on this particular morning. And we are also going to highlight something that I would argue our culture and society sometimes has a hard time articulating.

And that is that fathers matter. And that, frankly, men matter. Richard Reeves is a social scientist who wrote a book called *Of Boys and Men*.

[ 5 : 06 ] He's one of the leading voices in the role of men in society today. And he says that if we look at all of the available data, it is clear that, and I want to say this carefully, fathers are not merely a bonus parent.

Fathers are not merely placeholders where you just need an interchangeable second adult. Reeves would argue that fatherhood is one of the load-bearing structures of human formation.

Fatherhood is one of the load-bearing structures of human formation. That's why fatherlessness is such a big deal in our society.

In our country right now, roughly 18.5 million kids. That's one in four kids. One in four live without a biological or step or adoptive father present in the home.

What that means is that right now, and this is based on a survey of 130 countries, so based on that data, the U.S. currently has the highest rate of single-parent homes globally in our country.

[ 6 : 17 ] So, a lot of people grow up without a father or father figure in the home. And in addition to that, as we alluded to at the beginning of this, there are a lot of people who have a father, but they don't act like a father.

You know, there's a father present, but maybe they're abusive, or as we said, emotionally absent, or maybe they deal with addiction, or maybe they're just simply too busy with work or other pursuits to be meaningfully engaged in our lives.

And all of that means that there are many people, including many of us, people in our 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, who carry around some kind of deep father wound.

And a lot of us don't even become aware that that's there until later in life. You know, there was a 58-year-old man who told a story about when he played high school football, and he always wanted his dad to come with him to watch him play at his games, but his dad was a very successful businessman, and he was always traveling, he was always busy, he was never able to come to his games.

So, he had never made it to a single game, and this 58-year-old man tells a story about the final game of his high school career. He knew it was the last time he was ever going to play football, and it was a state championship, and he was desperate to have his dad there.

[ 7 : 34 ] And so, the night of the big game, he's on the field, he's warming up, and he looks into the stadium just in time to see his father arrive. And his father walks in, he's wearing a business suit, and he walks in with two other guys who are wearing business suits, and they stand there, and they talk for a few minutes, and then they turn around, and they walk back out of the stadium.

And the man who told this story, as I said, is now 58 years old. It has been 40 years since that night, and yet this man had tears streaming down his face as he told the story of his father walking out of that stadium.

He was reliving, as he told the story, that sense of rejection and pain as though it had happened the day before. These wounds often don't heal on their own.

Like, they're things that we just carry with us, pain that scabs over, but then anything, and sometimes the most unexpected things, can pick that scab off, and the wound bleeds afresh.

But here's the thing I really want to focus on. Even if you had a great relationship with your father, your human father, Scripture says there's actually a deeper wound that all human beings carry, that all human beings are born with.

[ 8 : 48 ] And that is the broken relationship that we have with our heavenly Father. All of us were made to know and to love and to be known and be loved by God as father.

Scripture makes it very clear that the kind of relationship God wants to have with us is not just as a king with His subjects or as a CEO with His employees. He wants to be our father and for us to be

His children.

And yet, Scripture is also clear, and I think if we look at our lives, this is very obvious. It's obvious in my life that we're born with this instinct to want to live life apart from that God, to make it on our own, to come up with our own meaning, to come up with our own direction, to try to seek a way to be whole apart from God.

Because we value that sense of independence and autonomy. We don't realize that that means our relationship with Him has been broken, that the idea that we could ever be whole apart from God is a great lie.

From the serpent in Genesis chapter 3. And I think most people know this deep down. Even if you don't consider yourself to be religious, I think most people have a sense of this because there are symptoms of our spiritual father wound that play out in our lives, right?

[10:08] It's, for instance, the restlessness that you feel. The restlessness that we feel when we feel like we need to prove that we are enough. You know, whether it's in our parenting or in our work or in our friendships, we have this restless desire to kind of prove that we're enough or to get enough recognition or affirmation that I'm enough because deep down we don't really know that we're beloved.

It's the instinct we have to hide when we sin and mess up. That instinct to hide and to conceal. It's that need to perform when we feel insecure.

It's that need to control when we feel afraid or powerless. It's that desire that we have to seek blessing from people who can't really give it or whose blessing actually doesn't really matter that much, but we think it does because we're seeking it from something that's not supposed to provide it.

These are all symptoms of a spiritual father wound. We were created to live as sons and daughters before the face of God.

We were made to receive our identity and our security and our blessing from Him. And so, what we realize when we read Scripture is that sin has estranged us from our Father.

[11:26] So, we on our own live like orphans. We live like people without a home. We live like the fatherless. We try to make a life for ourselves apart from the only one who can make us whole.

So, that's the ache of fatherlessness, but that actually then leads us to the love of God the Father and the power of this verse and what it represents. Psalm 68 does not merely tell us that God helps the fatherless, where He kind of gives you a pat on the head and says, it's going to be okay, here's some resources.

It says that He becomes a father to the fatherless, right? And that's astonishing. It's saying God steps into that empty space, that God is able to fill what is missing.

