

“Our Father Who Art in Heaven”
Isaiah 63:7-64:12
Psalm 103
John 1:1-18

April 3, 2022

We read this same passage a few weeks ago when we looked at “I Believe in the Holy Spirit.”
It’s actually not surprising that a passage emphasizing the Fatherhood of God
also emphasizes the gift of the Holy Spirit.
After all, how do you know that God is *your* Father?

The apostle John tells us:

“By this we know that we abide in him and he in us,
because he has given us of his Spirit.
And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son
to be the Savior of the world.” (1 John 4:13-14)

The way that you know that God is your Father is because he has given you his Spirit.
The Spirit of God is not a feeling.
He is not some mystical spooky force!

He is the third person of the Holy Trinity.
He is God the Holy Spirit!

How do you know that you have the Holy Spirit?
Well, if you confess that Jesus is Lord, you have the Holy Spirit.

A few verses earlier, John had said,
“By this you know the Spirit of God:

every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh
is from God,
and every spirit that does not confess Jesus
is not from God.” (1 John 4:2-3a)

But this is what Isaiah had spoken of in Isaiah 63-64.
Isaiah recounts the *hesed* – the steadfast love of the LORD.
His covenant faithfulness – his loyalty to his promises, and to his people.

When God saved Israel from Egypt,
He had said to Pharaoh –
“Israel is my son, my firstborn – so I say to you,
‘Let my son go, that he may serve me.’” (Ex 4:22)

Israel was called the firstborn Son of God.

But only a few time in the OT do the prophets address God as “our Father.”
Here, in Isaiah 63, Isaiah refers to the Exodus – and the Conquest –
and says “you are our Father,

our Redeemer from of old is your name.”
But while the holy people held possession of the land “for a little while,”
now the adversaries have trampled down your sanctuary,
and Israel has become like the other nations – no better than the Gentiles.

That’s why chapter 64 starts with the plea,
*“Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down,
that the mountains might quake at your presence...”*

Isaiah recognizes that Israel’s failure means that only God can save.

*Behold, you were angry, and we sinned;
in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved?
We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.*

We are helpless before you – in ourselves we have nothing by which we can stand before you.

*But now, O LORD, you are our Father;
we are the clay and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.*

We need you, O God, to act.

We need your Spirit to come.
And we are utterly incompetent to make it happen.

You’ll notice that the Lord’s Prayer begins *precisely* where the Creed does.
“Our Father”

Our Psalm of response – Psalm 103 – uses the same images
and so let us sing Psalm 103 to “our Father” –
thanking him that he has been merciful to us in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Sing Psalm 103
Read John 1:1-18

Some people really struggle with calling God, “Father.”
Maybe your father died – or disappeared – and so you didn’t have a father –
or worse, maybe your father treated you badly.

Many people have a good reason to be deeply suspicious of “fathers.”

But I would suggest that this is why calling out to God as “our Father” is so important.
After all, maybe someone has a bad experience with love.
Maybe someone did horrible things to you – and called it “love.”
Does that mean that you get rid of love?

Does that mean that you will be never be capable of experiencing love?

No!

You *know* what love is – and it makes you angry (rightly angry!)

that someone perverted “love”

and twisted that word into the service of manipulation and fear.

Even so with “Father.”

The reason why you are angry at your “biopapa”

is because *you know* what “father” means –

and that man was *not* “father.”

Fathers protect their children.

Fathers comfort their children.

Fathers are able and ready to help their children!

So if your father was *not* a father to you,
then it’s okay to say so!

That man may have begotten you –
but he was *not father*.

But God is.

Our Shorter Catechism has a lovely way of saying this:

Q. 100. *What does the preface of the Lord's prayer teach us?*

A. The preface of the Lord's prayer, which is, “Our Father who art in heaven,” teaches us to draw near to God with all holy reverence and confidence, as children to a father able and ready to help us; and that we should pray with and for others.

There are three points in the preface of the Lord's Prayer:

1. Our *Father* in heaven – what does it mean that God is Father?
2. Our *Father* in *heaven* – what does it mean that he is a ‘heavenly’ Father?
3. Our *Father* in heaven – why is it important that he is *our* Father?

1. Our *Father* in Heaven: “as Children to a Father Able and Ready to Help Us”

The most important thing to remember about prayer
is to remember who you are talking to!

