

Thursday Group Studies
The Fatherhood of God
Study 1
October 19th 2017

Revelations, Reactions and Revisitations

Few it seems see and experience God's Fatherhood in all things as the central part of the Gospel. Everything is seen in terms of Christ or the Spirit. But Christ Himself operated and is operating as the Son-Lord for the glory of the Father. He was not self-standing when he lived amongst us, but saw His whole purpose in terms of His Father. To follow Him is to come to the Father. This in no way denigrates or reduces the importance of Jesus. Rather it takes His presence and goal seriously.

For some the experience of being loved by the Father, and in turn responsively loving him comes as true revival. For others it marks their repentance and re-birth. If true repentance is a change of mind and heart about the Father then we can see something of the deficiency of a 'fatherless' Gospel. But we are also faced with another issue.

The Church seems to 'leak' when it comes to retaining life with the Father. None of us share in this blessing without continual and often strong attack. Each generation must respond and receive the Father's love through his Son. The good 'fatherhood theology' of the parents is no good for the children if the reality becomes limited to knowing about the Father.

Father's Great Giving

God's holy loving, his creation, providence, sovereignty, caring, covenant, judgement, mercy and grace are Fatherhood gifts. The Son and the Spirit delight in bringing these gifts to us, each in their own delighted way. Every aspect of our Lord's experience and ministry is about a human being living in the gifts of the Father. So we cannot have a true Christology without knowing the Fatherhood of God. This was clearly focused in and by his son Jesus of Nazareth. His claim, *If you have seen me you have seen my Father* (John 14:6-12), is a stunning one (see John 1:14). Jesus claimed to be the way, truth and life of the Father. So Phillip's request was a deep confession of his blindness. The issue of course is knowing/ seeing' Jesus. He is the great Revelator of all things about the Father. But more than that Jesus is the great transporter to the Father. Or to put it better the revelations of Jesus, applied by the Spirit, is transportation to the Father.

The fullness John saw in Jesus was to be seen and known by humanity. He said, *"We have all received"* (John 1:16). Through the rest of his Gospel John majors on the Son's relationship with the Father. So the fullness he has in mind can be seen as knowing the Father. Jesus does not simply reveal him and then later give us an experience of him if we get our moral, theological and religious ducks in a row. Religion wants information but humanity needs transportation. Yet this transportation is far from simple.

The Great Transportation

The grace of our transportation to the Father by our Lord involves capturing us as enemies of the Father, Son and Spirit. But a captured enemy, delivered to their captor, remains a fearful slave. A fearful slave never knows communion with their

captor. Yet the fullness of Jesus involved a hearty delight in his Father. So Jesus must deliver us in such a way that our heart cries, “Father! You are my greatest joy!” So our transportation to the Father by Jesus involves strong reactions. When Jesus reveals His Father to/in us the flesh hates it; the evil one hates it; the conscience hates it and our religion hates it. Understandably these responses and reactions must come. When Jesus revealed the Father to those with whom he first walked in our flesh and blood, strong reactions were obvious. That is, their enmity with the Father’s bubbled to the surface. Some were so angry that they called him demonic and some accused him of madness. Others continually raised religious and political barriers or simply retreated further into their religious idols. Some must have just looked vaguely at him as if he was speaking in a foreign language. Meeting the Father has never been a passive event.

Gaining Knowledge of the Father and His Ways

How then does God intend for us to get to know him as Father? How is it that we come to call God Father? What is the nature of getting to know how He operates? Most of us have grown up and studied under a system of education in which propositions rule. Our presupposition is that if the facts as we see them can be proven they are true and determined to be false if they don’t. The scientific model of gaining knowledge assumes that we can stand outside ourselves and examine the facts objectively. Whilst this may be truer for some things than others it is certainly not possible for relational issues and even more impossible for our comprehension of God with whom we are enemies. The old saying, ‘Better felt than told’ is the spirit of the knowledge we need of God. That is, when the heart feels the reconciliation between the Father and His children then that one knows the love of God as Father. This is not a plea for mysticism or so called irrational, subjective knowledge. It is not an ignoring of Biblical truth. Rather it is a plea that Biblical knowledge is something far different to that which we embrace in our modern cultures. Knowing the Father through the Biblical revelation is not just reading the facts, building a knowledge base and applying it. The cry has always gone up from the godly ones, *Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from Your law (Psalm 119:18). These ‘eyes’ are seen to be the eyes of our heart, so Paul prayed, I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened (Ephesians 1:18).*

Since the beginning God has made a different way of knowing him. Or to put it better, God has made us so that knowing him is more than knowing facts. First of all He has insisted that he alone is the ‘revealer’ and explainer of himself. He reserves the right, for our benefit, to name himself and explain that name. It is not given to us nor is it possible for us to assume that we can stand apart from him, analyse him and explain him so as to be able to embrace (‘taste’) him. *Taste and see that the Lord is good!* David cried, (Psalm 34:8); and we are invited to taste the kindness of the Lord (1 Peter 2:3). The Father is concerned that we **taste and see** him. No taste no seeing. The ‘fullness’ of the Son in our flesh was the way he tasted and knew the Father. So knowing the Father is not simply propositional but personal, not simply conceptual but covenantal.

