

EVERLASTING FATHER

ISAIAH 9:6-7

Clifford Stewart sent his parents a new microwave oven one Christmas. They were excited about this new addition to their technological world. When Clifford's dad unpacked and plugged it in, however, two smiles were turned into two frowns within seconds. Even after reading the directions, they couldn't figure out how to make the thing work. A couple of days later, Clifford's mom was playing cards with a friend and confessed her inability to get that microwave oven even to boil water. She said, "I really don't need better directions to get this darn thing to work. I just need my son to come along with the gift!" Aren't you grateful this morning that when God sent the gift of salvation, He didn't send a booklet of complicated instructions for us to figure out? He sent His Son.

God wishes to be known as Father more than in any other way. And it's Jesus, His Son, who reveals what kind of Father God is like. Isaiah, the Old Testament prophet who lived some 800 years before Jesus was born, seemed to be getting at that very point. He knew a Child was going to be born in the future who would be the fulfillment of all God's promises to the people of Israel and, indeed, to the entire world. This morning, instead of listening to me read Isaiah 9:6-7, would you read those verses with me in unison? "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this." (Isaiah 9:6-7 NIV)

What child is this? Each name for this coming Child reveals an aspect of human need that only God can meet. Because we need infallible direction and guidance, this Child is Wonderful Counselor. Because we need power and strength beyond ourselves, this Child is Mighty God. Because we're so much in need of both peace with God and the peace of God, this child is Prince of Peace. And, today, I want to explore with you that because we need the love and security that only a father can provide, this child is Everlasting Father. What does that name tell us about God? First of all, it means that God wants you:

TO KNOW HIM DEEPLY AS FATHER.

Did you know that God is rarely called "Father" in the Old Testament? When God is called "Father" in the Old Testament it usually refers to His role of bringing the nation of Israel into existence or being the leader of the nation. For instance, we read, "But you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us or Israel acknowledge us; you, O LORD, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name." (Isaiah 63:16 NIV) There are few passages in the Old Testament that suggest that you can know God as your Father in some personal sense.

So where did the idea of God being our heavenly Father come from? Jesus. Jesus always referred to God as “my Father.” Those who heard Jesus were shocked by it. No one ever called God “my Father” – it just sounded disrespectful and lacking in proper reverence. But Jesus took it a step further. He called God “Abba” which – in the language He spoke (Aramaic) – meant Daddy or Papa. It was the word little Jewish kids in Jesus’ day used to address their earthly, human fathers. Jesus didn’t call God “Abba” in just His own secluded, personal prayer time alone with God. Whenever He spoke to anyone about God, He called Him “my Daddy, my Papa.” It was disconcerting and uncomfortable. It was even more troubling to know that Jesus encouraged His followers to think of and speak to God in the same way!

On the night Jesus was betrayed by Judas and the whole drama of the cross was about to begin, He made one of those crystal clear statements about how He is the exclusive pathway to a relationship with God: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6 NLT) One of the disciples, Philip, fails to see the implication in Jesus’ words. He says, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” (John 14:8 NLT) In other words, “Oh, yeah, the Father.... Wouldn’t it be wonderful, Jesus, to actually see God the Father? Wouldn’t it be cool to get this awesome manifestation of Almighty God like they did back in Old Testament times?” So Jesus has to get even more explicit. “...‘Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and yet you still don’t know who I am? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father! So why are you asking me to show him to you? Don’t you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? ...Just believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me....’” (John 14:9-11 NLT)

What’s so important about all this and what difference does it make to your life? It underlines the fact that the Almighty God of the Universe wants to have a personal, intimate, first name basis relationship with you today, tomorrow and forever. People want to think of God in a variety of ways, but often ignore how He wants to be known. God wants to be known as Father because it satisfies an essential human need. What’s the need? You need to be known, loved and completely secure in that love forever. God the Father knows your name. God the Father crafted you in your mother’s womb like a piece of treasured art. God the Father made you absolutely unique and special. And this Father God wants to have an eternal relationship with you. Yes, you will have some disappointments and problems here on earth, but your future is both wonderful and secure if God is your Father. If He was ever your Father, He will always be your Father. No one and nothing can separate you from His care. There will never come a time when He will stop treating you as His beloved child. His Name is Everlasting Father! That meets a need in my life! How about you?

Sometimes professional theologians come up with the alternative names for God. Paul Tillich, a 20th century theologian, liked to refer to God as the “Ground of Being.” Wow, doesn’t that make you feel warm all over! Others like to depict

God as a kind of impersonal spiritual energy force that flows through the whole universe. Still others want to convince you that you yourself are a part of God if you just looked at it the right way! But none of those depictions of God meet any need in my life. How about you? The Bible says instead, "...you received God's Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him, 'Abba, Father.' ... And because we are his children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, prompting us to call out, 'Abba, Father.'" (Romans 8:15; Gal 4:6 NLT) You're invited to enter into that kind of relationship with the God of the Universe. God is not satisfied with anything less or anything else. Neither should you be! His Name is Everlasting Father!

