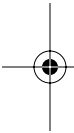


O N E



Intimate

“Our Father”

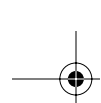


The most basic question when it comes to prayer is to *whom* do we pray? This question comes up with surprising frequency, even among my seminary students, because we are not quite sure how to address a triune Being. Of course, we worship all three persons of the Trinity. British author and preacher John Stott is reported to begin his time of prayer each morning with an intentional effort to worship God in all of his triunity, declaring:



Good morning, heavenly Father; good morning, Lord Jesus; good morning, Holy Spirit. Heavenly Father, I worship you as the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. Lord Jesus, I worship you, Savior and Lord of the world. Holy Spirit, I worship you, Sanctifier of the people of God. Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.



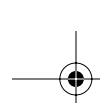


Stott, in his trinitarian worship, is on to something. God is three persons who are one God; yet are we to pray to all three? Jesus, who is God the Son, begins his instruction by telling us that we are to pray to God the Father. But giving us this instruction reminds us that we can *only* pray in Jesus' name. It is our relationship with Jesus that gives us access to God the Father. While each prayer is made to the Father, it is prayed in the name of the Son—meaning in the context and reality of a relationship with Christ. He is the one who brings us home, makes the introductions and provides the basis for the relationship. This reality was so apparent to the early disciples that at times they prayed directly to Jesus (Acts 7:59; 2 Corinthians 12:8), but these seemed exceptions to the rule: prayer is properly addressed to God the Father.

Yet prayer is still deeply trinitarian in nature; we pray to God the Father in the name of the Son and *through* the Holy Spirit. There is no instance in the New Testament of prayer being addressed directly to the Holy Spirit, perhaps because while the Father is in heaven (Matthew 6:9) and the Son sits at his right hand (Romans 8:34), the Spirit is with all Christians (John 14:16-17). Yet we cannot pray *apart* from the Holy Spirit. This was Paul's reminder in his manifesto to the Roman church, stating that the Spirit helps us in our weakness.

We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot ex-





press. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will. (Romans 8:26-27)

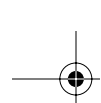
So Jesus begins by encouraging us to address our prayers to God the Father, which later Christians would understand to be in the name of Jesus through the mediating work of the Holy Spirit. It should not surprise us that when we enter into communion and conversation with the living God, it would be as communal in nature as *his* nature is.

Even though they had yet to be introduced to the mysteries of the Trinity, or at least had yet to grasp it, properly designating God as *Father* would not have been startling to Jesus' listeners. *Addressing* God as Father was another matter, for while it may have been understood by a Jewish person that God *was* Father, to *call* him that to his face would have been considered a bit cheeky. Yet this is precisely what Jesus taught them to do.

And not just any term for Father.

The most startling word on prayer from Jesus' mouth was the term he encouraged his disciples to use to address the paternal side of God. As the research of Joachim Jeremias concludes, "all . . . strata of the Gospel tradition report unanimously and without any hesitation that Jesus constantly addressed God as 'my Father' . . . and show that in so doing he used the Aramaic form aba [Abba]." Jeremias adds, "We are thus confronted with a fact of the utmost



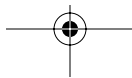
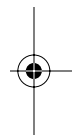


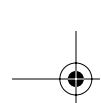
significance. Whereas there is not a single instance of God being addressed as *Abba* in the literature of Jewish prayer, Jesus always addressed him in this way.” That this was passed on to the disciples as the model for prayer is found in the use of *Abba* throughout the New Testament, demonstrating that the idea shaped the deepest levels of their thinking. “For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship,” wrote Paul to the Romans. “And by him we cry, ‘*Abba*, Father’” (Romans 8:15). To the Galatians, Paul wrote, “Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, ‘*Abba*, Father’” (Galatians 4:6).

Why does this stand out? For the same reason it does today.

Abba was an intimate term that would be used in families between small children and their fathers. The Talmud states, “When a child experiences the taste of wheat [i.e., when the child is weaned], it learns to say *abba* and *imma* [‘dear father’ and ‘dear mother’].” *Abba* and *imma* are the first sounds from a child’s mouth, and while often used by adults toward their parents as a term of endearment, it remained children’s speech. In contemporary English it has often been suggested that *Daddy* or *Da-da* would be much closer to the spirit of “*Abba*” than *Father*. This was not a stiff, solemn address but a term of endearment spoken with the affection and intimacy only a young child could bring to its saying.

So how should we pray? *Intimately*, as if we are crawling into the lap of our father, feeling his loving arms wrap around us as we





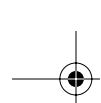
share the intricacies of our lives; not childish in the sense of immaturity or in the sense of meaningless chatter, but childlike in the sense of the relationship itself. When a child talks to a parent, at least in a healthy parent-child relationship, there is disarming honesty, an absence of guile, utter transparency, boundless affection, unquenchable curiosity and absolute truth. It is not surprising that early Christian liturgies prefaced the Lord's Prayer with the words, "We make *bold* to say, 'Our Father.'" Or as Augustine observed, the Lord's Prayer is something we "dare" to say (*audemus quotidie dicere*).

And addressing God this way *does* take a sense of daring.

