

PERCEPTIONS OF GOD: EFFECTIVELY MINISTERING TO MEN WHOSE VIEW OF
GOD HAS BEEN NEGATIVELY IMPACTED BY A DYSFUNCTIONAL FATHER FIGURE

BY

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE MASTERS IN DIVINITY

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MEQUON, WISCONSIN

FEBRUARY 22, 2017

Abstract

This research examines the link between how a father fulfills his role and how his children, specifically his sons, view God as a result. This work is meant to establish awareness and recognition that transference of the familial father with God the father does in fact take place, and quite often. The document presents a brief overview of the most common forms of paternal role violation, as well as the identity distortions that men struggle with as a result. It will examine how God the Father is altogether different from the earthly father, and how possible and necessary it is to approach our Heavenly Father through his Son. Five Bible stories are recommended as a possible point of initiation for pastors to use when counseling and encouraging these men. Bible stories are also utilized to illustrate some of the most common forms of paternal neglect or abuse and their affiliated identity distortions; as well as, to outline how using Scripture can assist with overcoming these distortions with Christ as the answer.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Literature Review	4
Is There A Link Between How Children Perceive Their Fathers and God?	6
2. What Are Most Common Forms of Paternal Abuse And Their Consequences?	8
A. The Absent Father	8
B. The Passive Father	8
C. The Enabling Father	9
D. Sexual Abuse	9
E. Physical Abuse	10
F. Psychological Abuse	10
G. Reality and Consequences of Neglect and Abuse	11
3. How God is a Different Father	13
A. The Importance of a Relationship with God	14
B. God Is a Father	15
C. God Wants To Be a Father	15
D. The Father Who Knows and Wants to be Known	16
E. A Warning	18
4. Through the Son We May All Approach the Father	19
A. The Son Reveals the Father	19
B. The Son Restores the Relationship between God and his Children	20
5. Bible Stories: Through Christ	22
A. Dealing With an Absent Father: Luke 15:11-32	22
B. Dealing With an Enabling Father: 1 Samuel 2:12-36	23
C. Dealing With a Passive Father: Judges 2:10-15; 4-5	25
D. Dealing With an Abusive Father: 2 Kings 21:1-18; 2 Chronicles 33:1-20	26
E. Dealing with an accusing father: Zechariah 31	27
Conclusion	29
Bibliography	31
Appendix 1: The Father's Love: A Devotion on the Parable of The Father with Two Sons	33
Appendix 2: The Father's Love: A Sermon on the Parable of The Father with Two Sons	35

Introduction

Fathers play a key role in the development of their children, for better or worse. It is an inescapable truth that pervades our entire culture. For example, Michael Jordan spoke openly of his father as his hero. In 1991, Michael's father, James, shared his son's joy as they celebrated his first championship victory. On Father's Day in 1996, as the Chicago Bulls won their fourth championship, Jordan fell to the floor in the fetal position on the court sobbing as he thought of his father who had been murdered three years earlier. Several US presidents, as well as many politicians, over the years have spoken openly about the impact, negative or positive, that their relationship with their father had upon them. A crucial element to Neil Patrick Harris' womanizing character, Barney Stinson, on the hit TV show, "How I Met your Mother," is his search for, and struggle with, his biological father; all the while sleeping with hundreds of women, spouting his catch phrase, "Daddy's home," and speaking of the vulnerability of twenty-something girls with "daddy issues." The story lines of some of the most popular comic book characters such as Superman, Batman, and Ironman are driven along by the ever present father-son dynamic. The entire Star Wars franchise is based on the father-son relationship. Even the book "Bambi" explores this relationship as a young Bambi is raised by his father after his mother's death. Furthermore, the Internet is full of what seems like a never ending parade of blogs exploring various father issues.

One of the unexpected consequences of the relationship between a father and child is that it seems to directly impact how a child views God. This occurrence in no way diminishes the spiritual impact that the mother has on her children. However, the relationship that a father has with his child impacts that child's relationship with God very distinctly, in a way that the relationship with the mother does not.¹

In my experience, when the father lives into his biblical role as husband and father, more often than not, seeing God as their Heavenly Father is very clear and the transition is very smooth. When the father role is distorted or abdicated, the consequences are painful, life altering, and may become a stumbling block in their faith.

When a person grows up without appropriate fatherly involvement in one of its various forms, either an abdicated paternal role or a combination of paternal abuse and/or neglect, the

¹ Murrow, David. "In spiritual matters, kids take their cues from Dad." *Touchstone*, 2005.

individual will naturally develop certain derogatory perceptions of self and of the idea of a "father."² People transfer these painful facts about their earthly father and their relationship, or lack thereof, and imprint them onto God their Heavenly Father. This transference portrays God as a giant, cosmic, and all powerful version of their sinful earthly father; thereby magnifying their present degrading views of themselves as sons. Subsequently, the child proceeds to relive a similar relationship with God as their father that they experienced with their earthly father.³

Why does this occur? Common sense would say that it is simply an easy transition. A child is born with a biological father, God refers to himself as Father, so naturally a child assigns the qualities of their earthly father to God the Father because the, "perceptions of what a father is really like are colored by our experiences."⁴

This phenomenon plays out differently in the lives of women than it does with men. Daughters learn how they will want to be, should be, loved by a man from both their relationship with their father and by watching how their father treats their mother.⁵ A son, on the other hand, learns how to be a man. In either case, the relationship with their father speaks to the very core of their identity, who they perceive themselves to be, and therefore how they relate to others.⁶ More often than not, the father-child relationship literally programs the way the child thinks. These ways of thinking over time are adopted by the child, and eventually the adult, and become the default browser by which they process the world. All of their thoughts, feelings, experiences, successes, failures, and interactions are viewed and colored through this tainted filter.⁷

This is where it gets tricky. It is easy to get side tracked by focusing on one of the many surface issues tormenting them when speaking to a person who is dealing with the myriad of consequences derived from paternal neglect or abuse. Most men, in my experience, if they want to talk at all, will want to focus on external circumstances like their job, marriage, or some other

² Bierman, Alex. "The Effects of Childhood Maltreatment on Adult Religiosity and Spirituality: Rejecting God the Father Because of Abusive Fathers?." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 44(3) (September 2005): 349,355.

³ Bishop, John L. *God Distorted: How Your Earthly Father Affects Your Perception Of God and Why It Matters*. (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2013), 8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵ Allender, Dan B. *The Wounded Heart: Hope for Adult Victims of Childhood Sexual Abuse*.(Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2008), 56.

⁶ Aglialoro, Paul. "The Benefits of Having a Present Father Figure - Happenings Magazine." *Happenings Magazine* RSS. N.p., 18 June 2014. Web. 17 Nov. 2015.

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⁷ Saunders, Stephen M. *A Christian Guide to Mental Illness: Recognizing Mental Illness in the Church and School*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2016. 282.

stressful point. Even when the focus is on internal matters, the conversation will most often be about surface issues such as their anger, drinking, or lack of stress management. However, none of these are the main issue at hand. Dr. Chris Thurman keenly diagnoses that the problem is not in the lies you have told others, or the lies others have told about you or to you; rather the problem is, "the lies you tell yourself every day that are killing you... Every lie that goes through your mind is slow, self-inflicted psychological and spiritual death. Every lie you think costs you your life. The lies we believe are the mental bullets that kill our souls, and they inflict significant damage often without our even realizing it until it is too late."⁸ At the heart of the problem is the question of identity, "Who am I?" and it is here that the focus must stay. It is imperative that the focus be maintained on this question of identity.

The purpose of this thesis is threefold. The first goal is to raise awareness and recognition of the identity distortions associated with the neglect or abuse of a boy, or man, by his father. The second goal is to give the reader a short refresher course in the fatherhood of our God, and how we are able to approach God as Father through the Son. The third goal is to lay out a basic action plan where Scripture is directly applied to the specific identity distortions of the counselee; one at a time, in either a one-on-one or small group setting, along with prayer work between meetings.

