

As a Father

All You Need is Love: Pt.2

During the month of February, we are examining the concept of love. Both the world and the church agree that “all you need is love”. Christians believe that because we tend to think that all you need is *God*, and Jesus’ own brother, James, wrote that “*God is love*”. But the reality is most *everybody* believes that - if there even is a God - God is love. The tensions arise when we start to define just what we mean by “love.” And so last week we laid out a thesis and that thesis is going to guide us in this series as we, really, study the very nature of God. Who God is.

And the thesis goes like this. In certain kinds of movies, all the players are cartoon characters – and I’m not talking about animation. In fact, I’ve seen some very deep character development in animated films. But there are certain types of film that have lazy scripts and thin storylines and sacrifice character development for stuff blowing up or the easy laugh or the manipulative jerking of tears. The characters are one-dimensional. They’re not nuanced. They’re either heroes or villains or they’re stereotypes of some kind. I saw three movies in a row last week that fit this description – two action flicks and rom-com. Cotton candy for the heart and mind.

It’s entertaining enough. A distraction when you need it. But as soon as you walk out of the theatre, you never think of those characters again. There’s no reason to. Because there was never any personal engagement with them. There was never supposed to be – the emphasis is on the special effects or the wacky slap-stick. They’re one-dimensional cartoons.

Now, even in Western society, most people still believe in God, but the god they believe in is a cartoon god, a one-dimensional god. Oh, there are all *kinds* of varieties. They might believe in a god who is a kind of great force of energy. Or they might believe in a god who is a kind of benevolent grandfather or a god who’s a stern judge or a wonderful, loving friend or a god who is the unmoved mover, the cause of all that is, and so on.

But in almost every case, as we were talking about last week, people’s views of gods are flat. They *choose* from the many metaphors and say, “That’s my god.” And after all, this is a culture of choice, but when you do that, when you choose the metaphor - and there are so many metaphors for God that come out of the Bible even - if you choose one or two over another one or two, you come up with a one-dimensional god. You come up with a cartoon god, and as a result, there’s again no personal engagement. And we said what the Bible teaches us is that God, because he’s a real God, is *complex*.

And last week we looked at a Psalm that says God is a father *and* He's a friend *and* He's a king *and* He's a lover and He's all these various things. And if you choose one or a couple in *exclusion* of another - if you refuse to hold them together in the tension as God reveals Himself to be in the Bible - if you have a *loving* god who never judges or punishes anybody, "I don't believe in that," or if you have a *holy* god, to whom you have to just really, really try very hard to be very good to please Him or else He'll *smite* you...if you have any one of these kinds of gods - there'll be no personal engagement.

And that's not the biblical God. The biblical God is a complex God. Therefore, we're looking for these four weeks at these various sorts of love, these various images of God - the biblical God is a father *and* a friend *and* a lover *and* a king - each one of which is absolutely critical. You can't just choose one or the other. What *makes* you a Christian, what helps you *grow* as a Christian, is to be able to hold them together, to understand them, receive them, all these various kinds of love, and respond to them appropriately.

So let me read you the opening lines of our text for this morning – another Psalm this time – **Psalm 103:1-2**, "*Praise the Lord, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the Lord, O my*

soul, and forget not all his benefits—" What benefits? It has a list, but it goes on to talk about God in His capacity as a father. That God's love, among other things, is father love. He's other things, but we're going to look at this today.

So let's just ask two questions of this classic text – this could be a Father's Day sermon. First, let's ask the question; What does it mean that God is a father? What is that getting across to us about God? And then secondly; How should we respond? That's all – easy outline today - What does it mean and what should we do with it?

Now, first, What does it mean that God is a father?

And obviously, all these metaphors go like this; what we're being told in the Bible is if you reflect on the very best *possible* kings, the very best *possible* lovers, the very best *possible* friends, and the very best *possible* parents, you will learn something critical, something absolutely crucial, about God that *you* have to take into consideration if you're going to relate to Him. And it's important to note that God defines these categories and *not* the other way around. Some of you have a hard time thinking of God as your Heavenly Father because of your relationship with your earthy father. That's going to be something we have to overcome for every one of these categories.

So what does it mean that God's a father? Let's look at three things that are in the text. It means *absolute safety, compassionate anger, and ultimate home.*

Let's take a look. First of all, Absolute safety.

