

GOD OUR FATHER What It Means To Be His Child

It's good to be emotionally stable, but it's more important to be in the hands of One who is greater than our problems. It's desirable to be born to non-abusive parents, but it's far better to be born into the family of God. It's beneficial to be employed in meaningful work, but it's eternally preferable to have a Provider who assures a security that exceeds all earthly benefits.

In the following pages, staff writer Kurt De Haan describes the kind of relationship that when understood and entered into can give meaning, security, and perspective to every area of life. It's the kind of family tie that can give faith to the fearful, hope to the disillusioned, and love to those who are lonely and unprotected.

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IN SEARCH OF THE PERFECT FATHER

Have you ever seen Scotland's Loch Ness monster? Caught a glimpse of the abominable snowman high in the Himalayas? Or spotted a perfect father anywhere on this planet?

No matter how thorough our search among the families on earth, and no matter how much we may love our own dad, we know all too well that every father has his flaws (which is putting it mildly). It is also true that what we know about human fathers and what we have experienced as children will affect how eagerly or how apprehensively we approach the subject of this booklet--knowing and enjoying God as our Father.

For some of us, it will be a fairly comfortable process. If we had a great and loving dad, we will gladly embrace the biblical picture of God as the ultimate parent. If we didn't have that kind of father, we may have a longing to find the kind of father we never knew. Still others of us, though, may struggle with even thinking of God in terms of a father. If our dad was abusive, emotionally distant, or physically absent, it may take a deliberate and perhaps even painful effort to sort through the misconceptions and learn

to cling to the life-changing truths of the right kind of fathering modeled by God.

Only Jesus has the perfect Father (Mt. 5:48), and He alone can help us to experience the close relationship with His Father that our hearts desire. The Lord Jesus told His disciples, "No one comes to the Father except through Me. If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also. . . . He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (Jn. 14:6-7,9). As the perfect Son of God, He revealed His Father perfectly, and He showed us how we could enjoy a closeness with the Father that we could never have dreamed possible.

No other relationship can be as fulfilling. For to know God as our Father is to know life as He intended it to be. Author and theologian J. I. Packer wrote, "If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God's child, and having God as his Father. If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all" (*Knowing God*, InterVarsity Press, p.182).

Do you believe that? Is that how you think and live each day? Do you enjoy a close relationship with the Father in heaven? Do you know how much He loves you and longs to care for you?

The purpose of this booklet is to help us to see the absolute perfection of our heavenly Father and to learn how to make the most of our relationship with Him.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE GOD'S CHILD?

"Once upon a time" Think back to a story you probably read as a child - *Cinderella*. In the popular English version that I remember, a poor peasant girl named Cinderella was living a slave like existence with her ugly stepsisters and a tyrant of a stepmother (both are bad stereotypes!).

While the stepmother and stepsisters went to a ball in the king's palace, Cinderella had to stay home. But when she was magically transformed into a dazzling beauty, she set off for the palace in a pumpkin-turned-coach.

During the evening the dashing young prince danced with Cinderella and fell in love. She had to rush home when the clock struck midnight, however, and accidentally left behind a glass slipper. The prince searched the kingdom to find the slipper's owner, and eventually found that it fit Cinderella. He swept her off her feet, married her, and she became a royal princess, part of the royal family.

It's a great story. I think part of the reason so many of us like the tale is that we all like to imagine we too could be a child of a king--living like a princess or prince--with all the privileges that come with such a position. We're often frustrated by the daily drudgery or even mistreatment. We long to be treated as someone special.

The Bible describes something far better than any mythical tale of a peasant-turned-princess, and something more real than imagining ourselves to be a child of a present-day world leader. The Bible states that common sinners can become children of the King of the universe.

In the pages that follow, we will examine six characteristics of what it means for a person to be a child of God.

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When the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son . . . to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!" Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ (Gal. 4:4-7).

Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! (1 Jn. 3:1).

Those are powerful words! Ordinary people like you and me can be called children of the Creator of the universe. That's worth thinking about.