Now, when God is your Father, He exercises loving authority and discipline in your life. Listen again to what God's Word says, "As you endure this divine discipline, remember that God is treating you as his own children. Who ever heard of a child who is never disciplined by its father? If God doesn't discipline you as he does all of his children, it means that you are illegitimate and are not really his children at all.... For our earthly fathers disciplined us for a few years, doing the best they knew how. But God's discipline is always good for us, so that we might share in his holiness." (Hebrews 12:7-8, 10 NLT) Here's something I know from personal experience. There are times when we prefer to keep God at a distance. As long as God can be something other than Father – the Almighty, the Ground of Being, the Supreme Ruler of the universe, whatever – it's possible to make him just an object to think or talk about occasionally rather than this Person that you love, obey and relate each day of your life.

If God is your Father, it raises all sorts of issues. Fathers spank your bottom when you break the rules. Fathers get in your face when you're doing something wrong. Fathers have a way of making life miserable until you submit to their authority. And just like we resist our earthly fathers on occasion, we resist our heavenly Father. We'd rather go our own way and do our own thing. Here's what you need to remember about God. He loves you with more tenderness, more affection and more passion than any earthly father ever loved his child. The Bible says, "The LORD is like a father to his children, tender and compassionate to those who fear him." (Psalm 103:13 NLT) By the same token, no one can "spank" you quite like your heavenly Father. No one can get in your face quite like God can. And no one has more ways to get you to submit to His authority or get you to go His way in life for your own good than God the Father. How does the Bible put it? "At the time, discipline isn't much fun. It always feels like it's going against the grain. Later, of course, it pays off handsomely, for it's the well-trained who find themselves mature in their relationship with God." (Hebrews 12:11 MSG) Do you remember that phrase "tough love"? That pretty well sums up God's kind of love. God is love, but He's also tough. You need a God like that. And you need a Father like that. His Name is Everlasting Father! What does that name tell us about God? Secondly, it means that God wants you:

TO EXPERIENCE HIM ETERNALLY AS FATHER.

Do you know what's turned out to be one of the devil's most effective strategies? He's been successful in making the idea of "father, dad or papa" something negative rather than positive for many people. Father was the one who beat you. Dad was the one who took advantage of you sexually. Papa was the one who abandoned you physically or emotionally. Father was the one who ridiculed you. Dad was the one who made you feel like you just never measured up. Papa was a tyrant. Or maybe Father was a warped Santa Claus – weak, spineless, inconsistent, overly indulgent. Does your earthly father fall somewhere in there? If so, you might be cringing rather than celebrating when I encourage you to think of God as your Everlasting Father.

Let me suggest humbly and sincerely that the Holy Spirit needs to heal your heart and mind on that issue. Or, to put it another way, you need to download a new program on to the hard drive of your heart and mind. Why? Because you were designed to need a father. We all need a father. And if your earthly father failed you miserably or just wasn't there, you need a heavenly Father even more. There's an enormous, unmet need in your life that only God as Father can meet.

Let me remind you of some ways God is a father – an everlasting Father. As the Everlasting Father, God is eternally accepting of you. God sought you before you ever sought Him. Despite all your sins and failures, when you put your trust in Jesus, He adopted you into His family. You will forever be an object of His love and grace. Earthly parents can withhold acceptance from their kids. Not the Everlasting Father. He can't reject you or turn His back on you. You never have to earn a relationship with Him or somehow put yourself in a position to deserve His love. What does the Bible say about Everlasting Father? "But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God." (John 1:12 NLT) Jesus is everlastingly accepting of you.

As the Everlasting Father, God is eternally available to you. Earthly parents can be lousy listeners. Has your child ever said, "Daddy, Daddy, Daddy" or "Mommy, Mommy, Mommy" and you respond, "You don't have to say it a thousand times. Once is enough." Maybe it isn't! We parents get so preoccupied with life and its demands that we sometimes fail to listen to the needs of our kids. Not the Everlasting Father. You never have to beg for His attention. You'll never be ignored by Everlasting Father. He's never too busy for you. He never sleeps, takes a day off or goes on vacation. What does the Bible say about Everlasting Father? "He will not let you stumble; the one who watches over you will not slumber. Indeed, he who watches over Israel never slumbers or sleeps." (Psalm 121:2-3 NLT) Jesus is everlasting available to you.

As the Everlasting Father, God is eternally caring towards you. Even earthly parents can sometimes fail to understand your feelings or they can crush your spirit. Not your Father in heaven. When you disappoint Him – and you will – He doesn't look for ways to get even, but rather to show you mercy. When heartache and trouble find you, He takes note of every tear and every sigh. He's

there when you feel like giving up. What does the Bible say about Everlasting Father? “Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you.” (1 Peter 5:7 NLT) Jesus is everlastingly caring towards you.

