

## Top Ten Fathers in the Bible Psalm 103:13

This weekend we specially honor fathers. For me, it is about memories since my father died several years ago. Of course, when it comes to memories there are tens of thousands of them, but one especially stands out in my mind.

Our family vacations were always along the east coast of this country and usually near a beach. From Cape Cod to Fort Lauderdale we lay on the sand and dove into the waves of the Atlantic Ocean.

My mother didn't swim. She even wore high heeled shoes to the beach. But my dad was a strong swimmer. When I was a little boy I would put my arms around his neck and hold on tight as we would go into the waves and he would swim out beyond the breakers. I can still remember the feel of his skin and the strength of his muscles as he swam. For me it was both exhilarating and very risky. I was in way over my head and I didn't have a chance of survival without him because I couldn't swim. But with him I could have the time of my life. I always felt safe in my father's strong arms.

That is the way a father is supposed to be—strong and safe in deep waters and pounding waves. It's the way many of the top ten fathers of the Bible were to their sons and daughters. But none more so than the greatest Father of them all, Father God.

In the Old Testament God was known by many different names like Yahweh and Elohim. They were and are powerful beautiful names that communicate God's greatness, power and covenant. But it was Jesus who taught us to call God "Our Father who art in heaven." Oh, it's true that we still say, "Hallowed be your name" because he is still holy, powerful, righteous and transcendent. But he is also our Father.

But Jesus used more than the formal expression "Father". He also used the Hebrew word "Abba". The ancient word is still used in modern Middle Eastern languages. I have heard little children running down the streets of Old Jerusalem calling out, "Abba! Abba!" It is like saying, "Daddy! Daddy!" God is "Our Daddy who is in heaven."

Some people tell me they feel very uncomfortable even thinking of God as their father because to them "father" means being drunk every night, physical and sexual abuse, anger, shouting or desertion. They have told me that words like "father" and "dad" are some of the ugliest and most frightening terms in our English language.

Please don't judge God by the failures of some earthly father. All good things can be sinfully corrupted and misused. A knife in the hands of a surgeon is an instrument of

healing; a knife in the hands of a murderer is an instrument of death.

When it comes to God, "Father" is his name of choice. It represents the best of all that a father is supposed to be—love; kindness; generosity; protection; and more. God is our father. He is all of that to us. Even if some human father fails us, God never does.

No one knew God the Father better than Jesus. He compared our Father in heaven to the best of fathers on earth and here is what Jesus said in Matthew 7:9-11:

*"Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!"*

God is good. God loves to bless us with generous gifts. God is our Daddy!

Second on this Top Ten list is the father of our human race, Adam. His story is famous and is reported in the opening chapters of the Bible. He was God's dream come true and one of God's greatest disappointments.

The Bible tells us that God created Adam in his own image or likeness. He was like God intellectually and emotionally, but not physically—he was still his own man. God named him Adam

which means "red" in Hebrew, referring to the color of the ground from which God formed Adam's body.

Adam was the best of the best—God-like, creative, brilliant, ambitious, independent and naive. He foolishly tried sin and infected himself and the entire human race with a malady that still wreaks havoc in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In this he was a disappointing father because every war, every disease, every crime and every evil dates back to Adam.

Adam's first child was born after his expulsion from the Garden of Eden. He and Eve had sinned and moved on. Now a new chapter of life was beginning and they had no experience with which to handle it. Adam had no earthly father for a role model, but he did as so many of us fathers have done. When Cain was born he hoped and prayed that his son would never repeat his mistakes and would instead build on his successes and strengths. New fatherhood is scary but it is also filled with hope.

There were other children, too, for Adam and Eve. Cain was their first child, then Abel and then Seth. Later there were other sons and daughters. Adam tried his best to raise them to be the best. If they didn't turn out well he

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couldn't blame the schools, pop music, MTV, drugs or bad friends. It was up to Adam. But never in his wildest dreams could Adam have imagined what would happen. His oldest son, Cain, murdered his second son, Abel. The agony of heart for Adam and Eve must have been beyond description.

From Adam we learn almost too much. We learn that God gives us great gifts but we are responsible to use them well. We learn that even the most gifted families have great heartaches. And we learn that you can't quit being a father even when fathering is indescribably difficult. For Adam there were other children who came along and he learned from his mistakes and did the best he could with the gifts that he had.

Father number 3 is Noah. He carried the DNA of Adam and Eve in a later generation. His story is told in Genesis 5 through 9. It is such a well-known story it barely needs retelling. God told Noah to build an ark and take into it a pair of every kind of animal to ride out a huge flood and start the world all over again. Here's what is says in Genesis 6:5-14, 22 and 7:1:

*The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. So the Lord said, "I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth—men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air—for I am grieved that I have made them." But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord.*

*This is the account of Noah.*

*Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God. Noah had three sons: Shem, Ham and Japheth.*

*Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence. God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways. So God said to Noah, "I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth. So make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in it and coat it with pitch inside and out."*

*Noah did everything just as God commanded him.*

*The Lord said to Noah, "Go into the ark, you and your whole family, because I have found you righteous in this generation."*

This example of Noah is a powerful example for fathers of every generation. It proves that even in the worst of times you can still live a righteous life and save your

family. Even when all your neighbors laugh at you for obeying God you can choose God over culture and raise godly children. It is not the times in which we live as much as it is the way we live and raise our children in those times.