Verses 13 and 14 say, "As a father has *compassion* on his children, so the LORD has *compassion* on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust." Notice, first of all, the *deep* emotion of God for us. You say, "I didn't see any," and that's right.

One of the problems is there's almost no way to get this across in English. You know the New International Version, which we read for you, a modern translation of the Bible, translates this particular word "compassion". The old King James Bible says "pity." "Like as a father pitieth his children..." Well, that's not very helpful. Neither of those word choices work very well.

The Hebrew experts will tell you the word that's being used here of God is a surprisingly, remarkably, unbelievably deep *emotional* word. I'm going to try to flesh it out here for you. And by the way, it means to be *viscerally*, overwhelmingly in love with something. And it tends to be usually used with regard to mothers. I'll get back to this in a second.

There are two particularly memorable places where the word is used in other scriptures. One is in **Isaiah 49:15**, where it's talking about a nursing mother, and God speaks to His people and says, "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no *compassion* on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!"

Now what's going on here? First of all, the word "compassion" as I said, is hard to really get across, but I'm beginning to. It's talking about an incredibly visceral love. There's a kind of love, there's a kind of compassion. It's overwhelming. It's visceral, and here God has the *audacity* - rightly so - to identify with this word, which has to do with the biologically rooted, overwhelming love that a mother has for an infant as her milk is coming in.

And there's another place where this very same word is used with regard to mother love. It's very vivid. You find this word in First Kings chapter three. It's a very famous story about a woman whose infant baby boy dies in the night - she suffocated him in her sleep actually, very tragic. And in her despair, she goes and finds another mother who's asleep with *her* infant baby boy and *steals* the child while the mother is sleeping.

The next day the true mother of the child realizes what has happened and drags the mother who has stolen the child to King Solomon, and King Solomon hears the dispute. And after listening to the dispute – and how in the world is he going to know who’s telling the truth? - he finally says, “I have an idea. Let’s do this. Bring me a sword and I’ll cut the child in half and give one half to her and the other half to her.”

And we’re told in **1 Kings 3:26**, “*The woman whose son was alive was **deeply moved out of love**...*” – that’s the same word from our Psalm - “*...for her son and said to the king, “Please, my Lord, give her the living baby! Don’t kill him!” But the other said, “Neither I nor you shall have him. Cut him in two!”*” I think we have a winner! And sure enough, Solomon now sees through the deception and awards the boy to his true mother.

But before we pass over it too quickly, think about that mother for a moment. She’s so moved with compassion, *viscerally* moved, that she in essence said, “*I’m the liar. She’s the mother. Give her the child.*” Now you know, to say to the king, “I have lied before you. I have committed perjury in your court.” is possibly a capital offense.

And what it meant was here’s the mother love. Here’s this unbelievably, overwhelmingly, emotional, visceral love. She realizes what’s going to happen and is willing to sacrifice her life and give her child *to the liar*, to the thief, to save the child. And God has the audacity to say, “That’s the kind of love I feel for you, for my children.”

Now by the way, this is a small tangent, it’s going to take about 30 seconds, but it’s worth saying. People say, “Why does the Bible so often talk about God as Father? Does that mean God is a *male* deity in the Bible?” No, the Bible is clear that God is a gender-less being. And this kind of vocabulary mixing and matching shows, no, the Bible is *not* saying fathers are the image of God but mothers aren’t. This is showing us both father love and mother love, *all parent love, is rooted in the heart and in the image of God Himself.*

The point here is, first, God is using an *unbelievably* emotional word and says, “I feel that love for you,” but look - we’re not quite done with this - look at verse 14. *Why* does God love us like this? V. 14 starts with “for” which means “because”. V. 13 is this incredible, emotional involvement with us. **V. 14** tells us why. “*...for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.*”

Now, I'm sure people are going to say this. At first sight, if I asked you, "Look at verses 13 and 14. Why does God love us? Why does God love His children?" Right away, you'd say, "Well, it's because we fear him. God loves those who fear him." But if you look carefully – and Hebrew always loves parallelism – notice "fearing him" and "being children" are the same thing.

In **verse 13**, it says, "*As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for...*" In other words, those who fear him – we're going to get back to this near the end – notice, to be in fear, which means awe and wonder, and to be children are the same thing. So He's not saying, "He loves you *because* you fear him." No, the word "because" is there. The word "for" is there. Why? Because you're a wreck, because you're flawed. See, dust is a metaphor for falling apart. Dust is a metaphor for being broken. Dust is a metaphor really for being...sinful.