This work begins with a look at the scientific research which outlines the link between a father's role and how his children view God. Next, there is an overview of the most common forms of paternal role violation and the identity distortions that it causes. Afterwards, there is an evaluation of how God is a different Father from earthly fathers and how it is possible to approach our Heavenly Father through his Son. After that, five Bible stories are applied directly to the specific identity distortions as an example of how to overcome them with Scripture. Finally, some practical suggestions and cautions will be offered to consider when ministering to young men from this background.

⁸ Thurman, Chris. *The Lies We Believe*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), vii-viii.

Literature Review

This paper examines four questions: Is there a quantitative or qualitative link between a father's role and how his children view God as their Heavenly Father? What are the types of paternal role violations and identity distortions caused by such violations in a child's life? Who is God as our Father? How does God reveal his Fatherhood to us through the Son?

Before I begin, it is important to point out that the amount of research and writing on the topic of parental neglect and abuse, as well as its consequences, is massive; especially taking into account the blogging phenomena. It touches every facet of human existence. This thesis in no way comes close to encapsulating all of that information.

Despite the vast amount of literature available on neglect and abuse, I found relatively little quantitative research done on the link between how a father carries out his role and the impact that it has on his son's perception of God. Furthermore, there is only slightly more qualitative research available. Regarding quantitative research, I found "Parental Image and the Concept of God: An Evangelical Protestant-Catholic Comparison" in the *Journal of Psychology and Theology*. In the same journal, I also located "Attachment to God: Differentiating the Contributions of Fathers and Mothers Using the Experiences in Parental Relationships Scale." And, I read "The Effects of Childhood Maltreatment on Adult Religiosity and Spirituality: Rejecting God the Father Because of Abusive Fathers," in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. Qualitative research and writings are more prevalent and are most often found in the form of online publications such as *Happenings Magazine*, *Desert News*, *Christianity Today* and blogs like *God Is Just Like My Father*. All of these sources show evidence that highly supports both the quantitative link as well as the qualitative link between how a father carries out his role and the impact that it has on his children's perception of God.

The statistical and clinical research available on the link between paternal neglect/abuse and its cognitive impact on children and adults is thoroughly researched. The types of literature presenting this information are quite diverse. Government organizations such as the Center for Disease Control (CDC), Child Protective Services (CPS), and the Center for Child Protection and Family Support provide accessible, current, and factual information on the basics of type, recognition of, and resources for neglect/abuse. Clinical sources such as, *A Christian Guide to Mental Illness: Recognizing Mental Illness in the Church and School*, by Saunders is a straightforward resource written from a Christian perspective to help believers understand mental

illness and mental health problems. I include Dr. Chris Thurman's book, *The Lies We Believe* and Dr. Dan Allender's book *The Wounded Heart: Hope for Adult Victims of Childhood Sexual Abuse*, in this category because they outline basic information about the effects of paternal neglect/abuse. More information on neglect/abuse can also be found in blogs, Seminary theses, and Professional Journals since they often form the basis for treatments.

The Bible is the primary source, and the final authority, when researching the true identity of both the perpetrators and victims of paternal neglect/abuse. Secondary sources that I have utilized to testify to the truth and supremacy of Scripture in this matter are Alwinson, Bishop, Tebow, and Keller.

Overall, there are a lot of resources and information available for those interested in this topic. Answering these four questions and suggesting a way to put them to practical use will provide pastors with a basic place to self-prepare, and implement biblically based encouragement and counseling. I will conclude by outlining additional resources for further study and assistance in this field in case that is needed or desired.

1. Is There A Link Between How Children Perceive Their Fathers and God?

Paternal impact on children is well documented. Serious studies on the positive impact of fathers on their children have only been investigated since the turn of the century. The CDC recently put forth some preliminary findings suggesting that strengthening the father-son bond may increase healthier behavior patterns in adolescent males. In Bishop's book, *God Distorted*, he cites a census from the US Department of Health which found that children with involved fathers are 40% less likely to repeat a grade in school, and adolescent girls raised in two-parent homes with involved fathers are significantly less likely to be sexually active than girls raised without involved fathers.⁹

The negative impacts on a child when the paternal role is abusive or abdicated are beyond refutation. That same census revealed that 63% of youth suicide victims, 90% of all homeless and runaway children, 80% of rapists with anger problems, and 71% of all high school dropouts come from fatherless homes. The census also revealed that children living in two parent households with a poor relationship with their father are 68% more likely to smoke, drink, or use drugs.¹⁰

However, what about a father's impact on the spirituality of their children? Some of the most current research has focused on the father's influence on church attendance. The evidence here is overwhelmingly in favor of the fact that a father's church attendance is the primary indicator of their children's future church attendance. The Switzerland based research group, Barna, found that only 3% of children went on to become regular churchgoers when the mother was a regular churchgoer, but the father attended infrequently. Similarly, only 2% of children became regular attendees when the mother attended church regularly, but the father never attended. When the mother and father both attended church, 33% of children grew up to do the same. When the father attended church regularly but the mother attended infrequently, 38% of children grew up to attend church regularly. What appears to be the most startling about this study is that when the father attended church regularly but the mother never attended, 44% of children grew up to be regular attendees at church.¹¹ Thus far, the research clearly shows that a

⁹ Bishop, 4,5.

¹⁰ Ibid., 4,5.

¹¹ <https://www.barna.org/culture-articles/579-christian-women-today-part-1-of-4-what-women-think-of-faith-leadership-and-their-role-in-the-church>

father's impact on his children goes beyond social consequences and heavily impacts the religiosity of his children; however, does it affect their perception of God?

Early work in psychoanalysis which based its assumptions heavily on the work of Freud did make the connection between God and earthly fathers. However, Freud only equated the individual's concept of God as a merely exalted concept of "father."¹² More recently, studies have gone back and forth on the topic; one study pointing to the correlation between mother and God as being higher, the next concluding that the "admiration of the father was significantly associated with strength of belief of God," and still other studies pointing towards a more parental correlation.¹³ Nonetheless, current research leans heavily in favor of the paternal role being the primary indicator of how a child will relate to God.

Bierman's study, *The Effects of Childhood Maltreatment on Adult Religiosity and Spirituality: Rejecting God the Father Because of Abusive Fathers* states that, "most research has shown that the victims of abuse tend to have more negative views of God, are less likely to believe in God, and are less likely to be involved in organized religion or not practice religion at all."¹⁴ This makes sense, especially in light of the fact that the vast majority of abuse is perpetrated by males. Bierman goes on to say that results of his study, "demonstrate that it is paternal abuse that has the primary negative association with religiosity."¹⁵

Limke and Mayfield's findings were similar to the aforementioned results. Their study in 2011 was titled, "Attachment to God: Differentiating the Contributions of Fathers and Mothers Using the Experiences in Parental Relationships Scale." Their research concluded that, "attachment to fathers predicted attachment to God. Moreover, attachment to God predicted both religious and existential well-being."¹⁶

¹² Keyser, Mark D. and Gary R. Collins, "Parental Image and the Concept of God: An Evangelical Protestant-Catholic Comparison." *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 4 (Winter 1976): 69.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 69,70.

¹⁴ Bierman, Alex. "The Effects of Childhood Maltreatment on Adult Religiosity and Spirituality: Rejecting God the Father Because of Abusive Fathers?." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 44(3) (September 2005): 349.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 355.

¹⁶ Limke, Alicia and Patrick B. Mayfield, "Attachment to God: Differentiating the Contributions of Fathers and Mothers Using the Experiences in Parental Relationships Scale." *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 39(2) (2011):122-129.

2. Most Common Forms of Paternal Abuse and Consequences

A dysfunctional father figure can assume several forms. Whereas there is agreement about these forms in general, the way that they are organized depends on the type and purpose of literature being reviewed. This thesis will give a brief overview of the six common forms of paternal neglect/abuse: the absent father, the passive father, the enabling father, and the three forms of paternal abuse—sexual, physical, and psychological. This will be a brief overview.

