

Not long ago, Newsweek magazine featured a cover story entitled, "A World Without Fathers." The focus was primarily on African-American families and the alarming increase of children being raised without father. Consider, for example:

- A black child born today has only a one-in-five chance of growing up with a father until he's sixteen. This statistic reflects not just poor families, but also a staggering 22 percent increase among those families making \$75,000 or more. Right now some 62 percent of all black families are without a father.
- Divorce is taking its toll among Caucasian families, as fathers flee their responsibilities in increasing numbers. There is no longer a stigma placed on fathers who just "disappear." The government is having to track down a growing army of runaway fathers who won't support their children.

At Hannah House, New Life for Girls and Teen Challenge Home for Women, one of the biggest struggles for women in the program is to forgive their father or stepfather for having molested them while they were young. Many of these young women have spent years battling memories of being terrorized by a lust-driven father or stepfather. One girl at Hannah House had a most difficult time forgiving her biological father for getting her pregnant. The Holy Spirit helped this young woman to forgive him recently, just before he died. But her life has been marked by his brutal sin.

Father's Love

- A stepfather in upper Manhattan killed his baby stepdaughter by throwing her out of an eighth-story window. The entire community wanted to string this man up. And many fatherless children in that housing project once again had their image of a father perverted in their minds. If you were to ask them what they think fathers are like, they'd answer, "He's a mean, vicious man who throws his children out the window." These kids can't relate to a loving, heavenly Father - because implanted in their minds is an image of a violent, heartless man!
- I know a twelve-year-old boy who was thrown out of his house by his stepfather, a former Pentecostal pastor who is now backslidden. This boy is not rebellious - he is really a good child. Fortunately, his biological father is a godly man who dearly loves him and rushed to pick him up. The boy is now happily reunited with his loving Father. He knows what a true father is!

I bring up all these examples to remind you of how difficult it is for many people to think of God as a loving Father. **They can't help but see God through the eyes of past experiences with an ungodly father or stepfather.** Very few of the troubled men and

women who come to us for help can relate to a father who is normal or loving. Their father either abandoned them or wounded and grieved them. It's all so sad - so tragic.

This subject is not new - it has been preached about for years. It is common knowledge that **many thousands of Christians do not believe God loves them, because their earthly father treated them wrongly.** And I intend this message to speak not only to them, but also to those who have no such clouded view of the heavenly Father. Indeed, there are many who have had good fathers and a solid family life, who love the Lord and walk in righteousness - yet who have not discovered the depths of our heavenly Father's special love!

Most of us know the Scriptures and the theology behind God's great love for His children. Yet very few of us have learned to appropriate that love. We don't enjoy the glorious benefits of having it!

I have recognized in my own life several hindrances to knowing God's love - roadblocks that keep me from appropriating and living in the absolute freedom of the Father's love. And I believe these are hindrances also to multitudes of other Christians.

Let me list just three of the hindrances that keep us from

entering fully into the special love our Father has for us:

1. We Really Do Not Believe What God Says About Himself!

Listen to how God described Himself to Moses:

"...The Lord, The Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin..." (EX 34:6-7). (The Lord stated He is all of these things *"without clearing the guilty"* - that He still *"visit[s] the iniquity of the Father upon the children..."* [verse 7].)

When we're in the midst of our many trials and tribulations, we forget what God has said about His own nature. Yet if we would only believe Him in such times, we would have such assurance in our souls! From cover to cover, the Bible speaks to us as God's voice, revealing to us how tender and loving He is. It says of our Father again and again:

- **He is at all times ready to forgive.** *"For thou, Lord art good, and ready to forgive; and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon thee"* (PSA 86:5).
- **He is patient with us, full of tenderness and mercy.** *"Great are thy tender mercies, O Lord..."* (PSA 119:156). *"... his tender mercies are over all his works"* (PSA 145:9). *"... the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy"* (JAM 5:11).
- **He is slow to anger and wrath.** *"The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy"* (PSA 108:3). *"The Lord is gracious, and full of compassion; slow to anger, and of great mercy"* (PSA 145:8). *"... turn unto the Lord your God: for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil"* (JOEL 2:13).

When you go to worship the Lord in prayer, be very careful what kind of image of God you take into His presence! You must be fully convinced He loves you - and that He is all He says He is!