Job is number 4 on our list. Although most famous for his suffering, but he was also a fabulous father. Job was an exceptionally successful man—the richest man of his generation and one of the wisest. He owned 7000 sheep, 3000 camels, 500 yolk of oxen and donkeys and had lots of servants on his staff. He was so wise that people came from great distances to hear his wisdom. And he was so righteous that God chose him in a competition with Satan himself.

Then one awful day he lost everything. Messengers delivered bad news upon bad news. Enemy soldiers stole his livestock and killed his servants. Those that survived were burned with fire. He later became painfully and chronically ill. But try to imagine the horror when a messenger brought him news about his seven sons and three daughters. In Job 1:18 we read:

*... "Your sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, when suddenly a mighty wind swept in from the desert and struck the four corners of the house. It collapsed on them and they are dead, and I am the only one who escaped to tell you!"*

Job's biography is 42 chapters long. It is a sad and difficult biography to read, but it ends with prosperity. Job 42:12-13 reads:

*The Lord blessed the latter part of Job's life more than the first. He had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yolk of oxen and a thousand donkeys. And he also had seven sons and three daughters.*

Everything was doubled except the number of children because the children who were lost could not be replaced. He was a faithful father to those who had died, grieving for them and missing them for the rest of his life, but he was also a marvelous father to those who came as later blessings.

Abraham is number 5 on our Top Ten list. He is still one of the most famous men in the world, claimed as the spiritual father of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. His biography is spread over much of the Old Testament book of Genesis from chapter 11 through chapter 50.

His parents must have thought he had father-potential from the day he was born because they named him Abram which means "high father". But God later changed his name to Abraham which means "father of a multitude". God had a greater dream for him that he would produce generations with millions of people who would become his descendents.

Read his biography for yourself. It is a mixture of stunning faith and surprising stupidity. He was not a perfect man. He wasn't always the best father. His famous sons were Isaac and Ishmael (modern Jews claim to be the descendants of Isaac and modern Muslims claim to be the descendants of Ishmael). Isaac was born to Abraham's wife Sarah; Ishmael was the son of Abraham's mistress Hagar. After Sarah died, Abraham remarried and fathered more children. Abraham was not the perfect parent; he made his share of tragic mistakes.

But Abraham is known in the Bible for two great accomplishments. First, Abraham was a man of faith. He believed God and God credited him as righteous. Abraham is also famous as the father of millions of descendents who carried forward his faith.

The lesson for modern fathers is plain and simple. The greatest heritage you can leave your children, grandchildren and future generations is not money, property, education, business or title. The greatest heritage you can give is faith. At your funeral, may your children say, "More than anything else, my dad was like Abraham. He believed in God and so do I."

Number 6 is Isaac, Abraham's son. His place in history is overshadowed by his more famous father. Abraham was 100 and Sarah was 90 when Isaac was born. His father was not only godly and famous, he was old. Isaac never knew what it was like to have a young father.

Isaac didn't marry until he was 37 and didn't become a father until he was 57. He was faithful to his beloved wife Rebekah. Together they had twins, Jacob and Esau.

Isaac was not an impartial father. He always considered Esau his favorite and gave him special treatment. However, God's favor was not on Esau but on Jacob. The brothers competed and fought for most of their lives. While Jacob sought a believer in God for a wife, Esau fell in love with and married a pagan woman, breaking his parents' hearts.

Isaac lived a very long time. He died at 180 years old. That was long enough to see his children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren grow up. He saw before his eyes the fulfillment of God's promise to make his father's descendants into a great nation.

Let me tell you my take on Isaac. He had a very famous and significant father, Abraham. He had a very famous son, Jacob, whose name God later changed to Israel, the name given to the nation. But in between was Isaac. He was not all that famous or important. Like so many of us fathers he was part of the in-between generation. But, if it were not for Isaac the chain of faith would have been broken. Instead, the chain of faith was strength-

ened. God bless those fathers who make the next generation great for God!

Number seven on this Top Ten list is a man who was neither famous nor a father. His story is recorded in the only book of the Bible that never once mentions the name of God, the book of Esther. His name was Mordecai and he lived under the rule of King Xerxes in Persia. He was a Jew who relocated to the city of Susa where King Xerxes' palace was located.

The king became unhappy with Queen Vashti and deposed her. A contest was set up for the most beautiful young women in the country to compete to become the next queen.