Back when my daughters were young, when I would come home at the end of a day, they would first want to tell me all about theirs, and then they wanted to play with me. Often, this meant fixing my hair. They wanted to put me in rollers, create braids, put in bows and pins. It goes without saying that doing this to me would not have entered anyone else's mind. That kind of intimate interaction could only occur between a father and his daughters. As they worked, they were in heaven. Or perhaps given a picture of it, along the lines of Susan and Lucy in C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, rolling in the grass with Aslan following his resurrection "so that all three of them rolled over together in a happy laughing heap of fur and arms and legs."

This is not the way those who first heard Jesus' teaching had been taught to pray. Formality, distance: these were the ideas that



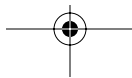
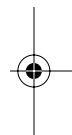


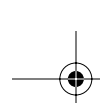
guided their approach to God. Anything but *Abba*. Jeremiah writes that to the Jewish mind, “it would have been disrespectful and therefore inconceivable to address God with this familiar word.” We are no different, praying in sonorous tones, interjecting “Thees” and “Thous” from King James English in our address. There is little sense of “Daddy” present in style, much less in spirit.

Yet do we find Jesus’ teaching liberating?

If you are like many people, the imagery of *Abba* is not helpful. It is not simply that we are uncomfortable interacting with God on this level, though most of us are; we do not have an experiential category for such intimacy. Our earthly fathers were not men we could talk to, particularly as if cradled in their arms. They were stern, callous, some even abusive. Not all of us *had* an *Abba*, so being told God is one is not always helpful.

Yet rather than this becoming an impediment to the intimate conversation God longs to have with us, perhaps it can fill our longing hearts with all that we have dreamed of experiencing. Imagine that wise, loving father you have always yearned for walking down a path by your side, his arm around your shoulders, listening, offering carefully chosen words of encouragement, loving you unconditionally. Unlike your own, with this Father you don’t feel awkward, but totally at ease. You feel freedom and safety, warmth and security. This is an image of God many must conjure in order to explore the intimacies of prayer; letting God be the Father we never had. The great comfort is that it is not an emotional

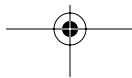


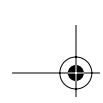


or mental contrivance; we are simply immersing ourselves in the reality of how Jesus said to pray and to whom we are to pray.

This intimacy is, of course, about more than familial—or familiar—language. It speaks to the new nature of the prayer event itself. Voicing “Abba” as the starting point of prayer was a prelude to the tearing of the Jerusalem temple veil that separated the holy place from the most holy place. From that point forward no priest was needed to voice prayers on our behalf or to serve as mediator between us and God. Now we were able to go directly into God’s presence. The writer of Hebrews speaks of this intimacy in terms of *confidence* (Hebrews 10:19). It’s not simply that God is Abba, but that we are his sons and daughters, and we should pray in the fullest security of that relationship.

Prayer is drawing near to God; this cannot take place in the midst of fear. As Philip Yancey has observed, the very birth of Jesus declared the inauguration of the *approachability* of God. The God who could have roared, “who could order armies and empires about like pawns on a chessboard, this God emerged . . . as a baby who could not speak or eat solid food or control his bladder, [and] who depended on a [poor] teenage couple for shelter, food and love.” God could have come to us in any way he wanted, and he chose to come as a baby. The most gentle, approachable, intimate way imaginable. God intentionally chose to relate to human beings in a manner that did not involve, or cause, fear. To encourage us to come to him confidently, boldly, as children, God came as a child himself.





And that same intent is carried through to our approach to prayer.

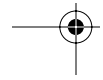
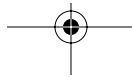
We need this. When the Israelites saw Mt. Sinai surrounded by thunder and lightning, trumpet blasts and smoke, they were terrified. They begged Moses to be their mediator. “Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die” (Exodus 20:19). Frederick Buechner writes that when we realize who we pray to, and the kinds of things we are asked to pray, “only the words ‘Our Father’ . . . make the prayer bearable.”

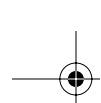
But those two words are there.

This then is the context for prayer: the intimacy of our adoption as sons and daughters (John 1:12; Galatians 3:26). As J. B. Phillips paraphrased the apostle John’s words, “Consider the incredible love that the Father has shown us in allowing us to be called ‘children of God’—and that is not just what we are called, but what we are” (1 John 3:1 Phillips). This is not a formal, legal relationship, but a passionate, consuming, *personal* one.

We are to pray in a way that reflects the true nature of our relationship. We are children of God, and that identity should form the deepest understandings and dynamics of how we relate to him as Father. The instruction of the Lord’s Prayer involved the permission to step into the fullness of our new identities in Christ. We are not to pray to God as if he is an auditor with the IRS, a highway patrol officer sitting in the speed trap or an angry parent it is best to avoid.

As a child I remember being so terrified of hell and having heard





so little about God's love that I would pray—every night—for God to save me, petitioning him even though his natural bent was to despise and reject me. I had no idea of the apostle Paul's declaration in Romans: "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. So you should not be like cowering, fearful slaves. You should behave instead like God's very own children, adopted into his family—calling him 'Father, dear Father' " (Romans 8:14-15 NLT).

I am still far away from a prayer life that connects with God as Abba or fully embraces my own sonship. I've made progress over the years I've spent embracing the Christian faith, with moments of rapturous, tear-flowing intimacy, but this is too often followed by retreats into stiff, guarded dialogue produced by a dry and distant spirit. But I continue to crawl into his lap—or at least look for it—encouraged by the one truth that will not let me do otherwise: I am his child.

And Jesus knew that when he taught us how to pray, we would need to be reminded to pray like one.