And here's something weird. We know from what the Bible says, and you know from common sense, when you're good, when you're right, when you're *doing* what God wants you to do, He loves you more. And yet we're also told when you're doing badly, when His children are doing poorly, when His children are falling apart, God loves you more. Does this sound like a non sequitur to you?

God is emotionally, deeply involved with His children *because* they're such idiots – *because* they're such dust. Is that a non sequitur to you? Listen, you don't understand parents. One of the things that's so interesting – this is the point here – God is emotionally involved, and it doesn't matter *what* His children do. *Whatever* you do, good or bad, whatever you do, God just loves and loves. You are absolutely and completely *safe* in God's unbreakable emotional commitment.

Now the reason we have to bring this out under Father and not under Friend, Lover, and King... Think for a minute. Do you know what? Friends can be patient, but at a certain point, if your friend continues and continues to divulge your secrets, continues and continues to break your confidences, you just can't keep *doing* the friend thing. Right? At a certain point you have to have to stop doing the friend thing if your friend acts like that.

Or love... You can reach out to hug and kiss, and your lover can push you away. "You're having a bad day? All right." But over and over and over and over and over again, if your hugs and your kisses are again and again and again spurned, you're going to stop *doing* the lover thing. You know at a certain point the friend has to stop doing the friend thing if the other person stops being a friend, and the lover has to stop doing the lover thing if the other person is not being a lover. And even kings at a certain point, if their citizens are trampling on their laws, can't be in a good relationship here.

But even us below-average parents – and there are many, many of us; at least 49 percent - even we below average parents know something. That when you have multiple children and one of them is being stupid and is being the most messed up, if anything you feel *more* parent love. Your heart goes out *more* to them.

Parents know that almost as soon as they're born, your heart locks on, and you realize no matter how this child acts for the rest of his or her life, you're never going to be happy unless they're happy. And God has the audacity to say, "The reason for that...is because parents, even you bad parents, even you below-average parents are made in my image. That's how I am. I'm Father. You are *absolutely* safe in my love." That's the first thing.

God's children are *absolutely* safe in His love. That's what you need. You need family love. You need unconditional love. You need love no matter *who* you are, no matter *what* you do. In fact, you need love just because you're a child, not because of anything you're giving to the father or the mother, just because you're the child. We all need love like that.

And God says, "It's with me. That's where it is. That's where the thing you most need in the world is. You need that absolute safety. You're not going to get it from anybody else. You're not only not going to get it from friends and lovers and kings, by definition.

You're not even going to be able to get it from fathers and mothers here on earth because they are broken to some degree. They are dust too, but I'm not." Absolute safety, number one.

The second thing it means; **Compassionate anger.**

This is the next thing we need. I know some of you are saying, "What?" Well look at **verses 8–10**. "*The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.*"

Now what do we see here...on the one hand and on the other hand? On the one hand, we see a God - a father, because that's who we're talking about here - whose anger is not a payback anger. It says right off the bat in verse 10 the anger is *not* repaying us for our sins. The anger is not tit-for-tat anger. The anger is not retributive – not retribution.

Now by the way – and this happens all the time, and because I'm a below-average parent, it happens a lot to me – if when your children inconvenience you or humiliate you or cause you pain in some ways, a very, very natural thing is let the child experience payback anger. In payback anger you're trying to frighten the child. You're trying to scare the child. You're trying to just maybe emotionally sort of shake up the child.

And what you're doing is you're trying to basically pay the child back. It's payback anger. "You humiliated me. I'm going to humiliate you. You hurt my feelings. I'm going to hurt your feelings. You created unpleasantness for me. I'm going to create incredible unpleasantness for you." And I want you to know payback anger in a family *never, ever* works. And I've been on the receiving *and* the giving end – you probably have too. It *always* poisons.

Payback anger is not like the rain that passes over us and leaves everything lush and green as a result. It's more like the rain that parks over us and just swamps and floods and destroys everything. And the *reason* why payback anger never, ever works in a family is our families are just images of God, our parenthood is just an image of God's parenthood, and God *never* gives payback anger to His children.