Why do we need to become part of another family?

An illustration from recent history will help us to realize the significance of this concept. The images are burned deeply into my memory--emaciated babies and young children sitting in cribs in a stark, ill-equipped Romanian orphanage. It was soon after the fall of the ruthless leader, Nicolae Ceausescu, in 1989. Conditions were awful. Malnutrition, disease, and death were frequent visitors.

The good news was that when Ceausescu fell, the plight of the orphans became worldwide news--and compassionate people from all over the world rushed to help. Food, medicine, and money poured in. But the most dramatic effort of love was made by those who struggled through the red tape to adopt the orphans. Instead of being children of a ruthless government, they became children of parents who longed to love them and provide for them a life with hope and a future.

God has done something similar for us. We live in a world that is dominated by a heartless tyrant. The Bible describes Satan as "the ruler of this world" (Jn. 12:31; 16:11) and "the god of this age," who has blinded the minds of people so they do not believe in Christ (2 Cor. 4:4). Those who reject Christ are called children of the devil (Jn. 8:44).

This directly contradicts the concept of what has been called the universal fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. To say that God is the loving Father of all people and that no one will ever be judged as worthy of hell is a statement contrary to what Jesus and the Bible say about who qualifies to be a child of God. In 1 John 3:15 we learn that humanity can be divided into two categories: the children of God and the children of the devil. And Jesus told Paul that his mission in life would be to turn people "from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God" (Acts 26:18).

What has God done to bring us into His family?

The Bible uses two word pictures to explain this process. The first is what Jesus described as being "born again" (Jn. 3:3). The second is the concept we have already referred to--adoption (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:5; Eph. 1:5). Both analogies help us to understand the frequent biblical use of the expressions *sons of God* and *children of God*.

Jesus said that a person is outside the family of God, spiritually condemned, unless he is spiritually reborn (Jn. 3:1-21). This rebirth is accomplished by

God's Spirit when a person expresses personal faith in Jesus as one's only hope of forgiveness of sin and life in heaven. The apostle John said that "as many as received [Jesus], to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name" (Jn. 1:11-12).

Adoption is the other key illustration used in the New Testament. In Romans 8:14-16, the apostle Paul wrote, "As many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God."

Whereas the term *born again* may be said to refer primarily to the giving of new spiritual life and bringing a person into God's family, the term *adoption* highlights the new relationship with the Father and the new legal rights and privileges.

We are not only saved from an eternity in hell, but we are also given a wonderful new status as children of God. Pastor and author Erwin Lutzer states, "Christ did not die on the cross just so our sins could be forgiven, though that itself would deserve our endless praise. Sin was a roadblock which God removed so that He could achieve some lofty goals in our lives. Specifically, we have been appointed to be sons of God" (*You're Richer Than You Think*, SP Publications, p.47).

In Galatians 3:22-4:7, Paul highlighted many of the truths we have addressed so far:

- Until we become a child of God, we are spiritually dead, enslaved to sin (3:22-23; 4:3).
- One becomes a child of God by a personal expression of faith in Christ (3:26).
- God's Spirit gives us new life and makes us children of God (4:6).
- To be a child of God means both freedom from sin's bondage and incredible privileges now and forever as a spiritual heir (vv.4-7).

How can being part of God's family change my life?

That's what the rest of this booklet is all about. We will explore the biblical truths that we have free access to the Father in prayer, training in how to be Christlike, help for every situation we face in life, a new perspective of hope

for this life and eternity, and last but not least, we have responsibilities to fulfill to our Father and to our new brothers and sisters.

Through [Jesus] we both have access by one Spirit to the Father (Eph. 2:18).

When you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. . . . For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him. In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name (Mt. 6:7-9).

Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Heb. 4:16).

The statements above would be seen as blasphemous if you believed that because God is perfect and separated from evil, He cannot be approached so casually, if at all, by people like you and me. Yet Jesus and His disciples have made it clear that we indeed can come to God in prayer because we are family through faith in Christ.