2.a The Absent Father

The absent father is the easiest form of neglect/abuse to recognize. The absent father is simply not there. That is not to say he is not present. The father's absence is constantly present. It looms at school functions, birthdays, and graduations. The father's absence is felt as a boy or young man watches his mother struggle to make ends meet financially, as well as in the lost interactions he has with her as a result. It is present in every unanswered question and fantasy about who his father is, and what that father might think of him if they were to meet. And unfortunately, it is a growing epidemic in this country, especially in African-American communities. "According to statistics, 43% of children live without their fathers. About 40% of children in father-absent homes have not seen their father at all during the past year, 26% of absent fathers live in a different state than their children, and 50% of children absent from their fathers have never set foot in their father's home."¹⁷

2.b The Passive Father

The passive father is a form of paternal neglect, and it is very difficult to detect. Dr. Stephan Poulter, a clinical psychologist, estimates that 40% of people are raised with a passive father.¹⁸ The passive father is physically present, but fails to provide an essential need for his child. In one sense, he may seem like the poster boy for fatherhood. He has a good job, works hard, is an exceptional provider of money and material needs, and is well respected in the community. Unfortunately, he fails to spend meaningful time with his children, he shows little interest in their lives, and he fails to give them any guidance or encouragement. "Though he is not physically absent, he is absent in a different way. He is present in body, but then not

¹⁷ Bishop, 15.

¹⁸ Dr. Stephan Poulter interviewed on *Good Morning America*, <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/Books/story?id=2018716&page=1>

available to his family in the way they need."¹⁹ This may occur for various reasons; for instance, he may be emotionally unavailable or just disinterested. His passivity may also be a result of an unhealthy marriage dynamic. Whatever the reason, a passive father exhibits a form of neglect toward his child.

At first glance, the Passive Father category may not seem like it should make the list. However, in addition to the other absent qualities previously discussed (time, interest, and guidance), consider that oftentimes a passive parent may set their child up to be abused by another individual. In his book *Wounded Heart*, Dr. Allender details several types of parental passivity that either led to sexual abuse or increased the hurt and helplessness of the victim's situation. Sometimes the parents choose to ignore or deny evidence of the abuse of their child, while other parents are unaware of the abuse but display such a character weakness that the abused child does not trust them or see them as a safe place.²⁰

2.c The Enabling Father

The enabling father, "is someone who intentionally or even unintentionally promotes a specific behavior or action in another person. The term *enabler* is most often associated with people who allow loved ones to behave in ways that are destructive to themselves and to others in the family."²¹ Lack of discipline in the lives of boys and young men is nothing short of destructive. Constant rescuing by the father robs his son of experiencing consequences of his sin, and causes him to develop unrealistic perceptions and expectations about interactions with others and God. It also produces a false sense of self, thereby creating an attitude of entitlement.²²

2.d Sexual Abuse

"Sexual abuse refers to forcing children to engage in sexual activities. By definition, any sexual activity with a child is forced, as a child cannot legally consent to it."²³ Even though girls are sexually abused more often than boys, the nature of the abuse on boys adds certain damaging aspects which are unique to their sex. The boy or young man will likely encounter stigma in the world indicating that sexual abuse is not supposed to happen to boys. His wounded masculinity

¹⁹ Bishop, 21.

²⁰ Allender, 124.

²¹ Bishop, 33.

²² *Ibid.*, 32.

²³ Saunders, 281,282.

will cause his shame and guilt to increase. Young men who have been abused sexually experience guilt, shame, confusion, self-loathing, a sense of responsibility believing themselves to be at fault, and a sense of feeling “dirty” or “bad.”²⁴

In general, sexual abuse is a prevalent form of abuse and its occurrence is higher than reported because of how often it is kept secret, especially with boys. Current research indicates that,

"over 3 million reports of child abuse are made every year in the United States. Many of those reports include multiple children, so child abuse reports and allegations involve an estimated 6 million children annually. It is extremely likely that the vast majority of cases of child abuse go unreported. Studies suggest that 30 to 70% of child maltreatment cases involve substance use on the part of the abuser."²⁵

2.e Physical Abuse

Physical abuse is the most visible and easily identified form of abuse. It, "can be defined as aggressive bodily contact with the child in a manner that causes the child to experience fear and pain."²⁶ As with domestic abuse, the frequency and severity of injury will escalate the longer the abuse is allowed to continue. The longer physical abuse continues the deeper the psychological ramifications.

2.f Psychological Abuse

Psychological abuse perpetrated by a father on his son is extremely hard to recognize definitively. "Verbal or emotional abuse includes screaming, threatening, name-calling, belittling, bullying, or ignoring the child. It can also take the form of exposing the child to violence being inflicted on others, including their mother, a sibling, or a pet."²⁷

One specific case of psychological abuse worth noting and identifying is the concept of "Scapegoat." In Leviticus 16 God gives Moses very precise instructions for the Day of Atonement. Part of Aaron's responsibilities was to select a goat by lot to be the Scapegoat. Aaron was to lay both his hands on the head of the goat and confess all the sin of the Israelites and thus symbolically transferred them to the goat. Then, a man would lead the goat out into the

²⁴ Saunders, 281,282.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

wilderness to a solitary place and release it into the wild. As the goat wandered away from Israel, it would carry the sins of Israel away. This was meant to be a picture for the Israelites of how God would one day forgive and forget their sins in Christ, who came as the true scapegoat that bore the sins of the world upon himself and took them away from us.

In many abusive homes, this ritual is reenacted quite perversely on a daily basis with a certain child designated as the Scapegoat, filling in for the goat. All of the guilt, shame, and blame of the abusive parent and the dysfunction of the family is shifted onto that child. Overtime, the role of the scapegoat becomes so concrete a concept in the family that even the other family members begin to treat the child as the scapegoat as both a survival tactic and a form of denial.²⁸

2.g Reality and Consequences of Neglect and Abuse

Simply put, neglect and abuse are messy. Speaking in non-clinical terms, all neglect is a form of abuse and all abuse is a form of neglect, and all of it comes with terrible psychological effects. Experiencing any one of these traumas by itself would warp a young man's perception of the world. For the sake of clarity, each subcategory of neglect/abuse was looked at in isolation. However, the painful truth is that would be very rare for one form to be perpetrated exclusive of the others. Every abdicated father role carries with it both passive and enabling effects. The lack of involvement of a passive father, at times, opens opportunities for other forms of neglect/abuse to occur. Sexual abuse entails some form of both physical and emotional abuse. Furthermore, all abuse has some demanding, controlling, and accusatory elements to it.

In addition, the cognitive distortions, the ways our mind convinces us of something that is not really true, that affect a young man are even more varied than the neglect/abuse they have suffered, further complicating the scenario. Victims of neglect and abuse often have little to no self worth and their ability to perform educationally and professionally is greatly diminished.²⁹ Relationships with others are also impaired. "The abused child learns, in the most grotesque fashion that the person you most love cannot be trusted. They learn that their sense of love itself can't be trusted."³⁰ Neglect and abuse also increase the chance for mental illness, substance abuse,

²⁸ Bishop, 47.

²⁹ Saunders, 283.

³⁰ Saunders, 283.

promiscuity, and the likelihood of being involved in criminal activity.³¹ Just think about the impact neglect and abuse can have on how a child perceives God as their Father.

It is not helpful, and oftentimes beyond the scope of a pastor, to attempt to unravel and understand the ‘why?’ of it all. It is also not helpful to get bogged down in depraved details; this may actually hurt the person further as they relive the trauma. This type of counseling should be referred to a licensed professional counselor who has experience in this matter.

³¹ Saunders, 283

3. How God is a Different Father

In the introduction, it was noted that the consequence of the father-child relationship directly impacts a child's view of God and themselves. Up to this point, human fathers have been evaluated in some depth. The key role that fathers play in the spiritual development of their sons has been established. In an even greater depth, the darker aspects of human father behavior have been reviewed. The most common forms of paternal neglect and abuse, and the heavy toll laid on young men who grew up with these types of fathers or father figures, have been briefly examined.