But on the other hand, this *is* a God who gets angry. You know one of the things that struck me as I was meditating on this, in **v. 9**, it says, "...*nor will he harbor his anger forever...*" Ok, but what does that mean? It means God *will* harbor anger. He won't harbor it *forever*, but that means God harbors anger. This is not a stoic, emotionless god. This is not a god who never gets angry. This is a God who *gets* angry...but who does not give us payback anger.

What are we talking about here? I'll tell you what. In verse 8, this is compassion-driven anger. It's slow. It's utterly under God's control. The compassion is permanent - as verses 8 and 9 say - and the anger is temporary. Why? Because *compassion* is driving the anger. It's deliberate. It's intentional. It's purposeful.

What are we talking about? Just this. There are two kinds of parents who can destroy your life. One is the completely permissive kind of parent, so detached that he or she just never gets angry, never lays down standards, never engages, never confronts - detached, permissive, "Do what you want." We call them neglecting parents, absent parents.

On the other hand, you have abusive parents – lots and lots of payback anger. And I want you to know *either* an absent parent or an abusive parent destroys that child. Either an absent parent or an abusive parent makes the child say, "I don't feel secure. I don't know if I'm loved." And that's because payback anger or *no* anger means the child is not loved.

You say, “What do you mean no anger?” If you love, you get angry. When I was in college, I read a book that had an impact on me, *Hope Has Its Reasons*, by Becky Pippert. I’m so thankful that at a formative age I was introduced to the voices of strong, brilliant Christian women. But she says, “The fact is that anger and love are inseparably bound in human experience...The more a father loves his son, the more he hates in him the drunkard, the liar, the traitor...If God were not angry over how we are destroying ourselves, then he wouldn’t be good and he certainly wouldn’t be loving. Anger isn’t the opposite of love. Hate is, and the final form of hate is indifference.” (94)

On the one hand, if you don’t have a parent who gets angry at you, you’re not loved. If on the other hand, you have a parent who is always paying you back, you’re not loved. Either way you’re going to feel like an orphan. Either way you’re going to not know who you are. And here’s what’s interesting. You say, “Well, what kind of anger are we talking about?” Anger that looks at your flaws, anger that looks at your brokenness – your dust-ness - anger that looks at what’s wrong with you, and very deliberately and very purposively *is* concerned, is upset.

The anger *is* emotional, and yet it’s under control because it’s unselfish and says, “I’m going to bring into your life a disciplinary action. You can’t go to the party. You can’t do this. You can’t do that. I’m bringing pain into your life but *only* so it will wake you up, so it’ll change you, so you can avoid the destructive pain that will *surely* come into your life later on if I don’t do this now.”

You and I desperately need compassionate anger. We need someone emotionally involved enough with us to get angry, but unselfishly so, with no personal ax to grind, with no desire to visit vengeance or retribution on us. We need that *more than anything*, and God says, “I’ve got it. The thing you need, that you look for, which you get only partially elsewhere. I got it. I’m Father. I’m *the* Father.” For God to say, “I’m Father,” means “in me and in me alone is absolute safety”. Secondly, “In me and me alone you have the wise guide, the compassionate anger.”

And lastly, it means *Ultimate home*. Verses 15-16 says, “*As for man, his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more.*” Why does that last line get me? Why does that last line get you? At least it will as I let you think about it for a minute.

“...the place remembers it no more.” The *place* you grew up remembers you no more. There is *nothing* worse, no worse nightmare than that place in *It's a Wonderful Life*, that Frank Capra film, where Jimmy Stewart as George Bailey is sent back to Bedford Falls, New York, and his place remembers him no more. Do you remember that? We did a God at the Movies Christmas edition on it years ago.

He wished he'd never been born and he gets his wish. He goes to see his mother but she has no idea who he is – “George who? I don't take in strangers. You belong in an insane asylum.” He goes to see his brother, who's dead of course because George wasn't around to save him. He goes to see his *wife*, Mary. She doesn't know who he is. He goes to his house, his home and he's a stranger.

What is home? Every other place you fit in, but home is the place that fits you. A real home is a place where the colors, the architecture, the furniture - everything is where it ought to be. The smells, the fire, the chair by the window - the ultimate home *fits* you. The ultimate home is everything you want. And George goes to his ultimate home – his refurbished dream home - and it's in shambles, it's a ruin. It's a nightmare. Of course it's a nightmare.