If I wanted to meet with a high-ranking federal government official, I would have to make an appointment--days or months in advance. But when I want to talk with my dad, what do I do? I simply drop by his home or pick up the phone and call him. Why? Because we're family.

My four children know they can come and talk to me anytime at all. No appointments are necessary. They don't have to put on their best clothes or even take a bath first. They don't have to use special language, kneel down, hold their hands a certain way, or follow an outline of what to say. Why? Because we're family.

We can call God "Abba."

Abba is the Aramaic term that Jewish children use to address their fathers. (Aramaic is a language closely related to Hebrew and was commonly spoken during the time of Christ's ministry.) The English equivalent of *Abba* would be the terms *Daddy* or *Dear Father*. Although the term was originally derived from babytalk, by the time of Christ it was a word used by young and old alike to speak in an intimate way to their fathers.

The New Testament was written in Greek (the trade language of the wider Mediterranean world), so the word we usually find for father is *pater*. But because the common language of the day in Palestine was Aramaic, we have good reason to believe that when Jesus taught His disciples to pray, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name" (Mt. 6:9), He told them to use the term *Abba*.

In Romans 8:15, the apostle Paul said that because we are God's adopted children, we can cry out "Abba, Father" (this phrase is also used in Mark 14:36 and Galatians 4:6). Concerning this verse, Bible commentator F. F. Bruce writes that the use of *Abba* is significant because "*Abba* was not, and is not the term used by Jews when addressing God as their Father. But the fact that the Aramaic word found its way into the worshiping vocabulary of the Gentile churches strongly suggests that it was used in this way by Jesus" (*The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, Eerdmans, p.166).

Why is this privilege so significant?

The Old Testament emphasizes God's awesome holiness to such a degree that He does not seem approachable. The tabernacle and temple reinforced this idea by both structure and ritual. God's special presence was not something that everyone could enter--only the high priest, and only once a year.

In his book *What Jesus Said About Successful Living*, Haddon W. Robinson writes, "In the Old Testament, the Israelites did not individually address God as Father. As far as we know, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, or Daniel never fell to their knees in the solitude of their chambers and dared to address God that way. Yet in the New Testament, God is called Father at least 275 times, and that is how we are instructed to speak to Him. All that a good father wants to be to his children, Jesus told us, God will be to Christians who approach Him in prayer. We can pray as children" (Discovery House Publishers, p.190).

In the New Testament, we have a clear picture of the believer's privilege to call God "Father." It is central to the gospel message and to the way we are to live as Christ's followers. God's holiness and greatness is not diminished by this in the least because in Christ we have a mediator who satisfies God's requirements for holiness and who makes us holy by His sacrifice for our sins (1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 8:6; 9:15; 12:24). We can now come before Him with a God-sanctioned boldness (Eph. 3:12; Heb. 4:16; 10:19).

Isn't there a danger of taking prayer too lightly?

There certainly is. As we embrace the refreshing truth that we have unhindered access to God through Jesus Christ, we must not forget that God is truly awesome. Haddon Robinson states, "The fact that we come to a throne should fill us with awe. But because it is a throne of *grace*, it is approachable. . . . We can intimately and confidently talk with our Father" (*What Jesus Said About Successful Living*, p.191).

What is your prayer-life like?

I don't know about you, but these truths from the Bible help me to see that heaven's door is always open to me as a member of God's family. The Father is eagerly anticipating my next visit, longing to hear my words of affection, to hear of my struggles, to hear my expressions of trust, and to hear the requests that show my realization that I depend on Him for everything in life. I hope you too are sensing the wonderful privilege and opportunity we have as God's children.

Whom the LORD loves He corrects, just as a father the son in whom He delights (Prov. 3:12).

We have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness (Heb. 12:9-11).

Training is a topic that most of us would rather not discuss. That's because we don't enjoy the pain that is necessary for learning and maturing. Training takes many forms. It may be physical: trying to get our body in shape by eating less and exercising more. It may be emotional and spiritual: learning how to depend on the Lord when tragedy strikes. Or it may take the form of suffering the consequences of sinful choices, and experiencing the Lord's rebuke: learning "the hard way."