As the Everlasting Father, God is eternally forgiving of you. We easily forget how much we need forgiveness. We overestimate our goodness and underestimate God’s holiness, don’t we? No doubt we offend God every day in with our attitudes, our thoughts, what we do and fail to do. But in Jesus and because of Jesus, God is constantly offering and providing forgiveness. There was a father whose son was constantly getting into trouble. Every effort to get him to change seemed futile. Finally, one of this father’s friends – seeing the pain caused by this son – said, “If that were my son, I would wash my hands of him.” The father answered, “If he were your son, so would I. But he’s my son.” That’s a real father. And that’s what God is like. What does the Bible say about Everlasting Father? “He has removed our sins as far from us as the east is from the west.” (Psalm 103:12 NLT) Jesus is everlastingly forgiving of you.

As the Everlasting Father, God is eternally generous towards you. God has a way of blessing people who don’t deserve blessing and haven’t earned it. You’re in that group, by the way, and so am I. Perhaps your earthly parents were tight wads, stingy or miserly. Your heavenly Father is very different. What does the Bible say about Everlasting Father? “But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.” (Titus 3:4-7 NLT) Jesus is everlastingly generous towards you.

As the Everlasting Father, God is eternally joyful because of you. Did you know God is always in a good mood? Sometimes earthly parents can be grouchy, gloomy and just about impossible to live with. Once, a lady was asked, “Did you wake up grouchy this morning?” She answered, “No, I usually let him sleep in!” Your heavenly Father is always glad to see you. He’s always full of kindness and love towards you. God delights in you. What does the Bible say about Everlasting Father? “For the LORD your God is living among you. He is a mighty savior. He will take delight in you with gladness. With his love, he will calm all your fears. He will rejoice over you with joyful songs.” (Zephaniah 3:17 NLT) Jesus is everlastingly joyful because of you.

As the Everlasting Father, God is eternally faithful towards you. Earthly parents sometimes fail their kids. They make promises they don’t keep or fail to be there when they’re needed. But the Bible is careful to declare that faithfulness is one of our heavenly Father’s greatest attributes. God will never break any promise He’s made. He promised to forgive your sins and make you His child. He kept that promise. He promises to guide you through ever mountain and valley of

life's journey. God is keeping that promise. He has promised that one day He will take you to live with Him in your new, eternal home. God will keep that promise. What does the Bible say about Everlasting Father? "For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations." (Psalm 100:5 NLT) Jesus is everlastingly faithful towards you.

Nicholas was in kindergarten. As Christmas approached, it was an exciting season to be six years old. For weeks he'd been memorizing songs for his school's winter pageant. Nicholas' dad, John, didn't have the heart to tell him he'd be working on the night of the production. But he found out through Nicholas' teacher that there would be a dress rehearsal the morning of the presentation. All parents unable to attend that evening were welcome to come then. Nicholas seemed happy with the compromise.

Because the public school system has stopped referring to the holiday as Christmas, John didn't expect much more than fun, commercialized entertainment – songs about reindeer, Santa, snowflakes and good cheer. But God our Father has a way of breaking through despite our attempts to keep Him out, doesn't He? Each class and grade, accompanied by their teacher, sat cross legged on the floor and then rose to perform their song. When it was Nicholas' class' time to sing, John was a little surprised to see the title of their song. It was called "Christmas Love." Nicholas was aglow as were all of his classmates. All were adorned with fuzzy mittens, red sweaters and bright snowcaps on their heads. Those in the front row held up large letters one by one to spell out the title of the song. As the class sang "C is for Christmas", a child would hold up the letter C. Then, "H is for Happy" and another child would hold up the H. This continued until the complete message "Christmas Love" was spelled out.

The performance was going smoothly, until suddenly, John and the rest of those watching noticed her – a small, quiet girl in the front row holding the letter "M" in "Christmas" upside down. She was totally unaware that her "M" now looked like a "W". The first through sixth graders snickered at her mistake. But she had no idea they were laughing at her, so she stood there tall, proudly holding up her "W." The laughter continued until the last letter was raised and then they all saw it together. A hush came over that group and eyes began to widen. In that instant, the dress rehearsal audience that day understood why they were there and why they celebrated Christmas. Because when the last letter was held high, the message read loud and clear: "CHRIST WAS LOVE." God, the Everlasting Father, will not be silenced and pushed aside. Not by the public school system. And not by you and me. He wants you to know Him deeply as Father. He wants you to experience Him eternally as Father. And He makes that relationship possible through His Son, Jesus the Christ. Christ was love. And He still is. His Name is Everlasting Father.