We saw last time from Jesus' teaching in Matthew 6
that God is not impressed with making a big show –
or with using lots of flowery words.

God knows what you need before you open your mouth –
but like any father, he still wants to hear it *from you!*

We read John 1 because John's gospel helps us understand what it means for God to be “Father.”

John 1:11-13 says that when the word become flesh

He came to his own [neuter – his own place – the land of Israel]

*but his own [masculine – his own people – of Israel] did not receive him.
But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name,
he gave the right to become children of God,
who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh
nor of the will of man, but of God.*

Those who believe in the name of Jesus become children of God –
who are born by the will of God.

But we become children of God because of who Jesus is.

*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory,
glory as of the only-begotten Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (v14)*

The word translated “only-begotten” is the word “*monogenes*” in Greek –
a word that can be translated “only-begotten” or “only” or “unique.”

When this word is used in the context of the begetting or bearing of children,
the translation “only-begotten” is appropriate.

And John 1:18 shows why this is:

“No one has ever seen God; the only-begotten God [the monogenes God]
who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.”

John’s point in John 1 is to say that the Word –
the Word who was in the beginning with God –
is the Son of God.

He was the only-begotten of the Father *before* he became flesh and dwelt among us.

I will grant that it is a strange phrase –
“the only-begotten God, who is at the Father’s side”!

But what it shows us is that God has been Father before all ages.
God has *always* been Father –
just like the Word has always been Son.

So when you come to the Father in prayer,
you are coming to one who has been Father for all eternity.
He is the reason why we think that “Father” needs to be something good.
(Just like he is the reason why we think that “love” needs to be something good –
why “justice” needs to be something good!)
Because in the Father love and justice meet –
in the Father, righteousness and peace kiss!

He has always loved his Son –
and therefore he knows how to love and care for you –
he is able and ready to help us!

And you see this in the history of the Son of God.

God created Adam in his image –

as a son of God.

Adam, as the son of God, had title to the inheritance of his Father –
until he forfeited it by his fall into sin.

Likewise, Abraham was called to leave his Father's house –
to leave the inheritance that his earthly father would have given him –
and go to the Land that God would give him as an inheritance.

And as we've seen, God calls Israel "my son, my firstborn."

The firstborn son is the one who receives the double portion of the inheritance.

But when Israel sins – when Israel fails to be the faithful Son of the Father,
then God called David to succeed where Israel failed.

And in 2 Samuel 7, God promised to be a father to David's sons.

But notice that each time the circle gets narrower:

God was the Father of all mankind in Adam,
the Father of one nation in Israel,
the Father of one king in David.

Indeed, it will get all the way down to the point where it is one man.
He is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And in the coming of the Christ,
the one who is the Second Adam,
the one who is the true Israel,
the one who is the Son of David,
we see that God is also the Father of all who are in Christ.

Isaiah had foretold this (Isaiah 63:15-16).

Isaiah was speaking of the need for a new creation.

In chapter 61 Isaiah spoke of the coming of the year of the LORD's favor,

a passage Jesus quotes at the beginning of his ministry in Luke 4.

Israel is going into Exile,

but even after they return from Exile,

their hearts will not fundamentally be changed.

God must do something new.

There must be a new creation.

The kingdom of God—the city of God—must be established by a divine act,

by the work of the anointed conqueror—the Messiah—

who will bring justice and peace to the earth.

And Isaiah pleads with God to do this based on his own relation to his people.

It is no longer because of Abraham—because Abraham has disowned his seed.
It is not because of Israel (Jacob)—because Jacob is repulsed by his children.
The people of God have utterly failed.
Their only hope is that God will be faithful in spite of their own faithlessness.

Will God restore his holy and beautiful house?
Will God restore his Son to his rightful place at his right hand?

If God were like us, then there is no chance of this ever happening!
If God were an earthly father, then we would be doomed.

But God is not an earthly father.
He is a heavenly father.

And that's the second point that we need to see from the preface of the Lord's Prayer.

2. Our Father in Heaven: “Draw Near with All Holy Reverence and Confidence”

Both in Isaiah 63-64 and in Psalm 103 we see the way in which these prayers highlight the importance of praying to a Father who is *in heaven*.

Why is heaven so important to your prayers?

Oh – wait – I should make sure that this is true!
Is heaven important to your prayers?
When you pray, do you talk as though God was down here on earth, like the rest of us?