When Jesus delivered the truth of the Father into our shadow-lands, our indifference to him was the most confronting indication of our sinfulness. It highlighted the terrifying gulf through which He must transport us. We were confronted and enraged by the fact that our new-birth lay within his hands not ours. We had no knowledge base to work on if we were to taste his beauty. But most

damning, we had no heart to taste him. If knowing him meant enjoying him like Jesus did he must bring his Father's world of glory to us.

In a recent blog John Piper reminds us of how Johnathan Edwards understood the process of knowing God.

There is a distinction to be made between a mere *notional* understanding, wherein the mind only beholds things in the exercise of a speculative faculty; and the *sense of the heart*, wherein the mind . . . relishes and feels. . . . The one is mere *speculative* knowledge; the other *sensible* [= sensed or felt] knowledge, in which more than the mere intellect is concerned; the heart is the proper subject of it, or the soul as a being that not only beholds, but has inclination, and is pleased or displeased. (*Religious Affections*).

Edwards describes the true knowledge of God as, 'Giving the mind a new taste or relish of beauty and sweetness'. It seems to me that as westerners we feel we can get ourselves from a speculative, propositional based knowledge of God to a hearty embracing of him as Father by simply building up our knowledge from the Scriptures. Yet the Bible is clear that it is possible to know lots about God and not know him as Jesus did. To know without tasting is not to know. To know in a way that does not relish the Father in all his ways is to simply know about him. Paul knew lots about God prior to conversion. Even the evil spirits knew lots about God. The religious leaders had a supreme knowledge of the Scriptures, yet were the first to hate the revelation Jesus brought. Humanity either shrinks from Father or runs to him. Any mechanical form of religious knowledge is a shrinking from him. Alexander Smellie, explaining Edwards, said that knowing God, "Is not cold and careful task work. It is the outgoing towards God himself, in love and in life, of the soul which God has touched and inhabits. It is "the motion of a hidden fire," trembling in the breast, warming all the heart, consuming in its ardent flame the dross of our sins, cleansing, energising and transfiguring us until – miracle of miracles – even we are heaven's fine and burnished gold." *Religious Affections* (p.9-10).

So as God is our Father (not simply like our father or even an archetypal father), Creator and Lord the knowledge he gives us will be to create a hearty relishing of his Fathering, creational gifts and giving, and a delighted submission to his sovereignty. For example, as our Father, Creator and Lord there are certain observable things that God does. These can be observed by all who will. But knowing him as Father, Creator and Lord is dependent upon submitting to him and trusting him as Father Creator and Lord. If we don't have a heart to love him as his child, depend upon him as a creature and obey him as our Lord then we will not know him. The sweet taste of honey is diverse from the ideas men get of honey by only looking on it, and feeling of it. (J. Edwards).

Edward's primary text was 1 Peter 1:8, *And though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory.* He maintains that humanity is given two faculties. One to perceive, judge, discern and understand things. The other is to be either drawn towards or be averse to things. Edwards maintains that it is the latter, our inclination towards a thing that governs our actions. E.g., we move towards those we like and not those we dislike. This exercise of the heart is at the centre of faith he says "The author of human nature has not only given us affections, but has made them very much the spring of our actions" (p. 19). *The desire of our soul is for Your name And for the remembrance of You* (Isaiah 26:8). The desire to be holy that leads to participation in holiness comes from tasting the goodness of holy Father. The goodness and beauty of the Father is seen not via cleverly devised words about him but through a revelation

of his glory. *For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For when He received honour and glory from God the Father, such an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majestic Glory, "This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased"—and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. (2 Peter 1:16-18). "Spiritual understanding primarily consists in this sense, or taste of the moral beauty of divine things." –Jonathan Edwards.*

So the point we are making is this. We “See the Father” in and through Jesus of Nazareth when he transforms us from enemies to delighted lovers. The heart must be transformed, bringing a whole new world to the conscious mind freed from the bondage of being an enemy.