Sadly, the way these men came to know their fathers is nothing short of tragic. They had a front row seat for every harsh word their father spoke, every blame shifting accusation he threw out, and every impossible demand he laid out. These men saw every rage filled explosion and the grotesque looks that accompanied them. These men watched as their fathers stormed out and did not return. They felt every beating. They felt the tension, disappointment, fear, and uncertainty that their father cultivated in the house. They felt his inaccessibility, and watched the gap between them grow over the years. Or, perhaps they heard nothing at all. Maybe, all they felt was the void left by his absence or neglect. Irregardless, they came to know him. Moreover, in the tragedy of this relationship they solidified in their head what a "father" is and who they were in relationship to that father.

The question should be asked, is that really what a "father" is, or, is that just the cloud that distorts and blinds them to what a "father" really is? Bishop correctly states that, "we cannot see God clearly if we see him as a bigger version of our fathers."³² Therefore, even though God bares the same title of "father" as their earthly father, God is altogether different. What we are asking them to do is a difficult thing; to put that false notion of what they learned a "father" is aside and take a look at God. look at who he reveals himself to be in his Word. Only there can God change their conception of a "father," and thereby give them their true identity as sons of God.

³² Bishop, 59.

3.a The Importance of a Relationship with God

The importance of having a relationship with God as the Father for men cannot be overstated. The obvious reason we need a relationship with God is salvation. There is also the matter of identity, which has tied up in it the notions of purpose and worth. People root their identities in their jobs, family role, monetary value, skill set, and a variety of other things. But, what happens when life shifts, as it always does, to the next phase? For that matter, what happens when identity is snatched away through unemployment, death, injury, age, a bad economy, an abusive or neglectful father, or one of the other thousands of ways life kicks in your door? All identities rooted in this life and in ourselves are in jeopardy. In his book "Shaken," Tim Tebow encourages readers to see that in moments of doubt and uncertainty, true strength is not drawn from who you are, but whose you are; you belong to the One who created you, the One who loved you beyond all love.³³

A relationship with God is what you were created for. Look at the love and attention to detail that God the Father operates within the first three chapters of Genesis. On days 1-3 of creation God creates habitats, and then on days 4-6 he fills those habitats up with animals. Look at the care and hands-on approach God takes in creating Adam, forming him out of the dust(Genesis 2:7). Notice how God gently guides Adam to the realization that he needs a match, and how God takes Adam's own flesh and bone and then returns it to him in the perfect companion of Eve, the perfect compliment for him(Genesis 2:15-25). Even after the Fall, when humanity ruined our relationship with God through the sin of Adam and Eve, God engages them with all mercy and patience. God, the Father Almighty, takes time to ask questions of his children as if he did not know what had taken place. Look at how God immediately safeguards his children by announcing the Savior, condemning the Enemy to death, disciplining Adam and Eve, and expelling them from the Garden so as not to allow the problem to become compounded. Yet, he provides them with clothes before allowing them to go (Genesis 3). Even after Fall, when wickedness multiplied with each new generation, God continued and sustained his relationship with humanity even, and especially, when we did not want it. Talk about a different 'father.' God is a father who shepherds his children. God is a father who is constant,

³³ Tebow, Tim. *Shaken: Discovering Your True Identity In The Midst Of Life's Storms*. Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 2016. pg 21

firm, and just; yet gentle, patient, wise, merciful, kind, and loving. He is a father who is present and encouraging; a father who takes the burden of the relationship upon himself.

And, this is where God is altogether different. For God's presence, knowledge, and power is all bound up in the fact that "God is love"(1John 4:16). The focus is not that he is loving or lovely. This is not the distorted and perverse love that was described to you as, 'the best he knows how,' that you grew up with, or the love that you just knew would walk through the door any minute,' or even the love that you knew would be there if 'he only knew me.' None of those are accurate. Rather, God is love. He is love itself; and, like everything else about him, it is love beyond your comprehension. He is the love that changes everything.

3.b God Is a Father

God is a father. He is the Father. In fact, he is the ideal image of a father from which other father-son relationships should be based. The father-son relationship is at the very essence of who God is. The one true God defines himself by this relationship. God the Father speaking of God the Son says in Psalm 2, "You are my son; today I have become your father"(Psalm 2:7) Jesus, God the Son, speaking in John 10 declares that he and the Father are one (John 10:30) What a beautiful picture this paints of the father-son dynamic. The father-son relationship is so intimate within the Godhead that the Father and Son are in perfect unity and agreement in all things.

The father-son relationship is so profound that it is at the very essence of the Christian faith. In both the Nicene and Apostles creeds, the Christian faith is professed in terms of this relationship. There is God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit who proceeds from them both. However, God's desire for fatherhood does not stop there. God extends that relationship to us as well. In Psalm 68, God is praised as, "a father to the fatherless"(Psalm 68:5). And, in Jeremiah 31, God calls himself Israel's father (Jeremiah 31:9). Furthermore, when Jesus teaches his disciples how to pray, he says we are to make our address as Christians to God, "our Father in Heaven"(Matthew 6:9).

3.c God Wants To Be a Father

God wants to be a father. Moses tells the Israelites, "For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth

to be his people, his treasured possession"(Deuteronomy 7:6). Our being chosen by God goes even farther back than that. In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, Paul wrote that God, "chose us... before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship"(Ephesians 1:4-5). God is under no compulsion to be our Father. He chose us out of his own goodness and grace simply because it pleased him.

3.d The Father Who Knows and Wants to be Known

God the Father knows his children and desires to be known by them. His wish is not just that a man would have a concept of a higher being than himself. Rather, God's desire is to share himself with his children and develop an ever-deepening relationship with each of them surrounded by, and founded on, the Father's perfect love for us. Our knowing him is an essential purpose in all of his work.

This can be seen in his work of creation. The Psalmist wrote, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world"(Psalm 19:1-4). Creation itself bears witness that there is a Creator. And even though from creation we see that there is a wise and powerful God, he remains imperceptible.

Yet, there is so much about God that we cannot know from nature. Thus, God reveals himself to us in his Word. Only there can God change a man's conception of a 'father,' and therefore give him his true identity as a son of God. A deeper knowledge of God is a crucial aspect in all God's work as Creator, Savior, and Sanctifier. And through his Word God gives and uses that knowledge to draw us to him, nurturing our trust in him and love for him. God's intention to make himself known is in every book of the Bible. That is why we have the Bible. It is God's record of how he has revealed himself to humanity in the Word throughout all history, from beginning to end.

Why does God go to such great lengths to be known? Because God knows who we are and knows that the one truly necessary thing in life is for us to know him. God knows his children with an intimacy that is beyond our understanding. There is nothing about you unknown to him. As seen in Psalm 139, God knew you before you were born (Psalm 139:16). When Jesus sent out the Twelve, he comforts them not to worry because God knows them so intimately that

he even knows the number of hairs that are on their heads(Matthew 10:30). Nevertheless, God the Father knows you to an even greater degree. God also knows the heart. He knows your deepest hurts, your greatest joys, and all your brokenness.

As your Heavenly Father, God is intimately involved in your life. God desires to be close to you. In the Bible, God's presence is one of the greatest comforts that he offers. David wrote:

⁷ Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?

⁸ If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

⁹ If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea,

¹⁰ even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.

¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,"

¹² even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.

¹³ For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.

¹⁴ I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.

¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.

¹⁶ Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be (Psalm 139:7-16).