Think about how Solomon prays:
“heaven of heavens cannot contain you – how much less this house that I have built!”
Solomon never imagined that the temple was God’s *actual* dwelling place!

Do you pray to your Father in heaven?
Or do you pray to your buddy next door?

Why does it matter that we pray to “Our Father, who art in heaven”?!

Because heaven – the place where God sits enthroned above the circle of the earth –
Heaven is the most important place in the cosmos.
For that matter, heaven is the most important place in your life.
Because heaven is where God reigns.
Heaven is where *Jesus* is seated in glory as King of kings.

You may be so busy – caught up in all the rat race of life,
constantly running from one thing to another –
that you say, “I don’t have time to pray!”
But what you are really saying

is that you are so busy taking care of your life,
that you don't need God.

And if you pray to a God who is bound up in all the earthly things –
then your deity is no different from the pagan gods!

If you really believe that Jesus is the Son of God who became flesh and dwelt among us –
if you really believe that he died – and rose from the dead –
if you really believe that he ascended to the right hand of God –
so that *heaven* is where our Lord Jesus sits –
ruling all things as King of kings and Lord of lords,

then why do spend so little time praying to the *only one* who can ultimately *do something*
about your situation?

When we pray “Our Father, Who art in heaven” –
then we are reoriented to who he *really is!* – and thus who *we really are!*

You’ll also find that prayer is the one place where the pace of life slows down
in the light of the glory of Christ.

I find that only in prayer does the pace of life seem proper –
because only then, when I glimpse the glory of Christ,
do I see “all these things” in their proper perspective.

If life is getting too hectic,
that is a sure sign that you are not spending enough time in prayer!

And don’t start groaning, “Oh no! Not one more thing to do!”
Prayer is not a “thing to do.”
In fact, I don’t like trivializing prayer by calling it “a relationship.”

That would downgrade prayer to being simply a conversation with a friend.

When we make prayer “a thing to do,” it becomes all about me.
When we think of prayer as a relationship, it becomes an earthly thing.

But prayer is a heavenly thing.
Prayer is an effectual means of our salvation.

Prayer is part of our worship.
We pray toward the temple – not a temple made with hands –
but the temple where our Lord Jesus Christ sits in glory!
Indeed, by the power of the Holy Spirit we enter that temple.
We come into the holy of holies and we speak to the living God.

If you are wondering, “how do I do this?”

Then let me encourage you to begin with the Lord’s Prayer.

“Our Father, Who Art in Heaven”

and then spend a few minutes developing that –

like Psalm 103 does with God as the creator and ruler
of the heavens, the earth and the seas.

And so on, through the Lord’s Prayer.

Or pray through the Psalms.

I would suggest starting with one like Psalm 89 –

one that tells a story or has a clear pattern that you can easily see.

Start by literally “praying” the Psalm,

and then improvise on it!

Connect the Psalm with Jesus – and you.

See Jesus’ story in the Psalm – and in him, you will see your own!

Or use Isaiah 63-64!

Isaiah gives us a heaven-centered picture of our heavenly Father.

“Look down from heaven and see,

from your holy and beautiful habitation.” (Is 63:15)

In the Bible “heaven” can refer to that blue dome above us –
the “visible heavens.”

But it can also refer to the invisible heavens – the place where God dwells.

The visible heavens—the sky with its host of sun, moon and stars –
reflects the invisible heavens—the spiritual realm with its host of angels.

All of these created things are expressing in creaturely form
something of the very presence of God himself.

The holy and beautiful house—the temple that Solomon built (64:11)

was supposed to be an earthly picture
of the holy and beautiful habitation in the heavenlies (63:15).

The problem is that the earthly does not look much like the heavenly
because of sin.

Israel, the son of God, has failed to look like his father.

Even Abraham and Jacob have disowned their children.

“Abraham does not know us, and Israel does not acknowledge us” (63:16),
so that “we have become like those over whom you have never ruled,
like those who are not called by your name.” (63:19)

Israel has been disowned and disinherited.

And yet Isaiah still dares to call God “our Father.”

And so when Jesus speaks in the sermon on the Mount about “our Father in heaven”

he is saying that all that Isaiah had promised is now coming to pass.

God called “Father” 17 times in the sermon on the mount,

and 9 times Jesus calls him our heavenly Father.