As children, we didn't enjoy the "lessons" our parents tried to teach us. Cleaning our rooms, helping with household chores, and doing our homework were generally not what we would have chosen to do with our time. And when we violated the rules, we didn't enjoy being sent to our room, getting spanked, being forced to do extra chores, or getting punished

in some other way. At the time we received the discipline, we didn't have much appreciation for what we learned.

My father had a way of reminding his four sons that he didn't enjoy having to discipline us. Just before spanking one of us, he would say, "This is going to hurt me more than it will you." Many times, I'm sure, we had a hard time believing that. But now, as a father of four children myself, I understand what he meant. And it seems I spend quite a bit of time thinking through the type of discipline to use and the goal I want to achieve with my children. All of this has helped me to understand a little more of what it means for God to discipline us.

How does God train His children?

As we have already illustrated, discipline can be either positive or negative. It can be training--instruction in how to live. Or it can take the form of correction--punishment for wrongdoing.

The author of Hebrews refers to both types of discipline. After a lengthy chapter in which he listed believers whose faith was severely tested by difficulties, persecution, and even martyrdom, he began chapter 12 by reminding his readers that we need to follow the examples of faithfulness of the past and to endure all difficulties as we follow Christ's example. Using athletic imagery, he told us to get in shape spiritually and not to allow anything to slow us down as we "run with endurance the race that is set before us" (v.1).

Then the writer pointed to Jesus Christ as the ultimate example to follow (vv.2-3). Hebrews 5:8 says this about Christ: "Though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered." That is not to say that Christ was in any way sinful. It does say, however, that through the suffering He endured, Christ experienced everything that the Father wanted Him to, and by that experience earned the qualifications to be the Savior of the world. Jesus Himself learned the high cost of obedience to the Father.

If Jesus Christ had to undergo such training, how could we ever question why God allows us to undergo training of a similar nature?

Hebrews 12 also speaks of discipline that is corrective, that which is a result of our sin. Verse 6 states that the Lord "scourges every son whom He receives." God sometimes has to take drastic measures in dealing with His children.

The New Testament church in Corinth, for example, had several members who needed correction (1 Cor. 11:17-34). They had lost touch with the reason for observing the Lord's Supper, and some were even getting drunk! As a result of God's discipline, several were suffering physically and some even died because of their callous attitude.

Why should we be glad that God disciplines His children?

It demonstrates His love. Hebrews 12:5 quotes Proverbs 3:12 and says that as a good human father corrects his children, God corrects those whom He loves.

Paul Dwight Moody, son of evangelist D. L. Moody (1837-1899), told how his dad reflected the love of the heavenly Father in discipline. The incident took place when Paul was 10 years old. His dad had told him to finish talking with a visiting friend and then go to bed. But, Paul wrote, "A little later he came into the room again and saw that I had not obeyed him. Speaking with that directness of which he was capable, he ordered me to bed at once. His brusque tone of voice was new to me, and I retreated, frightened and in tears. But before I had time to fall asleep, he was at my bedside. He explained that he had reprimanded me because I had disobeyed him, but this in no way indicated that he didn't love me. As he knelt to pray with me, I noticed that tears were falling down over his rugged, bearded face. . . . I'll never forget the scene. My father had unknowingly awakened within me the consciousness of the love of God."

What is the goal of discipline?

The Father's goal is to make us more like Christ. He doesn't want to hurt us; He wants to better us. Hebrews 12:10-11 tells us that God wants us to be "partakers of His holiness" and to produce "the peaceable fruit of righteousness." And according to James 1:2-5, the "testing" of our faith "produces patience" with the goal of making us spiritually mature.

Pastor Jim Carpenter writes, "Your heavenly Father never makes a mistake in discipline. His timing is perfect, His motives are pure, and His methods are never destructive. They are always beneficial" (*Discipleship Journal*, Issue 51, p.52).

Do we believe it?