The devil's biggest lie is to make you believe God is more willing to judge and condemn you than He is to save, bless and deliver you. Satan will try to do to you what he did to Job. He planted in his mind a perverted view of the Father!

Job said: *"For now thou numberest my steps: dost thou not watch over my sin? My transgression is sealed up in a bag, and thou sewest up mine iniquity"* (JOB 14:16-17). Job accused God of being a "spy in the sky"! He was saying, Lord, You've have been trailing me to see if I'm going to fail. You haven't been forgiving and forgetting my sins - You've been marking every false move I make! You're putting all my sins into a bag and saving them for judgment against me. They're all piling up - and one of these days You're going to make me face them!" (See Job 14).

This is the image most of us have of our heavenly Father! We believe He's waiting for us to fail so He can judge us, take something from us, destroy something that's precious to us!

Yet can you see how perverted such a view of God is - after everything God has told us of His great love, tender mercies and endless compassion toward us? The truth is, God wasn't spying on Job at all. He was so full of love and respect for Job that He was boasting of him to the devil and all the heavenly hosts! He said, "Have you ever seen a man like this one, who loves me so much? My servant Job is a righteous man, without guile!"

Just about the time you go into God's presence with your head down, depressed, thinking you've failed Him - He has been boasting about you! He tells all the angels. "Look at him - whenever he fails, he repents right away. He reaches out to Me continually. Isn't that wonderful?"

Yet Job came into the Lord's presence having lost all sense of God's love and tender mercies toward him. He mourned, "God, You have washed away all my hope!" (See verse 19).

Is this how you see the heavenly Father? Do you think He's so sick and tired of your failures and

weaknesses that He's ready to smite you, judge you, let your sins pile up against you? Do you see Him as being angry with you, and allowing the devil to terrorize you? Oh, that must grieve Him more than anything!

The Father Has Two Kinds of Love: A General Love for All Sinners, and a Special Love for All Who Are in His Family!

God has a general love for mankind that can be embraced by anyone who comes to Him in repentance. But there is also in God's heart another kind of love - a special love for His children!

God has always had a chosen, special people for Himself, upon whom He bestowed His great love. Israel once was the sole object for this special love:

"For thou art an holy people unto the Lord thy God: the Lord thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth. The Lord did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people. But because the Lord loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers..." (DEUT 7:6-8).

God directed these words to Israel. Yet, today, if you have received Jesus as your Savior and Lord - if you have been adopted into God's family, and He is your loving Father - then you too must come to grips with how special you are to Him! You are the recipient of God's special love! And here are His words to you:

"But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light... (you) are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy" (1.PET 2:9-10).

At one time you were not an object of His special love - but now you are! You have been reconciled to the Father, and He loves you with a special love - right now, at this very moment!

It is important that you do not reverence His judgments more than His Love! Satan will come to you in your times of weakness and failure and will hammer you with every passage of Scripture about God's wrath against sin. Of course, God does judge sin. But Satan will take these verses out of context and use them to inject fear into your mind:

- *"Thou [God] art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity..."* (HAB 1:13).
- *"... Who is able to stand before this holy Lord God?"* (1.SAM 6:20).
- *"And Joshua said unto the people, Ye cannot serve the Lord: for he is an holy God; he is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions nor your sins"* (JOS 24:19).

I've heard pastors take these verses out of context and pound their sheep with them. But in each of these passages God was addressing a rebellious, hypocritical nation. He was saying, "In your present state I can't forgive you - because you don't have a heart that's repentant, that reaches out to Me for forgiveness and mercy. Your heart is set on your sin!"

All these frightful verses are aimed at hypocrites who refuse to hate their sin. And if you're a hypocrite, God will come to you with these words as a hammer, not to hurt you, but to break your hardness - to bring you back to a heart of love for Him. But these harsh words are never meant for repentant children who are sprinkled with the blood of Jesus - who always turn in repentance to their Heavenly Father! Yet too many of us allow these frightful verses to block out any vision of God's love!

2. We Do Not Rest in the Fact That God Knows What Is Best For Us!

There are times when God takes things from us. And there are times we pray for things we think we need, but God doesn't give them to us. Nevertheless, *"...The Lord knoweth the way of righteousness..."* (PSA 1:6). And one day it all will

prove to be for our benefit - and for His kingdom!