This is a closeness that his child cannot run or hide from; a closeness that goes beyond even a mother carrying her child in her womb; a closeness and intimacy that reaches back before that child ever existed. This is the comfort that God repeatedly encourages his people with, as their Father, reassuring them that, "I will never leave you nor forsake you,"³⁴ and "I will be with you."³⁵ This is why the Ark of the LORD went with the formations of the Israelites in travel and in battle.³⁶ The psalm writers praise God for his presence again and again. God's presence is joy, confidence, light, blessing, security, and protection for his children, Israel.³⁷

God the Father is radically different than the fathers many men grew up with. God loves them and made plans with these men in mind. God desires to have them close and to have them know him as their Heavenly Father. Maybe they think they are too broken or made too many mistakes for these things to be true. But God knew they would not only bear the oppressive weight of their father's sins, but would themselves sin and even hurt others with their sin. He has

³⁴ Ibid. Dt 31:6,8; Joshua 1:5; Heb 13:5

³⁵ Ibid. Gen 26:3; Ex 3:12; Dt 31:23; Joshua 1:5; Judges 6:16; 1K 11:38; Isa 43:2; Jn 13:33

³⁶ Ibid. Ex 25:22; Josh 3-4,6; 1 Sam 4:4; 2 Sam 11:11

³⁷ Ibid. Ps 16:11; 23; 31:20; 41:12; 89:15

prepared for their brokenness, their guilt, their shame, and the shame others have thrust upon them. He has prepared for and delivered them from all of it. Furthermore, he sent Jesus to reveal it all to us.

3.e A Warning

A listing and description of all the attributes of God that make him the wonderful Father is a matter for a different setting. When ministering to young men who grew up with an abusive or neglectful father, you should use caution not to lay out too quickly all the various aspects of God's omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence and then slap the term 'father' on them. Numerous warnings are laid out throughout the literature regarding this. First, deep down on a subconscious level you have just introduced him to a distant, all-powerful, cosmic 'father' that he is unable to please, unable to dissuade, unable to hide from, unable to lie to, and unable to run away from. His earthly father was, in certain aspects, already a personification of this and he may continue to link the two in his mind.

Second, he will retain and focus on the seemingly more harsh aspects of God, the law; and, be skeptical of the more gentle aspects, grace. His father, absent or present, has cognitively trained him to seek out and spot potential disappointments and danger. Subconsciously, God's sovereignty, righteousness, and hatred of sin will be a part of his daily life; while God's kindness, compassion, mercy, and love will seem unrealistic and unattainable.

4. Through The Son We May All Approach the Father

Jesus is the key that grants us access to God so that we are able to know him as our Heavenly Father. Jesus reveals the Father to us. Jesus does this in a way that only he can because Jesus, God the Son, is one with the Father. In revealing the Father to us, Jesus restores the broken relationship between God the Father and his people.

4.a The Son Reveals the Father

The enigma of getting to know God in the Bible is in recognizing that the whole Bible is about Jesus. Who better to facilitate your relationship with your Heavenly Father than the Son who has known him as Father from eternity; who is one with the Father? All of Scripture revolves around him. In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells the Pharisees, "You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me,"(John 5:39). It is through Jesus, God the Son that we come to know the Father. In fact, Jesus is the only way to know the Father. Jesus says, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me"(John 14:6). In "God So Loved The World," Lyle Lange opens by stating that the centrality of Jesus to Scripture is that:

"At the heart of the study of Christian doctrine is Jesus Christ. Just as Jesus is the center of the entire Bible, so he is the heart and core of the study of Christian doctrine. The entire body of Christian doctrine centers on Jesus and what he did for our salvation. If you lose Christ all you have left is an ethical system for the morality of mankind. Apart from Jesus Christ, there is no salvation. Apart from faith in Christ, there is no power or motivation for Christian living." ³⁸

Once Jesus properly occupies his place at the center of Scripture, most everything else falls into place.

Jesus is one with the Father. This makes him the ideal person to reveal God to humanity. God the Father and God the Son are one (John 10:30). This is more than just being on the same page. The Father and the Son are one in essence. Jesus was sent by the Father (John 8:29). He spoke the words his Father told him to speak (John 17:8). Jesus and the Father seek to glorify one another (John 8:50).

³⁸ Lange, Lyle. *God So Loved The World: A Study of Christian Doctrine*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Pub. House, 2005, pg 3.

In an effort to explain this concept to the disciples, Jesus says to them, "If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him... Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father... Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me" (John 14:7-11). Consider how Jesus' words frame his whole life in terms of revealing the Father to others. Each event and encounter in Jesus' life was purposeful; motivated by, and carried out in, the perfect love. From the cradle to the cross, there was no randomness or happenstance; rather each word, encounter, and miracle echoed what is on the heart and mind of the Father. "In everything Jesus does, we clearly see the love, patience, and generosity of the Father."³⁹

4.b The Son Restores the Relationship between God and His Children

Nowhere is the Father's great love more clearly visible than on the cross. Shortly before being arrested, Jesus prayed to the Father about his impending suffering and death, and how it would affect the disciples. "I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them" (John 17:26).

The relationship that had been created for people to enjoy with God had been destroyed by Adam, our first father's rebellion. Each of us, from the moment of conception, have embraced that ruined relationship with God and made it our own. We ran away from our Father and sold ourselves into slavery, to death, and corruption. The restoration of that relationship was exactly why Jesus had come. God the Father and God the Son had created the rescue plan before the creation of the world. Jesus would offer up his own perfect life as a sacrifice to God on the cross for the sin of the World.

"Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed... and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all." (Isaiah 53:4-6)

And then after three days, Jesus shrugged off death, picked up his life again, and rose victorious over Death, Sin, and Satan.

³⁹ Alwinson. pg 30.

Through his suffering, death, and resurrection, Jesus forged a new relationship where we became sons of God our Father. "But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father.' So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir" (Gal 4:4-7).

In Christ, everything is changed. Those who grew up with no father have been adopted as a son by the Father in Christ. Those who grew up with a father that enabled their sin and self destruction have received in Christ the true love of God that condemns sin, wipes away guilt, and bears self control. Those who grew up with passive, weak fathers have a strong, protective Father through Christ who always acts for their benefit. Those who grew up abused have a Father who is kind, patient, gentle, and compassionate in Christ. Those who grew up cast as the family scapegoat have, in Christ, received mercy, received the forgiveness of sins, and been declared 'not guilty!' Those who were denied the basic and core parental provisions through neglect and abuse have access to an ever-present Father, full acceptance as a son, a place within the family of God, and bear a name that is beyond any other. In Christ, we have received a legacy and a relationship with God the Father based on his grace.

5. Bible Stories

5.a Dealing With an Absent Father: Luke 15:11-32

The Bible clearly condemns fatherly neglect. Proverbs 27:8 says, "like a bird that flees its nest is a man who flees from his home. In 1 Timothy 5:8 Paul condemns those who neglect their family as having "denied the faith" and says they are "worse than an unbeliever." But there really is no particular Bible story that illustrates the trouble of an absent father the way it is dealt with in this paper. However, the entire Bible illustrates that when men do not know God as their Father, the result is catastrophic. We clearly see this when we look at the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden, Noah's story, Sodom and Gomorrah, the Exodus, the time of the Judges, the time of the Kings, the wisdom found in Psalms and Proverbs, the Exiles and Returns, the state of God's people at Jesus' arrival, and the world's push back against the Gospel.

What is also clearly seen in the major accounts of the Bible, as well as in the smaller individual connective stories, is the unrelenting love of God the Father. Time and time again, God shows his patience and mercy for rebellious and ungrateful children, as well as hatred of everything that seeks to separate us from him. We see our Father quick to forgive us and anxious to reinstate us as sons through the Son, Jesus.

Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' So he got up and went to his father.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and

kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

"Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

"'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'" (Luke 15:11-32)

A father had two sons. Although at first the sons appear to be very different, they turn out to be quite similar in the end. Both the older son and the younger son alienate themselves from their father; both sons were lost.⁴⁰ But in this parable it is not the sons that take center stage, it is the father. It is the father who has provided for his sons. It is the memory of the father's integrity and kindness that calls the younger son home. It is the father that pines for his lost boy as he watches the horizon. It is the father that runs out to meet his son, reinstates his son, and initiates the celebration over his son's return. It is that same father that takes time in the middle of a celebration to go out to his eldest son and urge him to join the festivities. It is the father who reassures the eldest son of their relationship and his identity.