Are we convinced that everything God allows to happen in our lives is training of one sort or another--with the goal of making us more like Christ?

It's true. It is that truth that puts all of the good and bad in life in perspective. With a goal so grand and noble, nothing in life is too bad to endure. And if we are willing to accept that, our attitude then must be, "Lord, whatever it takes, make me like Your Son Jesus Christ."

A father of the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in His holy habitation (Ps. 68:5).

Do not worry, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" . . . For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things (Mt. 6:31-32).

What man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him! (Mt. 7:9-11).

As a dad, I am eager to come to my children's aid. It may be a skinned arm or leg that needs some cleaning up, a bandage, and most of all, a little sympathy. It may be some help in trying to understand a tough homework assignment. It could be help in handling a conflict with a fellow student or a neighbor. It could be protecting them from a large, mean-looking dog that suddenly showed up in our front yard. Sometimes it is simply a hug when they are feeling left out or lonely.

How do we know our Father in heaven will help us in our times of need?

What kind of Father would He be if He didn't? Jesus answered this question in Matthew 7. He said that it's unthinkable that a father would be so cruel that he would give a stone to a hungry child who asks for some bread, or a snake to one who asks for fish (vv.9-10). Then He drew a comparison: If we, as imperfect and sinful as we are, know how to give what is good to our children, how much more will our absolutely perfect Father give good things to us (v.11).

Commenting on this passage, William Hendriksen writes, "The heavenly Father will not disappoint His children. This, however, does not mean that He will always give them whatever they ask. It means that He will not give them anything that is bad for them. He will give 'good things' to those who ask Him" (*The Gospel of Matthew*, Baker Book House, p.363).

The Bible assures us that we can cast all our cares on Him because He cares for us (1 Pet. 5:7). He knows our needs and He knows how to meet those needs with wisdom and compassion.

The Old Testament prophet Isaiah provides us with an interesting picture of God's care for His spiritual children. During a difficult time when Israel was being defeated by her enemies and God seemed to be far away, the people said, "The LORD has forsaken me, and my Lord has forgotten me." But God answered, "Can a woman forget her nursing child, and not have compassion on the son of her womb? Surely they may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands" (Isa. 49:14-16).

We too can be certain that the One who gave us spiritual birth will never abandon us nor fail us.

What kinds of help do we need?

Here are some examples of the kind of help we need, and Bible verses (look them up) that indicate how God will supply those needs.

- receiving basic physical needs (Mt. 6:31-32)
- having wisdom to know what to say in tough witnessing situations (Mt. 10:18-20)
- knowing how to pray (Rom. 8:26)
- dealing with suffering (Rom. 8:18-30)
- coping with illness (2 Cor. 12:7-10; Jas. 5:16)
- resisting temptation (Rom. 6:1-23; 8:12-17; 1 Cor. 10:13)
- needing comfort (2 Cor. 1:3-7)
- facing intense pressures (2 Cor. 1:8-11)
- resisting Satan (Eph. 6:10-18; Jas. 4:7)
- coping with trials (Jas. 1:5)
- overcoming worry (1 Pet. 5:7)

How has God demonstrated His loving care in times past?

As we read the Bible, we find many examples of God's help in times of need. He has shown that He is the eager provider and protector of His children.

The nation of Israel, for example, experienced the love of the Father throughout their history. In thinking back to the time the Lord brought them out of Egypt, Moses said, "The LORD your God carried you, as a father

carries his son, all the way you went until you reached this place" (Dt. 1:31 NIV).

The Bible contains many other examples too numerous to mention here. People like Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael, Joseph, Ruth, Daniel, Esther, Paul, and John could testify to God's provision and protection.

How has God demonstrated His loving care to you?

The truths we have been talking about may mean little to you if you don't recognize that God wants to care for you too. If you are His child through faith in Christ, He's already done a lot for you, and He longs to do more.