The winner was a gorgeous Hebrew girl named Esther. Apparently her parents had died and she was adopted by her relative Mordecai who had raised her.

Mordecai was a devoutly godly man. When he

found out that an advisor to King Xerxes named Haman had tricked the king into ordering the execution of all Jews in the empire, he called on Queen Esther to intervene on behalf of her people. The risk was great. First of all, the queen couldn't even talk to the king without his prior invitation. Second, no one knew she was Jewish and therefore included in the order to slaughter. She could keep her mouth shut and have a comfortable happy life or risk her own death by intervening for her people.

In a very famous challenge in Esther 4:13-14, her adopted father told her:

*"Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"*

Esther chose to heed the words of her adopted father and to do what was right even if it meant risking her life. As a result she saved an entire generation of the people of God.

Mordecai is a champion of adopted fathers in every generation who lead their daughters and sons to do what is right.

Number 8 on our list is one of the first fathers in the New Testament. Like Mordecai he was not a natural father; he was a step-father. Step-fathering can be one of the highest callings a man can have. It is the opportunity to shape a life that has been brought to you by the hand of God rather than through the usual process of procreation. Step-fathering can also be a difficult assignment. When the inevitable hardships of parenting come there can be the temptation to say, "This is not my responsibility!" Or

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there is the possibility that the child may say, “You aren’t really my dad!” Perhaps this is the greatest opportunity to show the power of love that is greater than the product of two microscopic cells joining together.

Number 8 is Joseph. He was not a step-father by choice. He was drafted by God. The odds were against him because the expectations were way too high. His son, Jesus, could always say, “You’re not my real father. My Father is God. And you don’t measure up!” That’s a tough challenge to answer. Joseph knew he could never measure up to Jesus’ real Father.

You can read about Joseph in the Christmas story where there is one very interesting line. It’s not about Jesus the baby but Jesus the grown man. It’s in Luke 3:23: “*Now Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry. He was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph.*” Isn’t that amazing? They saw the miracles he performed and said, “That’s Joseph’s son.” They heard Jesus speak like no one had ever spoken before and said, “We know who he is; that’s Joseph’s boy.” They saw someone with stunning character and integrity and said, “Oh, yea. His father is Joseph.” When they saw Jesus they thought of Joseph, his step-father. You might think that was intended as an insult but to Joseph it was the greatest of compliments. The step-father had helped shape the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

Number 9 is a father you may not know. His story is reported by Dr. Luke, the physician/historian in Luke 8:41-42 and 51-54:

*... a man named Jarius, a ruler of the synagogue, came and fell at Jesus’ feet, pleading with him to come to his house because his only daughter, a girl of about twelve, was dying.*

*As Jesus was on his way, the crowds almost crushed him.*

*When (Jesus) arrived at the house of Jarius, he did not let anyone go in with him except Peter, John and James, and the child’s father and mother. Meanwhile, all the people were wailing and mourning for her. “Stop wailing,” Jesus said, “She is not dead but asleep.”*

*They laughed at him, knowing that she was dead. But he took her by the hand and said, “My child, get up!” Her spirit returned, and at once she stood up. Then Jesus told them to give her something to eat. Her parents were astonished, but he ordered them not to tell anyone what had happened.*

Jarius makes our Top Ten list of biblical fathers because he humbled himself for his daughter’s sake. He was an important and powerful leader; a proud man. He was the president of the synagogue, a leader of the community. Synagogue leaders weren’t supposed to beg from free-lance rabbis like Jesus. It was difficult for Jarius to ask for help from this prophet from Nazareth, but his daughter was dying and he was desperate. This father would not hold on to pride. He would do whatever he needed to do. So he fell down in front of Jesus and pleaded with him. If the people took away his position, they took away his position. If they laughed because Jesus said he could bring her back to life, let them laugh. He put his confidence in Jesus Christ. Blessed are fathers who are willing to humble themselves for a daughter’s or a son’s sake in order to bring them to Jesus.

Last on the Top Ten list is a man never known to have had children. In modern America he would not be honored on Father’s Day. Although he was probably once married, his wife is never mentioned. Perhaps he was a widower or divorcee. It was Paul and he was a saint!

Paul was a different kind of father. He was like a father to Timothy, his young friend and colleague. He took Timothy with him on trips, wrote letters to Timothy, spent hours talking with him and counseling him, introduced him to all the right people, prayed for him and loved him. Although Paul wrote them, the books of 1 and 2 Timothy are named after his spiritual son. He made him famous. He was like a father to Timothy. Paul wrote to other people telling them how proud he was of Timothy. In Philippians 2:22 he wrote, “*You know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel.*”

Blessed are those men who, like Paul, become proud fathers of young men and women whom they mentor to become everything God wants them to be.

There are so many ways to be a father—from nature to nurture; from physical to spiritual; from here to eternity.

May God bless every man who holds others in his arms and teaches them to live for God.

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