George Bailey goes back to the place where he grew up - verse 16 - and his place remembers him no more. He's a man without a place. He's a man without a home. Why do some of you get so upset when your parents talk about selling their house. It's not *your* house. Oh but it was. Did you know, the bedroom where I slept from 7th grade until I moved off to college – it's now the east-bound turn lane of a six-lane divided highway? My home was displaced by Mid-Cities Blvd! I go “back home” and I don't recognize anything. They've torn down the “new” mall – where the cool kids hung out. Are you old enough to remember “new” things that aren't new anymore? Don't laugh young people, the nostalgia train is coming for you before you know it!

Why do so many of us want to go and find we can't really enjoy going back to the place we grew up and seeing all the changes? Why is that so awful? Why is it so terrible to realize your place remembers you no more? Why is it so terrible not to *have* a place, not to be *from* anywhere? Why? Why is place so important?

I don't know, but the one thing we do know is this is the human condition. Over and over and over again we go back, and we find our place remembers us no more. No matter how hard we try, houses crumble. We can't make the mortgage. People break up. People get divorced. Parents die. The children you once carried home asleep from Disney World, now won't speak to you. They paved paradise and put up a parking lot.

Why? What is this getting at? What it's getting at is we all need a place, we all need a sense of home, and *until* - we're being told - until you realize what your heart is really after, you're going to spend all of your life chasing a mirage, a hallucination, a fantasy. You're going to spend all of your life working *too* hard - because if you could just make a enough money to *buy* that perfect home...! You're going to spend all of your life searching for something, and where can you find it? Where is the only place you can find it?

Take a look at the contrast. It's amazing. Verse 16 says, "... its place remembers it no more," *but* in **verse 17**, what's the replacement for that? "***But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him...***" The Lord's love is *the* home. The Lord's love is *the* place. The Lord's love is the *only* place that, when you go there, they have to take you in. The Lord's love is the *only* place where the fire never goes out in the fireplace.

The Lord's love...On the night before the crucifixion, Jesus Christ says to his disciples, "I go to prepare a place for you." Where? "*In my Father's house* are many rooms..." The ultimate home your heart is looking for is there. The ultimate, absolute safety you need is there. The ultimate, compassionate anger you need is there. *That's* what it means to say God is the Father. *That's* what it means when it says, "As a father...so the LORD..."

Now, secondly, How should we respond? What do we do about this? What do we *do*? How do we get that into our lives? And I'm going to tell you four things. You have to do four things, four *steps*, if you want. And they're all here. If you want that absolute safety in your life, if you want that compassionate anger in your life, how can you know you're unconditionally loved by God? How can you know there's a place for you - an eternal place? In other words, how can you know you're a child of God's - that He is your Father?

First is a preliminary step. It's not really a step, but I'll call it a step. The preliminary step is realize being a child of God is **not automatic**. Look. who is it who God is giving all this to? Look at **v. 18**, "*with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts.*" A covenant is a contract, and you keep a covenant only because you've *made* a covenant. It means there's a spot where you *weren't* in covenant and then you are. There's a spot where you *weren't* in a relationship and then you are.

And the reason I have to say this is because the average person today in America has an idea of God, and even has an idea of God as a father, but believes, "Aren't we *all* God's children?" The answer is yes and no...but mainly no. Here's why. If you think of the metaphor of a parent, parents give you three things: your existence, your resemblance, and a relationship.

First of all, parents give you your existence. If someone is your biological parent, it's because you literally sprung from their body. Second is resemblance. *All* of your genetic code came from one parent or the other. All of what you look like, all of who you are in all those senses, comes from one or the other. Anika looks like Deanna and acts like me. Ari acts like Deanna but looks like me. I mean, exhibit A (picture of Ari and me each at 16). Resemblance!

And then last of all is relationship, because that's what we've been talking about so far. A parent doesn't just give you existence and resemblance but also has to create absolute safety, also has to bring you into a place of guidance and personal engagement and compassionate anger and create a home, a place where you can grow and nurture, a place that fits you, and so on.

Now, if you ask *those* three things, "Is God the Father of everybody?" In the first sense, of course. God is the Author of everybody. God is the Creator of everybody. In Acts 17, Paul says to the Greeks in Athens that "we are all God's offspring." Of course, we are...in the *first* sense. If you primarily think of God's fatherhood in terms of the *source* of your existence, we're all God's children, but the Bible doesn't *primarily* think of it that way, because it's really not the most important. After all, any adoptive parent will tell you that not physically bringing their child into existence does nothing to negate their ability to be a loving parent.