The evidence of His care may come through the people He sends into your life to meet your needs and encourage you. It may come through a deep peace in your heart as you express your trust in Him and cast all your cares on Him (1 Pet. 5:7). It may come through the supply of your physical needs or the grace and strength to endure great difficulty (2 Cor. 12:9; Phil. 4:11). You can be sure that your Father cares for you.

[I pray] that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation . . . ; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints (Eph. 1:17-18).

We know that all things work together for good to those who love God If God is for us, who can be against us? (Rom. 8:28,31).

In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself (Jn. 14:2-3).

Hope is what keeps you and me alive. People who lose hope of some sort or another usually become an enemy of society or a drain upon it. People without some glimmer of hope lash out or drop out. They become suicidal--by their reckless behavior in search of a temporary thrill or by blatant acts of despair that lead them to try to end it all by jumping, overdosing, or shooting.

What hope keeps people going from day to day?

The hope of a paycheck? The thought of what they're going to do tomorrow or on the weekend? A vacation? A six-pack in the refrigerator? A warm relationship? A promotion? A high school diploma? A college degree? A new baby? A new house? Retirement? Recognition and reward from family, co-workers, friends, fellow churchgoers? Religion and the thought of eventual reward from God?

At the core of all the religions of the world is a quest for hope--something that makes sense of the apparent chaos and injustices of life. Men and women long to know why they exist, where they are going, and what makes it all worthwhile. Tragically, so many people are clinging to false hope.

The apostle Paul, when speaking to a group of philosophers in first-century Athens, tried to help them see the futility of their thinking and to see that the only true hope is in Jesus Christ (Acts 17:16-34). Paul had observed idol after idol in the city (v.16)--idols that represented false hope. So he pointed to the Creator who could be known (v.27). There is hope in this life and beyond the grave (v.31). That hope is centered in knowing God as He has revealed Himself through His Son Jesus Christ, and trusting Him for forgiveness of sin.

In a letter to the believers in Ephesus, Paul described their condition before they had learned about Christ and put their trust in Him. He said, "At that time you were without Christ, . . . having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12).

Why do we have reason to hope?

We are part of a family that has a loving heavenly Father and a Son who has opened the door to hope.

Paul also told the Ephesians he was praying that they would realize just how great the believers' hope is through Christ (1:17-18). He prayed that they would get to know God the Father better and realize all that He offers His

children. Let's examine a few of the reasons we have for hope in this life and beyond.

What is our basis for hope?

- We have been given spiritual life and are freed from Satan's death-grip (Eph. 2:1-7).
- We have been given the inner presence of the Holy Spirit, who confirms that we are God's children (Rom. 8:16) and guarantees that our adoption is forever (Eph. 1:13-14).
- We have God's power enabling us to live for Him (2 Cor. 12:9; Eph. 1:19).
- We have assurance that nothing can separate us from God's love (Rom. 8:35-39).
- We have confidence that all the events of life--good and bad--have a purpose (Rom. 8:28) and that God is in control (vv.29-39).
- We have the promise that we can be forgiven of sin and restored to a close relationship with the Father if we confess (1 Jn. 1:5-10).
- We have the guarantee of our Father's help as we live for Him (see section on help).
- We have a Father who hears and answers prayer (see previous section on prayer).
- We have the encouragement that comes from belonging to a family where each is spiritually gifted for the good of others (Rom. 12:1-8; Eph. 4:1-16; Heb. 10:25).
- We have the promise of an abundant, meaningful life (Jn. 10:10).
- We have God's Word to guide us and equip us for every task (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

What is our hope for eternity?

- We look forward to a coming resurrection (Acts 24:15; 1 Cor. 15).
- We have a heavenly home waiting for us, specially prepared by Christ (Jn. 14:1-6).
- We will be with Christ Himself (1 Jn. 3:2; 2 Cor. 5:6-9; Rev. 21-22).
- We will be like Christ (1 Jn. 3:2)--having a new body that is free from the ravages of sin (2 Cor. 5:1-5).
- We will be reunited with our believing loved ones (1 Th. 4:13-18).
- We will receive an inheritance far beyond our greatest dreams (Eph. 1:11,14,18; Col. 1:12; 1 Pet. 1:3-4).