Men who grew up without a father, as previously discussed, are often tormented by the uncertainty of a relationship with an earthly father that never existed. However, these same men can be comforted by the presence and acceptance of God their Father. In Christ, God the Father is recklessly extravagant with his love, giving everything he is for his sons to show them a love which has always been, even before they knew it.

5.b Dealing With an Enabling Father: 1 Samuel 2:12-36

Eli was the High Priest at Shiloh where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. Eli had two sons who were also priests, Hophni and Phinehas. Eli had neglected the training of his sons and

⁴⁰ Keller, Timothy. *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith*. (New York: Penguin Group, 2008), 36.

his tolerance of their behavior was now having disastrous consequences. Hophini and Phinehas had the infamous practice of taking the best portion of the sacrifices offered to the LORD for themselves through threats and force. In their flagrant disrespect for the LORD, they also had sex with the women who served at the opening to the tent of meeting. When word of his sons' behavior reached Eli's ear, he tried to rebuke them. However, Eli was now an old man and his rebuke was simply too little, too late.

The LORD rebuked Eli through a prophet and held him responsible for his son's actions. The prophet handed down the LORD's judgment. Because of the hardness of his son's hearts, they would die and Eli's line would cease to minister before the LORD. The reason for such harsh judgment from God was that Eli's failure to discipline Hophini and Phinehas enabled their sin and taught them to despise the LORD. Their actions were giving the LORD a bad reputation. Besides, if the LORD indulged the sin of Eli and his sons, he would be making the same mistake that Eli had made.

Whereas God does not enable the sins of his children and does hold them accountable, he is also merciful. Eli had said to his sons, "If one person sins against another, God may mediate for the offender; but if anyone sins against the Lord, who will intercede for them?"(1 Samuel 2:25). The unnamed prophet answers Eli's question declaring that when the LORD removes his family from the priesthood, the LORD, " will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who will act according to what is in my heart and mind. I will firmly establish his priestly house, and they will minister before my anointed one always"(Samuel 2:35). The prophet is referring to Jesus.

We have all sinned against the LORD and deserve punishment, but God has raised up a faithful priest. In Christ, we have a priest who acts according to what is in the heart and mind of the LORD; that is that Jesus intercedes for us, God's people. Jesus is not like Hophini and Phinehas who extorts a price for half-hearted, self-centered service. Nor is he like Eli, taking a laissez-faire attitude toward sin. In fact, God loves his children so much and hates sin so much that Jesus was willing to endure the horror of Hell in our place. Jesus did this so that we may know both how seriously God takes sin and, "may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ"(Ephesians 3:18).

5.c Dealing With a Passive Father: Judges 2:10-15; 4-5

"My deep conviction is that as the men go, so goes the culture."⁴¹ This was the case during the time of the Judges. Within one generation, Israel had forgotten how the LORD had powerfully delivered Canaan into Israel's hands. The problem started in the generation of Moses' successor, Joshua. The fathers of that generation seem to have failed to teach their children all that the LORD had done for Israel, leading them out of Egypt and delivering Canaan into their possession. The result was disastrous. Israel followed and worshiped the gods of the nations around them (Judges 2:10).

During this time, the LORD raised up Judges to shepherd the people back to the LORD. At one point, when male leadership reached a low, the LORD raised up the prophetess, wife, and mother Deborah to lead Israel. This is the only time in the Bible that Israel is lead by a woman.

The problem was not with Deborah. She was a faithful and strong leader. The problem was that the men of Israel had passively abdicated their role. The men of Israel, even her warriors, had grown timid as exemplified in Barak. Even when Deborah spoke the LORD's will to Barak telling him that the LORD had given the enemy into his hands, Barak would not go out to battle without Deborah. Because of this, the commander of the enemy army was given into the hands of Jael, a woman of the tents, essentially a housewife. The passivity of the men of Israel during the time of Judges allowed Israel to be abused and oppressed at the hands of the surrounding peoples.

God, on the other hand, is deeply interested and involved with all that is going on in our lives. The issue of sin is at the very core of human existence since the Fall. God could not ignore our sin, nor was he willing to cease his great love for us. Sin had to be accounted for and dealt with. Yet, that would mean destruction for his beloved humanity. So, sinners needed to be saved. Jesus would accomplish both.

As our Prophet, Jesus is not indifferent to us or distant from us. During his time among us, Jesus brought us God's Word; both Law and Gospel. To those who needed the Law, Jesus commanded repentance (Matthew 4:17). To those who were convicted by the Law of their sin, Jesus proclaimed himself the Savior (John 3:16-17).

As our Priest, Jesus did not sit idly by and allow us to die in our sin. Jesus stood as our substitute. In his life, he kept God's law perfectly in our place. On the cross Jesus hung in our

⁴¹ Alwinson, pg2.

place and endured the punishment we deserved (Isaiah 53:4-5). Even now, Jesus represents us to the Father interceding on our behalf. "But because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore, he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them" (Hebrews 7:24-25).

As our King, Jesus did not sheepishly cower or pretend not to notice as sin and Satan drug us to Hell. In his death and resurrection, Jesus stripped the Devil of his power to accuse, and sin of its power to lead to death (Colossians 2:15). Jesus sits enthroned in Heaven, working all things for the good of his people (Romans 8:28).

5.d Dealing With an Abusive Father: 2 Kings 21:1-18; 2 Chronicles 33:1-20

The main purpose of a king over Israel and Judah was similar to that of a father. The king was to shepherd the LORD's people to the LORD. Likewise, a father's role exists to lead his children to God. And like so many fathers, the reign of Manasseh as king over Judah could accurately be summed up with the word "abusive." Not only was Manasseh a wicked king, but also a wicked and abusive father and countrymen. His blatant and purposeful abuse of not only those he ruled over, but also his own children, puts him firmly in the running for worst ruler of God's people ever.

Manasseh abused Judah in every possible way. Spiritually, Manasseh drug Judah back into idolatry. He rebuilt the high places, the old pagan worship sites on hilltops around Jerusalem. He built altars in the temple of the LORD to all the starry hosts and bowed down and worshiped them. Manasseh practiced divination, sought omens, and consulted mediums and spiritists.

Manasseh's abuse was also sexual and physical. He carved an Asherah pole and put it in the temple of the LORD. Asherah was the sister-spouse of Baal. The worship Asherah revolved around adultery and temple prostitution. And as for physical abuse, Manasseh worshiped the blood thirsty Phoenician god, Baal. Manasseh shed so much innocent blood that it filled Jerusalem from end to end; he even went so far as to sacrifice his own son in the fire.

In his abusive idolatry, Manasseh prevented the people from worshiping the true God and led the people of Judah to commit the same sins he had. And even though God sought to turn Israel from their sin through the prophets, the people did not listen. Manasseh led his people,

God's people, astray so that they did even more evil than the pagan nations the LORD had driven out before the Israelites. How distorted Judah's perception of God had become?

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light”(Matthew 11:28-30). These are the words with which Jesus reveals the Father's heart.

Jesus does not set up the stumbling blocks of idolatry for his people or lead them down dark paths away from their Heavenly Father. Jesus gathers men to himself. "Come to me, the Way, the Truth, and the Life." Jesus shepherds his people out of hypocritical false worship of self and leads them to God the Father that they may rest in the Father's presence (Matthew 5-7). Jesus does not heap up violence and abuse upon his people thereby teaching them to do the same to themselves and others. Instead, Jesus relieved people of the illnesses and oppressions that weighed them down (Matthew 8:16). He called people out of sexual immorality by teaching them the gentleness and humility of God's grace.⁴²

Our Heavenly Father is beyond kind, patient, gentle, and compassionate. We are sinners deserving death and punishment yet, "he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities" (Psalm 103:10). We have a God who not only will not abuse us, but took the punishment we do deserve for our sins upon himself on the cross. In his book, "Prodigal God," Keller explains, ""it doesn't matter who you are and what you've done. It doesn't matter if you've deliberately oppressed or even murdered people, or how much you have been abused yourself... There is no evil that the fathers love cannot part and cover, there is no sin that is a match for his grace."⁴³ What a different king and shepherd Jesus is for us? What a different father he reveals in our Heavenly Father?