He's able to become what we need. He becomes a father to the fatherless. And how does He do it? He becomes a fatherless, right? Through His Son, Jesus Christ. The New Testament repeatedly refers to Jesus as the firstborn.

And to call Jesus the firstborn is not to say that Jesus is the first thing God made. Some people misunderstand that. Now, before the incarnation, we know that Jesus existed for all eternity in a perfect relationship with His heavenly Father.

[12:50] So, when it refers to Jesus as the firstborn, it's talking about status. In the ancient world, to be the firstborn son was the most privileged place in the family next to the father.

The most privileged place. The firstborn son in Jewish culture would receive a double portion of the inheritance. They were the ones who would typically oversee all of their father's affairs and estate. And when the father died, it would all pass. All those rights and all the title and all the privileges that came with it would all pass to the son who would continue the family. And the legacy, the firstborn son, was everything that everybody wanted to be.

So, just to put it in modern terms, think of the kind of relationship you wish you could have or could have had with your father.

Even the best fathers aren't perfect. But what would the perfect relationship be like? Imagine what you wish it could have been with your father, right?

[13:54] Like, as I thought about this, I thought, well, you know, it would be to feel absolutely secure in his approval and in his love. Where I wake up every morning knowing that he approves and he loves.

It would be that sense that I'm his favorite thing in the world. That he's just delighted when he looks at me. That sense that your father will always be there for you, will always protect you, will always provide for you.

That sense that you can always count on him, that he'll always be there and he'll never let you down. That's the kind of relationship that Jesus has with his heavenly father.

In fact, when Jesus is baptized, his father's voice, his audible voice says, This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased.

And I think those are those things that we all long to hear from our father. He's saying essentially, I'm with you, I love you, and I am proud of you.

[15:01] And that speaks to the deepest parts of us. But here's the good news. At the heart of the Christian faith, there is an astonishing claim. And that is that God wants to have that same kind of relationship with us.

He wants to have that same kind of relationship with you. That's actually what we were made for.

And so what the gospel says is that Jesus Christ came to help us find our way home.

Back into the arms of our heavenly father. It's the whole reason that he left that perfect relationship and became flesh. And Jesus actually illustrates this amazing claim by telling a story about a father and two sons.

Two brothers. The elder brother works hard for his father faithfully every day. But the younger brother demands his inheritance early, which is tantamount to saying, I wish you would go ahead and die, old man, so I can take what's mine.

And then he abandons his father, and he goes and he squanders everything. And only when he has lost everything, only when he is so desperate that he is jealous of the slop that the pigs eat, does he decide to return.

[16:17] Not even out of a genuine heartbroken repentance, but more for pragmatic reasons.

Maybe I can convince my dad to hire me on as a servant, as a hired hand, so at least then I would have a place to sleep and some food to eat.

Because this isn't working anymore. The amazing thing about the story is that when the father sees the son still far off down the road, he, in a very undignified manner for a wealthy Jewish man, breaks out into a run and sprints down the road and embraces his son.

And before his son can even get the words out that he's been rehearsing on the walk home, he is tearfully kissing him. And he's putting his ring back on his finger, and he's taking his robe, and he's putting his robe back around his son.

And you know what that means. He's reinstating him as his son, as his child. And then he sends word out. Take everything that we've been saving, the fatted calf, the best wine.

Prepare it all because we're going to have a big party tonight. Tell everybody in town. We want everybody to be there. We're going to celebrate. What are we celebrating? My son who is lost has come home. Jesus is saying that is what God desires for each one of us.

[17:40] We've all in different ways abandoned God, I think, the way the younger brother did.

Simply by living in God's world and enjoying God's things as though God doesn't exist.

I wish you would die, old man, and leave me alone and let me do what I want. Jesus is saying, even if we have done that to God, God has not given up on us.

Like the father in the parable, God is like the father looking down the road. You can imagine that father waking up every day, going to his window, and looking out on that road, the road that his son left down.

And just looking for some sign of his son's return. You can imagine every day the father getting up and doing that. It's the only reason he would have seen him when he was still a long way off and known to go out and meet him, right?

He was already looking for him. And Jesus is saying, that's how God the father feels when he thinks about you, when he thinks about the people who have walked away from him. He's not angry.

[18:42] He's not waiting. He's, well, I hope they know what they did. No, he's looking and he's waiting for the slightest, slightest sign that there's any part of you that wants to come back to him.

And then as soon as that is there, as soon as there's even an inclination in your heart, he's running down the road to meet you.

And he's not waiting for you to phrase it perfectly. He's waiting for you to simply turn to simply, that's what the word repentance means, simply to turn and to say, I want to give this up and I want to go

back to my father.

And that's all it takes. And he is there. And he's putting the ring on your finger and he's putting the robe around your shoulders. And Jesus is saying, God wants to restore each one of us to the status of a firstborn son, to gain the same relationship with God that Jesus has enjoyed for all of eternity. And this is available to almost anyone. I say almost because by the end of the parable, there's only one person who has not yet gone into the celebration. And that's the elder brother.