You see, the truest satisfaction in life is in doing the perfect will of God - in being in His perfect will, doing His work, living according to His choosings. But most of us are convinced only we know that we need to be fulfilled and happy. And, in most cases, what we believe is best for us actually would ruin us!

Never in the history of mankind has God taken anything from one of His children, except to bring in something better, more beautiful, more fulfilling. God's best is not something to fear - it is always that which satisfies most. He not only knows what is best for you - He wants you to have His best!

Oh, if we truly believed this, what rest, peace and joy it would produce in us! We would not grieve over letting go of things; we would know we're been set free from all bondage! We would say, "Lord, if You're taking this from me, it must mean You have something much better for me. So take it - You can have it!"

I have heard many young women say, "Do you mean God may be trying to take my boyfriend from me? He's my life - there's nobody else like him. If I lose him, I've lost everything!"

I've seen this happen many times. When they lose their boyfriend, they cry. "I want to die!" But I think to myself, "If you'll just turn to the Lord with all your heart and love Him, you'll be surprised at what comes to you down the road!"

Then a young man does come - one who is so much better than she ever could have imagined - so much in God's will and in His divine order. And when she looks back to what she almost settled for, she cries, "God, thank You for not allowing me to accept anything less than Your best for me!"

There is a young lady from England on our staff who was engaged to be married to a fine young man - but God told her clearly to lay the relationship on the altar. The Lord said, "This one is not for you. I have something else planned - and he does not fit in!"

So she broke it off - and she was called to a special ministry which

totally fulfills her. Now she is being greatly used in a wonderful way. God is proving to her that what He brings in to replace is so much better!

Beloved, we need to rest in the loving hand of our Father! We need to come to the point of trust, where we can say, "I have a loving heavenly Father who wants the very best for me. He knows it all!"

How did Job finally come to a place of rest? He persuaded himself that God knew what He was doing - and that everything was under control! Job said, *"But he knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold"* (JOB 23:10).

Now, you may be wondering, "Will God cut me off if I sin or fail while I'm waiting for His best? I know I'm not perfect. Does that mean I'll miss His best for me if I fall short?"

This is where many Christians are right now. They see God at work in their lives - they know He wants them to come into His best - yet still they wonder, **What if I blow it? What if I do something wrong, and God gets angry or impatient with me?** Will all His promises fail me? Will I have to settle for something less than His best?"

No - never! I want to give you a wonderful illustration that shows God's eternal purposes will not be thwarted by your weaknesses or failures. **If your heart is right before God - if you keep returning to Him and seeking Him with all your heart - nothing will change His plans for you!**

Consider God's Merciful Dealings With Ephraim, Who Had Shamed the Lord!

"...I am a Father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn" (JER 31:9).

Ephraim was the largest tribe of Israel and the people closest to God's heart. The Lord had an eternal plan for this very blessed tribe - but Ephraim kept backsliding and grieving God. They sinned against more light and grace and blessings than anyone in Israel!

But did God abandon sinful Ephraim? Just the opposite: The

Lord said Ephraim was to be a free and ransomed people! They would live among fatness - meaning, God's greatest blessings!

What was it God saw in Ephraim? They had a repentant heart - a shame for sin, a willingness to return to the Lord! And in spite of all their failures, this one trait attracted God's heart to them!

When a strong, prophetic word came forth to Ephraim, they responded. When they were rebuked, they wept over their sin. Even though they were bent on backsliding, they had a willingness to run back to God. And at the height of their backsliding, God said:

"...Is Ephraim [not] a precious son to me? Is he [not] a delightful child? That as soon as I speak against him, I do earnestly remember him still? Wherefore are my bowels [my emotions] so stirred for him? Tenderly loving I will tenderly love him, saith the Lord" (JER 31:20, Spurrell, original Hebrew).

God was saying, "In spite of Ephraim's shortcomings and failures, I see a repentant spirit. And I will not take away My tender love. My eternal purpose for Ephraim will go on as I have planned!"

Beloved, God has a plan for your life - to be sure you keep turning to Him! He is going to accomplish all His purposes for you, no matter what you are going through or how severe your trial. God is putting a lot of thought into planning your future!