God is the heavenly Father who will make right all of the failures of earth.

And as our *heavenly* Father he sets a better pattern than our earthly fathers.

Matthew 5:45—your Father in heaven sends rain on the just and the unjust,
so you also should Love your enemies.

Likewise, 5:48, “You therefore must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect”

In other words, you should look like your Father—

there should be a family resemblance.

Even the language of the “Father who sees in secret”

is a reference to his heavenly character

(Remember Isaiah’s speaking of God “looking down” from heaven)

It is only because God is our *heavenly* Father

that he is able to see all things—even things done in secret.

And so when we come to God in prayer,

we must come with all holy reverence and confidence,

because our Father does see all things—he knows all things—

and he is able to do something about it!

3. Our Father in Heaven: “That We Should Pray with and for Others”

But the most remarkable thing about the opening to the Lord’s Prayer,

is that this heavenly Father

is *our* Father.

It is perhaps noteworthy that no Psalm ever addresses God as “Our Father.”

Psalm 89 is the closest, when it says that the Lord’s anointed – the Davidic king –
would cry out to God, “You are *my* Father.”

Throughout the Old Testament there are references to God as the Father of Israel –
and yet there is a reluctance to address him as such.

Why is this?

It is because God has become our Father through Christ.

And while that was true for Israel as well

(after all, Israel was saved by the same atoning sacrifice as we!)

yet there is a sense in which until the coming of the Son of God,

Israel’s relationship to God as Father was somewhat compromised!

It’s why I love to point out that in the gospel of John,

Jesus refers to God as “Father” or “my Father” more than eighty times.

From John 10-17 Jesus refers to God as his Father at least 65 times (in 8 chapters).

“I and the Father are one” (10:30)

“I will ask the Father, and he will give you another helper” (14:16)

“He who loves me will be loved by my Father” (14:21)
“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser” (15:1)
“The Father himself loves you because you have loved me” (16:27)

In all of these 65 uses –

as in all 80+ times that Jesus calls God “Father” before the resurrection –
there’s an exclusive feel to this.

Jesus calls God his Father in a unique way – in a way that no one else ever had.

Only after the resurrection, when Mary Magdalene meets him, does Jesus finally say,
“go to my brothers and say,
‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father’” (20:17)

Now we know from the other gospels that Jesus did in fact teach his disciples to pray,
“Our Father” even during his earthly ministry.

But John’s emphasis on the exclusive relationship between the Father and the Son
throughout Jesus’ earthly ministry is helpful for us.

“God has become our Father through Christ.” (Heidelberg Catechism)

Because *he* is the Son of God, therefore those who are united to him
become fellow heirs with him.

Because he is the natural Son of God,
we who receive the Spirit of adoption
are adopted as sons.

As Paul says in Galatians,
“For in Christ Jesus you are *all* sons of God, through faith.
For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” (Gal 3:26-7)

And if God is *our Father*, then certainly as children of one and the same father,
we should be praying with and for one another.

We are one family.

Some churches express this by having the children refer to other adults as
“Uncle” and “Aunt”

Others have been more radical and refer to everyone as “Brother” and “Sister”
I really don’t care how we address each other.
But I really want to see us *living* as brothers and sisters.

I remember one young lady who came to MCPC and said,
“Wow, you guys are really like a family!”

I replied, “Yes, remember, that when you are family – you bump into each other a lot!”

There is a reason why modern Americans prefer isolation –
and only allow very few people into their lives!

But the *good news* is that Jesus has come in order to restore us!
That means forgiveness for our sins!
It also means comfort for our miseries!

It means that when you feel the “ouch” of being close to someone –
then you need to talk with them!

And no – don’t start by saying, “You tried to hurt me!”
Rather, say, “Ouch! That hurt!”

What you’ll find is that *most of the time*, the person wasn’t trying to hurt you!

And then you can come to our Father in heaven together –
and you can pray together!

You can go to a heavenly Father who will hear you – and who will give you his Spirit
to strengthen you in walking humbly together before him!

We need to pray *with others* –
and we need to pray *for others*.

Because he is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
therefore he is *our Father in heaven*.

And if God is *our Father*,
then we need to “draw near to God with all holy reverence and confidence,
as children to a father able and ready to help us;”
and we need to “pray with and for others.”