Everybody's inside partying. The father comes out. Why don't you come in? The elder brother is furious because the father has shown mercy to this younger brother who squandered everything.

[ 20 : 01 ] But he's also furious. Why? Because all that they're spending and eating and drinking and celebrating, all of that, that was his inheritance. And now it's being used to celebrate this younger brother who brought nothing but shame to our house.

And what you realize is the elder brother can't see that he has also spurned his father's love. He says, I was loyal. I was here. I did everything you asked.

But all those years he worked so hard weren't motivated by love for his father. If they had been, he would be in that party. All of those years of service were motivated not by love for his father, but by love for his father's stuff.

I'm going to do my part. I'm going to be loyal. I'm going to obey. I'm going to work hard because I'm earning it. And one day I'm going to get what's mine. I'm going to get what they're now spending on this party. If he loved his father, he would love what his father loves, and he would be in there celebrating because he would love to see his father so delighted.

But he's angry and furious because he believes he deserves and should get what is rightfully owed him. He cannot see that he also needs mercy.

[ 21 : 20 ] His pride blinds him. So, there is this warning in this parable. God wants us to come back to him. He desires that. He's looking for us down the road. But the one thing that will keep that from happening is if we approach God believing that we are owed something instead of with a posture that says, I cry out for your mercy.

God loves us as his children, and he wants us to love him as our father, not for what he can give us, but for who he is. So, the implications of this are many, but I would say this, just something to consider.

Every single one of us, if you ever want to find a sense of identity, meaning, security, that begins by healing our spiritual father wound.

We need to come back to our father. We need to experience his forgiveness and embrace and be reinstated as sons and daughters of the king. Now, what does this mean for us more broadly?

As we take everybody here into account, I want to suggest three ways that we might take this with us from here. First, it means that there is a way for us to seek healing for our earthly father wounds, for those of us who have them.

[ 22 : 39 ] I think we all, in different ways, may feel hurt or let down by our earthly fathers. Some of us had amazing fathers, but no father is perfect, and there's only one perfect father, and that's our father in heaven.

And so, part of what this is telling us is if God is a father to the fatherless, it means that God can be the kind of father that all of us want and need, and none of us get because human beings aren't perfect. So, what that means is that we can now look to our heavenly father to give us things that we didn't get.

And in some cases, we're actually maybe looking for our earthly fathers to give us things that only our heavenly father can give us, right? We're maybe expecting too much. By living in the security of our relationship with God the Father, we can seek healing for our earthly father wounds.

What does that mean? It means there's some work that we may need to do. There may need to be some forgiveness that you have to extend, ways that you've been hurt or felt wrong, and you're carrying that with you.

And it may be that this Father's Day is the day when you decide, I'm going to stop carrying this resentment or this anger. I'm going to choose to forgive. Not because he's...maybe he hasn't asked for forgiveness.

[ 23 : 51 ] Maybe he doesn't know that he's hurting. Maybe he's passed away, and you can't have that conversation. You can still forgive, and you're not doing it based on... Even whether or not you believe he deserves it, you're doing it based on your relationship that you now have with your heavenly father who has forgiven you.

It means beyond forgiveness that there may just need to be things that we grieve, you know, ways that we wish our father could...roles we wish they could have played, things we wish they could have done, or maybe things that they did that we wish they hadn't done, and it's more of a source of grief and sadness of what might have been.

And we need to be willing to grieve those things. There's no way to deal with those feelings other than just to go right through them. You can't go around them. You can't sidestep them. You know, you can just...you have to go through.

But you can do that because you have the security of your heavenly father. And then...and this is going to sound...this is hard, okay? You have to be able to forgive and grieve.

And grief brings anger, and it brings all that...you have to deal with all that stuff. And to be able to name and to be thankful and to have gratitude for all the good that your father did bring into your life.

[ 25 : 02 ] And that sounds very...what we want to do is to say bad or good, right or wrong. We want to think in binaries. Cognitively, it's a lot easier for us. It's a lot harder, but it's a lot more emotionally healthy to be able to hold both together.

There are hard things. There are grievous things. But there's also really good things, and there's beautiful things. And they're...and both are true. That's...that's what healing that father wound looks like, okay?

And it's possible because you have a relationship with your heavenly father. Number two, I think this offers tremendous encouragement for those of us who are fathers. You know, we've been knocking on fathers a bit this morning, and I'm also a father of three.

And I know that there are ways that I let my kids down. I know that the time is going to come when they are going to have to forgive and grieve. Ways that I've fallen short.

And that's hard. When you're a parent, you're pretty much constantly worrying about, or at least I am. A lot of parents I know are. Constantly feeling like, you know, I thought I was going to be this great parent, and now I'm just...I'm hoping that I'm just average.

[ 26 : 20 ] You know, that I'm not bad. You know? Hoping I'm in the upper 50th percentile, you know? But you thought you were going to be like top 10, you know? And now you're like, I'm just hoping for more good than bad.

And so...and parenting does that. It's tremendously humbling. This passage reminds us of something crucial. Our kids need a heavenly father just as much as we do.

Because he can do for them things that we will never...