- Our service for Christ and the sacrifices we made for Him will be richly rewarded (1 Cor. 3:9-15; 9:16-27; Col. 3:24).
- We will experience relief from every kind of sorrow we knew on earth (Rev. 21:4).

Do you have hope?

As we have just seen, we have plenty of reasons to be hopeful about this life and the life to come. It's easy to become preoccupied with troubles that confront us daily. Some of those difficulties may appear insurmountable. That's all the more reason we should purposefully and regularly set aside time to review these reasons for hope. No matter how hopeless life may seem at the moment, we have reason for hope on earth because we have a Father in heaven.

As obedient children, . . . be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, "Be holy, for I am holy." And if you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay here in fear (1 Pet. 1:14-17).

You shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect (Mt. 5:48).

In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother (1 Jn. 3:10).

To be God's child is great, and it has many benefits that we can feel thrilled to be able to enjoy. We've spent the major part of this booklet detailing many of those privileges. But there's another important and inescapable side to this relationship: God's children have responsibilities to fulfill.

What do we expect from our own children?

It's heartbreaking to listen to an elderly parent talk about a son or daughter who finished school and got a job, then moved out of the house and hardly ever stops by to visit or even telephone Mom and Dad. We grieve with the parent of a rebellious 17-year-old who seems intent on playing the party scene and turning his back on God and the church. And we're sympathetic with the parents of a preschooler who runs away in a store when they say, "Come back here!"

I don't know how it was around your house, but when I was growing up one thing was clear: Being a child involved giving as well as taking. In spite of my stubborn tendency to do otherwise, I was expected to treat my parents with proper respect, to trust their judgment, to listen to them attentively, to do what they said to do (such as chores), and to treat my brothers well. I also learned that doing all those things was a lot more enjoyable if I was aware of my parents' love and their desire to help me, not hurt me.

Now that I am deep into parenthood, I have the perspective from the other side. And I realize how much it must have pleased my parents when I treated them right (which I didn't always do). And I also realize that the response I desire most from my children is not just obedience but an expression of love.

What does God want from us?

The New Testament contains many exhortations to exhibit the right conduct or develop the proper attitudes. And very often those commands are within the context of our relationship with God our Father and the family of believers. Let's look at several examples.

The Father desires our love most of all. What did Jesus say when a legal expert asked Him, "Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" (Mt. 22:36 NIV). Jesus replied, "'Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment" (vv.37-38).

It's one thing to go through the motions of obeying out of duty, but it's quite another to serve God out of genuine devotion, telling Him often that we love Him. Have you told your heavenly Father recently that you love Him?

What this means to our heavenly Father was illustrated to me by one of my daughters when she was 2 years old. She had learned the mechanics of saying, "I love you," by mimicking Mom and Dad, but on one occasion her words took on special meaning. One evening while we were playing together, she ran to me, put her little arms around my neck and said, "I love you, Daddy!" That moment was precious to me. Her words went straight to my heart because they were sincere, unrehearsed, and pure.

As we think about who our heavenly Father is, how much He loves us, and all He does for us, we too will find ourselves running to Him in prayer and saying, "I love You, Father!"

The Father deserves honor. At the end of the Old Testament, the Lord asked the leaders of His chosen people some soul-searching questions: "A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am the Father, where is My honor? And if I am a Master, where is My reverence?" (Mal. 1:6).

We learned earlier of the tremendous privilege we have to call the almighty Creator by the intimate term *Abba*. But we must never forget who He is--the sovereign Lord of all that exists.

To honor the Father also means to recognize that He is the provider of all that we have and enjoy. We are to be "always giving thanks to God the Father for everything" (Eph. 5:20 NIV).

The Father wants us to imitate Him. Pastor and author Erwin Lutzer writes, "If a man says, 'My father is Mr. Jones,' you look at his face to see if you can see any resemblance to his father. So when a believer says, 'I am a son of God,' we should expect that his life will have at least some trace of the character of God" (*You're Richer Than You Think*, Victor Books, p.55).