5.e Dealing With an Accusing Father: Zechariah 3

Not to over vilify, but when talking about an accuser there is one being that comes to mind before any other. The word "satan" in Hebrew can mean "*adversary*" and "*accuser*" and Satan is best understood when both meanings are applied in unison. Satan is the accusing adversary. Satan appears in many places throughout the Bible. The two most well known settings

⁴² John 4 Jesus talks with the Samaritan woman and John 8:3-11 Jesus is merciful to the woman caught in adultery

⁴³ Keller, pg 24.

he is found in are in the Garden of Eden and in the wilderness tempting Jesus. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this study we will look at Zechariah 3 because the words speak to the accused are so straightforward and beautifully.

The high priest Joshua is standing before the angel of the Lord in what I always imagined was the throne room of Heaven. And Satan is also there, standing on the right side, waiting to accuse Joshua. Accusations tend to stick; whether true or not, even as adults. However, when the accusations come from a father to a son, they are received as truth. That is Satan's favorite attack. Satan accuses a person of being sinful, which we know he had a huge hand in bringing about. Then, he slanders God as not willing to forgive. An abusive father waging psychological warfare on his son uses similar tactics. He blames his son for the trouble he caused and the errors that he led his son into, and then tells his son that he is unworthy of love.

Nevertheless, here in Zechariah God does a wonderful thing. Before Satan can launch an attack, the Lord shuts Satan down and defends Joshua. "The Lord rebuke you, Satan! The Lord, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you! Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?" Joshua is a burning stick snatched from the fire. He is wearing his filthy clothes standing before the angel of the Lord. And, he does not have any defense for what he is. But, then Joshua hears the voice of the angel, "Take off his filthy clothes." The Angel of the LORD says to Joshua, "See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put fine garments on you." A clean turban is put on his head, and Joshua is clothed while the Angel of the LORD watches his decree carried out.

This transformation is what the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus has accomplished for us. We see this in the Gospel as Jesus rebukes Satan on our behalf. It is seen in baptism as a believer is snatched from the fires of Hell. It is seen in the Lord's Supper as our sins are forgiven, our faith is strengthened, and we are given the clean garments of the Christian life.

"The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work." (1 John 3:8). Jesus came to be the scapegoat that stood condemned in our place. The scapegoat who removed our sin in a single day and carried away the filthy garments of our guilt and shame. The scapegoat who allows us to stand before our Father in Heaven as dearly loved sons. Through the prophet Isaiah, the LORD says, "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more." (Isaiah 43:25). How awesome is it that in Christ the God who knows all chooses to forget our sins?

6. Conclusion

Research into both the positive and negative effects that a father has on his children is quite prevalent. Far less research has been conducted regarding a father's impact on the spiritual lives of his children, although more is being done. However, the research that is available clearly reveals a strong correlation between a father's spiritual involvement in his family and his children's continued involvement in church. There is also strong evidence and real-life observation showing paternal neglect and abuse as the primary negative impact on the way men view God as Father.

The neglect and abuse that a boy endures at the hand of his father has several well documented forms. Whether it is the absence, enabling, or passivity of a neglectful father or the physical, sexual, or psychological torment of an abusive one, the men who have lived through it are often left with various troubles. Anxiety, fears, and doubts not based in reality; emotional issues; control issues; and, difficulties in personal relationships are just a few of the consequences associated with paternal neglect and abuse. There are resultant ramifications to the spiritual life as well with men growing up with distorted perceptions of God, seeing him as cosmically, powerful version of their own father.

God is a very different Father. The fatherhood of God is at his very essence, existing in an eternal, divine, father-son dynamic of the Trinity. He created us to be loved, disciplined, saved, and sanctified by him as our Father. God made us in order to know us and be known by us; and, to ultimately share in the eternal blessing of his presence. Even when our sin separated us from him, God our Father was unwilling to let us go.

The Father sent the Son, Jesus Christ, to open the way that sin had shut. Through Christ's life, death, and resurrection, Jesus granted us access and acceptability from the Father. God the Father, through the Son, took the orphans of sin and made us into God's sons and heirs with Christ. Only in Jesus can we see God as the present, involved, protective, gentle, kind, and merciful Father he truly is. Those who were denied the basic and core parental provisions through neglect and abuse have access in Christ to an ever present Father, full acceptance as a son, a place within the family of God, and bear a name that is beyond any other. In Christ we have received legacy and a relationship with God the Father based on his grace.

The purpose for this research is threefold. First, it is intended to raise awareness and recognition of paternal neglect and abuse as a very real obstacle to the faith of many men, both

believer and non-believer alike. Second, it was written to give the reader encouragement in Christ, "who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God" (2 Corinthians 1:4). Third, it was constructed to provide the reader with a starting point to speak directly to the pain and loss that these men suffer, utilizing very basic counseling techniques and a scriptural foundation.

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Appendix 1: The Father's Love: A Devotion on the Parable of The Father with Two Sons.

Luke 15:11 – 31 The Father's Love

How could God love me? This is the question in the hearts of many sinners. This was the question that prompted Jesus to tell the parable of the Prodigal Son. Tax collectors and ‘sinners’ were gathering around Jesus to hear him teach. The law driven Pharisees criticized Jesus for his welcoming of sinners.

Jesus wanted them, and us, to understand that the focus of God is not on sin and punishment but on his own love and mercy for his lost children. Jesus told the crowd about a man who had two sons. One day the younger son came to his father and demanded his share of the inheritance. So, the father gave each son his share. Not long after, the younger son took his share, went to live in another country, and promptly wasted everything in wild living. Right about that time, the country he was living in fell on hard times and the younger son, having nothing left, took a job tending pigs on one of the local properties. Times were so bad that the younger son wanted the food that the pigs ate.

After a little while, the younger son remembered the wealth and generosity of his father toward his employees and he came up with a plan. The younger son would return to his father, confess his sin and his unworthiness to be his father's son, and beg for a job as one of his father's employees. And, that's what he did. But, as the younger son approached his father's house, the father saw him while he was still a long way off and with great compassion the father ran to his son and threw himself on him hugging and kissing him. The son confessed that he had sinned and was unworthy to be his son. But, the father immediately told his servants to dress his son in the best robe, a ring, and shoes. The father told them to kill the fattened calf and prepare a celebration because his son who was dead was now alive; the son who was lost, had been found.

So how could God love me? Is it such a bad question? How could God love any of us? After all, aren't we just like the younger son? We want control of our own life. We take God's blessings and then remove ourselves from God's presence, protection, and provisions. We then become consumed with our own unworthiness. The problem is that like the younger son, like the sinners of Jesus' day, we are focused on sin rather than the love and mercy of our Father.

But, God our Heavenly Father, like the father in the parable, is not concerned with our sin as much as he is with his own deep desire to have us back by his side; safe and reinstated to our full and former place as his beloved children. Notice that the father in the parable is already

watching for his son, and when he sees him, he has compassion on him. The father runs to him and, before a single word can be spoken, the father throws himself on his son hugging and kissing him. He does not even openly acknowledge the son's confession, but immediately begins to reinstate him.

This is the picture of our Heavenly Father's love for us in Christ. He does not treat us as we deserve. But rather through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection we have the Father's love and compassion. Through Jesus, our sins are wiped away, and we who were dead, are alive; we who were lost, are found.

Appendix 2: The Father's Love: A Sermon on the Parable of The Father with Two Sons.