Secondly, if on the other hand you say primarily God's fatherhood means resemblance, in that case, *nobody but Jesus* is God's child. If you think primarily of the first one – existence - basically *everybody* is God's child. If you think of the second one – resemblance - *nobody but Jesus*, he's the only One who is *just like* his Father. He's the only One who is *perfectly* good, *perfectly* loving, *perfectly* honest.

So if you look at those first two aspects of fatherhood in this metaphor, either *everybody* is a child or *nobody* is a child, but we all know from what the Bible says that's not the *primary* part of the metaphor that God is using. It's not the *primary* part of the metaphor the biblical authors have in mind when they talk about it.

John 1:12, says, "*Yet to all who received him, to those who **believed in his name**, he gave the right to become children of God...*" There it is. The first thing you have to understand is being a child of God is not automatic except in the most general sense. It's a relationship you can enter into. You're either not in the family or you can come into the family. You have to know that or you'll never get in! If you don't know you're out, you're never going to get in. Ok? That's the first step.

Secondly, the transformative step. What's the transformative step? Your heart must be melted by how God became your Father. Unless you're a total narcissist, the question is going to eventually come to you, "Why me?" "The Creator of the Universe, the Maker of all things seen and unseen, the ultimate spark of all being...chose *me* to be His child? How could that be?"

See, if you understand the complexity and the reality of who God is, you're *going* to ask that question. If you don't ask that question, if you don't say, "How could God do this? How could He love us like this? How could His anger *not* be payback anger? I mean think of the *atrocities* we have committed on one another through history. How could God never, ever pay us back? How could God accept us like this?" if you never ask that question, it's because you have a cartoon god - just loving - and who isn't judge, isn't holy, doesn't have standards. That's a neglectful absentee god. That's not a loving God.

So the question is how could God do this? Here's the answer. George Bailey was just a story, but what a nightmare! His place knew him no more. He had no place in the world. What a nightmare! But then the movie ended and the lights came on. But there was someone who really existed and who said, (**Luke 9:58**) "*Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the*

Son of Man has no place..." When Jesus did visit his hometown, they really did try to take him away to an asylum. He had no place.

And on the cross when Jesus Christ turned to God - I want you to know *every* time in the Bible you see Jesus talk to God, he says, "Father, my Father, our Father, holy Father, Abba Father," *every* time...but one. When he was on the cross, he said, "My God." What was happening there? His place knew him no more. He lost the spirit of sonship. The door was closed. No fire in the hearth, no light from within.

The ultimate nightmare, something *vastly* deeper, something unimaginable, cast away, out of the family, out of the house, out of the home. His place knew him no more. He was gone. He *felt* gone. It was like going to hell forever and worse. Why? He lost the spirit of sonship...so we could have it. *His* place knew him no more...so *we* could have a place.

The door was closed on the ultimate home - slammed in Jesus' face - so the door could be opened for us. Why? Because Jesus paid the penalty for our sin. Somebody says, "I don't believe in that. I don't believe in a God of justice." Listen, don't you want your Father to be the ultimate power? "My dad can beat up your dad!" Don't you want your Father to be real? And the real God created the universe.

How will that God not be powerful? And the real God made us to love our neighbor as ourselves, and we haven't done it. So the real God *will* be a judge. But here's the great thing; because Jesus Christ exchanged places with us – the cross means Jesus got what we deserve and we get what he deserves – we don't have to be *afraid* of the greatest power in the universe. His justice has been satisfied.

The *greatest* power in the universe...now you can call Him at 1:00 a.m. and ask for a glass of water, and He'll come, because that's what parents do. Great kings do that for their little kid...but nobody else. You can get on His lap. Nobody else can get on the king's lap. He'll listen to you no matter what. He'll love you unconditionally. Only if you understand that Jesus Christ's place knew him no more so you could have a place. Do you believe that? Do you see that? Does it move you? That's the transformative step, the melting of your heart.

And thirdly there's the contractual step. You have to **make a covenant**. That's what it says. There's always a covenant. I got to watch a court-room covenant happen live on Zoom last year. A couple in our church appeared before a judge and became the legal parents of a little girl they had been fostering for several years. The judge asked some questions. They had to swear some oaths. I don't know that I've ever

been in tears over a legal procedure before! But they don't just *give* you the kid. There's a covenant.