I have a prophetic word for some who are reading this message right now: You can't judge God's eternal purpose for you by what you're feeling or thinking. You may be too focused on your failure or sin to judge correctly. **God wants to say to you in spirit, "Keep your heart humble before Me. Trust My Word about My nature - that I'm a tender, loving Father who has invested much in you, and I am not about to let you go. You're my delightful child - and I will deliver you!"**

"How precious also are thy thoughts unto me, O God! How great is the sum of them!" (PSA 139:17). *"For I*

know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end" (JER 29:11). God is saying to us through this "I'm not inclined to be thinking evil, judgment and chastisement toward you. I'm thinking good thoughts - I'm at work planning your life! Stand still and see the salvation of the Lord. Soak in My love!"

That's the kind of Father we serve! Not One who has evil, judgmental thoughts of vengeance - but One who has good thoughts toward us, of peace and hope to our final days!

As believers, we have two options: We can believe what God says about Himself - that He loves us and is going to see us through all our trials; that He is at work, opening and closing all doors to us; and that when we fail He's not mad at us, but will correct us in His tender love.

Or, we can believe the terrible alternative - that God has allowed us to be deceived by the devil and has left us to fend for ourselves!

You may say, "I don't see much evidence that God is doing anything to change my terrible condition. My pain seems to never end. I've waited and waited. How long will it take?"

It takes as long as necessary for a holy, omnipotent God to pull all the pieces together! He has so many thoughts about you and your future, you couldn't even count them. They are more numerous than the sands in the sea!

God gave David a promise that He would build him a sure house - an everlasting kingdom that would be established forever. And through all of David's testings, sins and disgrace, God's purpose was not hindered. Even when shame was heaped on David by his own family and sons, he held onto God's promise and wouldn't let go.

Finally, when David was old and gray and it didn't look as if the promise would be fulfilled, he said: *"Although my house be not so with God; yet he hath made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things, and sure: for this is all my salvation, and all my desire, although he make it not to grow"* (2.SAM 23:5). He was saying, "I don't see it being

fulfilled yet - but I stand on God's Word to me. He will bring it to pass!"

David rested in knowing that God knew best and would keep His word: *"For David speaketh concerning him, I foresaw the Lord always before my face, for he is on my right hand, that I should not be moved: therefore did my heart rejoice, and my tongue was glad; moreover also my flesh shall rest in hope"* (ACTS 2:25-26).

3. We have Considered It Too Good to Be True That We Can Serve the Lord All Our Days With Gladness - and Not Fear!

God's desire for us is to be so convinced of His tender love - so persuaded He is at work bringing us into His best - that we will have continual joy and gladness in our walk with Him!

Moses warned Israel, *"Because thou servedst not the Lord the God with joyfulness, and with gladness of heart, for the abundance of all things: therefore shalt thou serve thine enemies which the Lord shall send against thee, in hunger, and in thirst, and in nakedness, and in want of all things..."* (DEUT 28:47-48).

He is saying to us today, "be glad and rejoice in what I have already done for you! If you go around moping, murmuring and complaining, you'll forever be spiritually starved and naked, a prey to your enemies!"

God wants us to so trust in His love for us, we will be testimonies of gladness and good cheer! He wants preachers who are glad at heart - with a gladness that's based on truth. And His truth produces a wealth of gladness that flows naturally outward from the heart:

"Serve the Lord with gladness; come before his presence with singing" (PSA 100:2). *"...he brought forth his people with joy, and his chosen with gladness"* (PSA 105:43).

"Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, ye righteous: and shout for joy, all ye that are upright in heart" (PSA 32:11). *"...let the righteous be glad; Let them rejoice before God: Yea, let them exceedingly rejoice"* (PSA 68:3).

You may ask, "How long can I expect to maintain gladness and joy in my service to the Lord?" Most Christians believe it lasts only as long as seasons of refreshing come from on high - or as long as things go right.

No - we are to have joy at all times! That's exactly what the Bible says: "*O satisfy us early with thy mercy; that we may rejoice and be*

glad all our days" (PSA 90:14). "***But be ye glad and rejoice forever in that which I create: for behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a joy"*** (ISA 65:18).

We are "the Jerusalem from above" - reborn and living for Him with a spirit of gladness and rejoicing! And our loving heavenly Father has given us a rock-solid foundation for all our joy and

gladness: "*...be of good cheer; I have overcome the world"* (JN 16:33).

Trust the Father - believe His Word about Himself - and see His gladness pour forth from your life. Hallelujah!

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