The apostle Paul wrote, "Be imitators of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us" (Eph. 5:1-2). We are imitators of God also when we are merciful as He is merciful (Lk. 6:36).

The family resemblance is seen in our clean break from a godless way of life. We are to be clearly different from people who are not members of God's family. In 1 John we read, "This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God" (3:10 NIV).

Although we are "born again" by faith (Jn. 3:3,16), we demonstrate the reality of that faith by acts of obedience to God. James said, "Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead" (2:17). Jesus taught, "Whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother" (Mt. 12:50). He also said, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven" (7:21).

Our pattern of behavior, therefore, whether acts of obedience or disobedience, reveals to whose family we belong.

What responsibilities do we have to other members of the family?

Romans 12:5 reminds us that we are closely linked to other children of God. We may not recognize it or consistently act like it, but all who come to God through faith in Christ are members of the same family: "We, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another."

It must hurt the Father to see His children at odds with each other. It hurts me deeply when my children fight and I hear a comment like, "She hates me!" It is painful to see them not wanting to help each other. How much more it must make our Father's heart ache to see the kind of "warfare" that goes on among believers.

As members of a spiritual family, we must put aside our self-centeredness and look out for the interests of one another. Our responsibilities include:

- We are to love one another. The all-encompassing obligation we have to other children of God, just as in our relationship with God, is love (Rom. 13:8; 1 Cor. 13; 1 Th. 3:12; 4:9; 1 Pet. 3:8; 4:8; 1 Jn. 3:11,23; 4:7,11-12; 2 Jn. 1:5).
- We are to honor one another through service (Rom. 12:10; Gal. 5:13; 1 Pet. 4:10).
- We are to be generous and hospitable (Rom. 12:13; 1 Pet. 4:9).
- We are to do all we can to build up one another spiritually, not tear each other down (Rom. 14:13).
- We are to teach each other (Rom. 15:14).
- We are to be truthful (Eph. 4:25; Col. 3:9).
- We are to be kind and forgiving (Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13).
- We are to comfort one another in times of need (1 Th. 5:11).
- We are to challenge each other to live holy lives (Heb. 3:13; 10:24-25).
- We are to pray for one another (Jas. 5:16).

Are we fulfilling our responsibilities joyfully?

We've listed many obligations that we have to our heavenly Father and to our brothers and sisters in Christ. As we read such a list, we may tend to feel like a child who just received a list of chores to do on Saturday morning before he can go play with his friends.

That's why we need to remind ourselves continually of what will motivate us to do all these things with the right attitude--a recognition that we are family. We are part of a spiritual family headed by a loving Father who out of love

for us has gone to great lengths, even sacrificing His own Son Jesus Christ, to bring us into His family.

As we think of all He has done for us and how much He loves us, our hearts and lives cannot help but respond with the kind of loving words and actions that will please Him and create a closer family among those who also have been adopted by Him.

As we complete this study, the prayer of the apostle Paul for the children of God in Ephesus is also my prayer for you:

I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know Him better (Eph. 1:17 NIV).

ARE YOU A MEMBER OF THE FAMILY?

It's the most important issue of life: Can you say that God is your Father? Have you become a child of God by declaring your personal faith in Jesus as Savior? Your answer determines whether all the joys of knowing God as Father now and throughout eternity will be yours.

Perhaps you've read this booklet with an uneasy feeling that you are not a member of the family. Now is a good time to settle the issue.

The Father longs to adopt you, and the procedure is simple. Come to Him in childlike faith, accepting His offer of forgiveness from your sins, which have kept you out of the family. Jesus lived, died, and rose from the grave to show you the Father's love and to make it possible to become a member of God's family.

The Father is waiting to hear from you. He does not expect flowery words, just a simple expression of childlike faith. Tell Him that you believe Jesus died to pay the penalty for your sins. Accept His gift of forgiveness (Rom. 6:23) and the invitation to be part of His family forever.

If you've done that, welcome to the family!