How do you make a covenant with God? You could do it today. I hope some people will, I hope at least a few. I hope that when we go to prayer some of you are going to say, "I always knew you were a God, and I tried to be good" or "I thought you were loving, and I was always grumpy that you weren't answering my prayers. But now I realize what your Son did for me, and now I'd like you to accept me into your family because of what Jesus did. And I'm going to live as a child of yours, in absolute confidence and trust."

See that it's not automatic – that's the preliminary step. Realize what Christ has done for you – that's the transformative step. Cross the line – that's the contractual step. And then lastly, the praise step: Wonder and think and meditate and celebrate the fatherly love of God in your heart until it changes you for the rest of your life. And now we're back to where we started! **Psalm 103:1-2**, "*Praise the Lord, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits—*"

What do verses 1 and 2 tell us? Who is this entire psalm addressed to? To *whom* is the psalmist saying, “As a father has compassion on his children ...”? To *whom* is it saying, “But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD’s love is with those who fear him ...”? Who is he talking to? God? No, God knows it. Others? No, he didn’t say, “Praise him O Israel” – other places do. But what does *this* psalm say? “*Praise the LORD, O my soul...*” All of your problems come because your soul does not know you’re a child of God. You’ve forgotten. Do you *know* that God absolutely loves you? You’d never have a problem with rejection.

Listen, **Hebrews 13:12-14** says, “*And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.*” What is he saying? Jesus Christ was *thrown* out so we could be brought in. Jesus Christ was taken out. Here’s the point. If you know you have the Father’s love, does it *matter* if you’re disgraced? Does it matter who rejects you? Does it matter if you’re an outsider?

Why are you so upset with criticism? Why are you so upset with the fact that somebody you valued seems to have gotten cold to you? You’re not one of the inner

circle? Why are you so devastated? Why do you struggle with problems of self-worth? I’ll tell you why. Your soul...*doesn’t...know...this*. You’re living as if it isn’t true. “Praise the Lord, soul. Listen, soul.”

I’ll give you another example. Some of you are so mad at your parents, but there are no perfect parents. You’re so mad because they haven’t given you this kind of love. God says, “How could they?” If you are parents or if you’re ever going to be parents, you won’t be able to do it either. Some of you are too mad at your parents. Some of you are too dependent on your parents. You’re desperately looking to them. God says, “They can’t give it to you. I can free you *from* your family - the bitterness - and I can free you *for* your family.”

Or money. You know over and over when the Bible talks about, “Don’t be worried about money. Don’t be afraid. Don’t try to make too much money. Don’t be greedy. Don’t drive yourself into the grave in order to make money.” It always says – we looked at this verse just last month - “Because your Father knows what you need.” If you’re worried about money all the time, you don’t believe God is your Father. Or if you’re working like crazy so you can build that beautiful dream house, I want you to know it won’t work. It won’t be enough.

If you tell your soul, if you wonder in amazement that you're a child of God, if you know you're a child of God and you keep telling yourself, you push it and push it and push it in, you'll be free from the need of approval. You'll be free from either bitterness or over-dependence on your family. You'll be free from the worry for money or for overwork.

And one more thing. When bad things happen to you - terrible things even - you'll relax. Do you know what's interesting about all these other metaphors? Lovers are contemporaries, kings and citizens are contemporaries, friends are contemporaries...you're your Father is 40, and you're 4.

And that means Father is always bringing things into your life you don't get. And most 4-year-olds are much smarter than we are, because most 4-year-olds get really mad for a while when you say, "No, you can't do this." "Can we go to McDonald's? No." They get upset - they may throw a fit - and then they *forget* about it. They get over it. They don't say, "Give me your bank access, I want to audit the funds. Show me your tax return, why the hell don't we have Happy Meal money?" They just kind of go, "Eh, I'm 4, what do I know?"

You know, my kids are going to know more than their dad one of these days. That day is *not today*...but it will come. But if you live to be 100, you'll *never* know what your Heavenly Father knows. So when bad things happen to you, do you say, "I don't know, I'm just a kid."? Do you know that's what "amen" means? Let it be unto me. "God, you're God and I'm not. But I trust you, so amen." Can you relax?

What a load off if you realize you're a child of God! Do you know this? Dear friends, does your soul know this? Tell your soul, "Praise the Lord, oh my soul..." You're forgetting the benefits. The benefits of having a *Father's* love. All your problems come from that. Know that.

Let's pray...