Brothers and Sisters-- Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.
(1 Tim 1:2)

“Eight balloons no one was buyin'--All broke loose one afternoon.
Eight balloons with strings a-flyin',--Free to do what they wanted to.
One flew up to touch the sun - POP!--One thought highways might be fun - POP!
One took a nap in a cactus pile - POP!--One stayed to play with a careless child - POP!
One tried to taste some bacon fryin' - POP!--One fell in love with a porcupine - POP!
One looked close in a crocodile's mouth - POP!--One sat around 'til his air ran out - WHOOSH!
Eight balloons no one was buyin' --They broke loose and away they flew,
Free to float and free to fly--And free to pop where they wanted to.” (Silverstein)

We like the idea of freedom, especially in our country. We like this idea that we operate with the absence of necessity, coercion, or constraint in our choices and actions. Jesus tells us a story that, like the Shel Silverstien poem I just read, points out the destruction, loss, and self deception that comes from longing for false freedom. It is only in the Father's love that true freedom is found. **It is the Father's Love that Restores the Lost and Calls us to Rejoice** over their restoration.

I. The Father's Love Restores the Lost

The Pharisees had been watching Jesus closely for some time now. Jesus continued to receive sinners despite the Pharisees grumbling against him and even continued to reach out to the Pharisees. Jesus tells 3 parables that illustrate his work, what is going on at that very moment, and above all **the Father's love**.

So, there was a man who had two sons. And, the younger of them said to his father, *'Father, give me what is rightfully mine, the share of property that would be mine if you were dead.'* The father gives his son what he asks for. And, within a few days the younger son converts everything that is his to cash and takes off to some foreign country to party. And, as is usually the case in these matters, he blows through his money pretty quick in general wild living. Just about the time the money runs out, the whole region gets hit with hard times due to a severe famine. Times are so hard that he has to take a job with a local guy feeding pigs. This guy completely takes advantage of his need. The job doesn't pay well at all because even working for

this guy, the younger son is practically starving to death; so much so that he envies the pigs and wants their food. No one in this country is showing him any kindness at all.

Remember that Jesus is talking to Jews. In their minds, this son is a traitor to his family and his people. He has defiled himself spiritually and then joined himself to pagan gentiles. He has taken the worst job in all history making himself lower than even the filthy pigs.

Wow! No testing the water with this younger son is there? He just dives right in with the usual suspects: drinking, drugs, prostitutes... general recklessness... dangerous living. Some of us here today have gone seeking our "freedom" in such ways. It is a hard road... even before the money runs out... leaves a lot of scars... and not just on you... but those who care about you most.

I don't want you to think though that Jesus is giving us an exaggerated picture of the worst sinners. For you, maybe you can't relate to prostitutes and wild living. Maybe your running away from God was more subtle and less messy. But, running is running. And, there are a lot of ways to run from God... pretty much by using any gift the Father has given us in an inappropriate way. By nature, none of us want anything to do with God our Father. David confesses the human nature in Psalm 51 "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me." The younger son is a picture of every one of us without Christ. So, how could we ever go to a righteous and holy God as the broken creatures we are?

But, then the son remembers how generous his father is and how well he treats his farm hands, and he comes to his senses. So, he makes a plan to throw himself on his father's mercy and heads back home. But, what he doesn't know is that the whole time he's been gone, his father has been patiently waiting and watching for his return. And one day as the father is scanning the horizon, his father sees him still a long way off, and full of compassion runs out to meet him. The father is desperate to get to his child. When the father reaches his son, he collapses on him and kisses him.

The son, as he planned, humbles himself before his father and says to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father doesn't let him finish nor does he even acknowledge his son's confession. Rather, overcome with love and excitement, he immediately seeks to tend to his son's needs calling to his servants, "Hurry, bring the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. Are you hungry son, of course you hungry... while y'all are at it butcher the fattened calf

we are grilling out tonight, we are having a party. For my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.”

Just look at the God Jesus reveals to us in this story. It is never us who comes to God is it? It is God the Father and, “his kindness that lead us to repentance” (Romans 2:4). Like the younger son in the parable, we are drawn to return home to the Father by the sure promise of forgiveness. And as we are drawn to the Father, what we find is that the Father has been eagerly waiting for our return. So when he sees you, it is not judgment but rather compassion that fills his heart. The Father is instantly with you ... surrounding you... loving you... reinstating you.

That isn't to say that your sin doesn't bother, or matter to, the Father. But, we have to remember who is telling this story... it is Jesus. The Father's compassion is best seen and completely realized in Christ. It is in Christ the Father closes the gap between himself and you! Jesus is the Father's feet that he runs to you with... the arms he holds you with.

It is in Christ you are fully restored. Christ's righteous life for you gives you your status in the Father's eyes as his fully restored sons and daughters. And Jesus tells us what happens, “I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:10). All of heaven rejoices! Think about that the next time you celebrate a Baptism. This is the unseen work of the Holy Spirit at Baptism. And soon, that rejoicing will be followed up by the most over the top celebration in Heaven for eternity.

II. The Father's Love Calls us to Rejoice

But, that is not the only ones that the Father cares for. In Jesus' story, the man had two sons. The older son had been in the field and returns to hear celebrating. He knew nothing of what had happened. So, he asks a servant what is going on and learns of his brother's return and that his father was so full of joy to have his younger son back safe that he threw this huge party. At this, the older son becomes angry and refuses to go in; so, once again the father goes to his son. Jesus tells us that the father pleads with his son to come and join the festivities. But, the older son is indignant and says to the father, “Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!” (citation/ or if made up kust put single quotes around everything) What is wrong with you!? That isn't fair!

Self-righteousness; what a thorn in the side of man? This older son is so preoccupied with what a good son he has been that he fails to recognize the grace of his situation. He fails to recognize that all he has possessions, opportunity, and status has all been given to him by his father.

You and I may at one time have been wayward and lost like the younger son, but for most of us that is not the case here today. Most of us aren't tempted by the wild living that appealed to us in our youth. Like the older son, it is an attitude of self-righteousness that traps us most. How does it show itself in your life? Do you refuse to go to the Father in prayer? Have you become blinded by your own discipline and hard work, falling into the trap of believing that you have earned your spiritual blessings? When the topic of evangelism comes up, do you secretly harbor unfruitful attitudes on the 'kind' of people God should bring to faith and through our doors? When you look out at the world do you react to the lost with anger rather than compassion? Do you rejoicing over God's salvation to others? What about your salvation? Have you failed to recognize the grace of your situation as members of the Church?

And the father replies, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. You could have celebrated any time you wanted... why didn't you? But now It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this brother of yours was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found" (citation). And with that, the father leaves his son with the open ended invite to come in and share in this blessing.

Thankfully the Father recognizes this sin in us. And like he did when we were lost, the Father comes to us in Christ even, and especially, when we refused to go to him. And, he says to us, 'My sons... my daughters, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.' We are reminded in Christ that the Father is always with us and has shared all he has with us. The Father has withheld nothing from us, not even his Son. He has given us the very thing he loves most in the whole universe, Jesus. We see that in every minute of Jesus' perfect life for us, in every agonizing and crushing moment of Jesus' death on our behalf, and in the guarantee of our eternal life in his resurrection.

And through this one great gift comes all the others; in Christ, the Father shares all his love. We have his Word; the Law to show us our sin and guide us in Christian living and, the Gospel to comfort us and motivate us. We have the sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper to sustain and strengthen our faith through life. The Father invites us to join in the celebration at

the Holy Spirit's work of bringing others to faith as they are fully restored. He even gives us the joy and honor of helping to seek the lost with the Gospel.

We have true freedom in the forgiveness of our sins and the ability to forgive others in Christ just as we were forgiven. And, one day he will bring us to Heaven. Furthermore, if all heaven rejoices at the repentance of one sinner, what do you think Heaven will be like when the Father has all his children gathered together safely in one place under the roof of his protection and presence? All this we have in Christ.

Brothers and Sisters rejoice in the freedom of the Father's Love that Restores the Lost.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father --to him be glory and power forever and ever.

(Revelations 1:5-7). AMEN!