

Heart Matters: Loving Father

Deut 32:4-14; Mt 11:28-12:8; 1st Peter 1:3-12



We say that God loves us. We readily proclaim that as our Heavenly Father, God loves all of humanity. We speak of a loving Father who cares for the entire world. “Jesus loves the little children—all the children of the world. Every color, every race, they are covered by His grace. Jesus loves the little children of the world.” The message is clear, but what does this love look like?

In the Ancient Near East, it was common to refer to one’s divinity as father. People understood their lives to depend on creation by the gods. They spoke gods as having fathered their nations, at times setting them apart from other peoples. Mesopotamian creation stories cast the gods as creating humanity out of their own need to be fed. In these stories, humanity was cast as a race of slaves obliged to feed the gods through sacrifice. In contrast, the Hebrews focused on the quality of care they found in *Yahweh*, God and father of all nations. This *Yahweh* took the initiative to care for creation, in love looking out for the needs of humanity before we recognize our needs.

In Deuteronomy, Moses’ song establishes *Yahweh*’s position as father over all. God was seen as Father, in that life for the people had begun with God—twice. As Creator, God had granted life. God also renewed life in releasing the people from Egyptian bondage. God was their Father. *Yahweh* had given life and provided for their futures. God had given them all they needed. God had cared for them as a mother cares for her young—as the eagle carrying its young out into the wind to learn to fly.

In this passage from Moses’ song, there is an understanding that *Yahweh* allowed for other gods to hold sway over the nations. At the same time, *Yahweh* took a specific interest in the nation of Israel—descendants of Abraham. God’s actions with Israel were designed to show the rest of the world the quality of His care for the people. *Yahweh*’s action in the life of the people was to point to the difference between *Yahweh* and the so-called gods that the rest of humanity worshipped.

Rather than remembering humanity when compelled to do so, *Yahweh* was involved in the life of the nation. Rather than waiting on the people to cry out in anguish, *Yahweh* was seeking out those who would enter into relationship with their heavenly Father. Rather than seeking humanity to meet His own needs, *Yahweh* was intentionally meeting the needs of the people, feeding, guiding, and protecting them as *Yahweh*’s creatures demonstrated their own care for their young.

Moses’ song was a reminder to the people. It was a reminder of the quality of *Yahweh*’s love and character. It called them to recognize in *Yahweh* not simply the role of a heavenly Father, but a loving Father. This was the song they were to sing to remind them of their own responsibility to be faithful in their relationship and allegiance to *Yahweh*. They were to serve out of gratitude and with a full appreciation to *Yahweh*’s character. God was worthy of their allegiance for having created them and given them life. *Yahweh* was also worthy for taking the initiative to love them, even when they had nothing to offer in return.

Jesus often spoke of the same aspect of God’s character as Father. Jesus used the endearing term, “*Abba*” in speaking to God. He also recast God’s fatherly role on various occasions. One was in the context of teaching on the Sabbath. For most of the Jews, the Sabbath was a burden that

was extra hard to bear. There were regulations upon regulations for determining what could and what could not be done on the Sabbath. The regulations were so ample and decisive that setting aside a day from one's week of labor became more of a burden than a blessing.

Jesus reminded them of the purpose behind the Sabbath. *Yahweh* had granted the Sabbath as a release from the stress of life. The Sabbath was to be seen as a blessing, not a burden. God had established it to become a benefit for humanity. It was a needed rest, not an imposition to harm one's life. It was established as a weekly reminder that although there was always much to do in caring for the flocks and the fields it was ultimately *Yahweh* who provided for the people's needs.

Jesus recast the Mosaic instruction as based on God's love and care for the people. Rather than cold harsh words of imposition upon life, these were instructions for the benefit of humanity. "Take my yoke upon you," meant that we should release ourselves from any other yoke. This yoke provided for the needs of the people. This yoke provided for rest and enjoying the fruit of one's labors. This yoke was based on the loving care of a heavenly Father who understands our needs better than we understand them.

The Jews had misunderstood the Sabbath, because they had forgotten what it stood for. They had forgotten its meaning and purpose—rest in the comfort and assurance of God's provision and care. It was a weekly reminder that they could never work hard enough or long enough to meet their needs—nor was it necessary. While they could not control all the variables in agricultural produce, it was ultimately *Yahweh* who would provide for their needs, anyway. Trust the Father's love. Trust that *Yahweh* will provide. Trust that the world was created to meet our needs, after all.

Peter sets forth a beautiful reminder of the quality of God's love as Father and Lord. It was the quality of God's love, mercy, and grace that caught the writer's attention. Christians were in the midst of persecution. Life was not easy on the Jewish Christians in the days of his writing to the Diaspora. They Jews had been scattered throughout the Greco-Roman world for over two hundred years, but with the destruction of Jerusalem, they no longer had a homeland. The Jews were under persecution by the Romans. Christians were under persecution by the Jews, perceived as violating Mosaic law and tradition. Outside of Judaism, they were perceived as Jews, within Judaism they were deemed as heretics and dangerous.

In this dire context, Peter focuses on the blessings of God's salvation. He focuses on the temporary nature of the fears, tears, sufferings, and difficulties that the believing community faced. They were temporary in the context of the greater action and salvation that God was bringing about. The message of salvation was worth so much more. It was a message of eternal significance, not temporary blessings.

He called believers to focus on God's greater purposes. He reminded us of God's care and provision for a salvation that the very prophets could not comprehend with clarity. He charged us to trust in the glorious provision of a loving heavenly Father who was acting to meet our needs and call us to a greater experience of life. Will we trust the provision of our loving Father? Will we accept the yoke our Father asks us to exchange for our own? Do we really believe we have a loving heavenly Father?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*