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Volume 3 – 2011

God as Father: The Imagery of Unmerited Relationship with God

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Introduction

God is spirit (John 4:24) and invisible. Yet, the invisible God has visible works and impacts. Therefore, he is in relation with the visible beings. With that in mind, the concept the present writer wishes to present in this article is, the fatherhood of God and the imagery of our unmerited relationship with him. First, we will quickly survey the imagery of God as Father in the Bible. Second, we

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will go into the unmerited salvific fatherhood of God. The third section is on our unmerited relationship with God as Father.

A. Imagery of God as Father in the Bible

Here, one may think it is relevant to talk about the universal fatherhood of God, which includes: his role as the creator, provider and protector. However, it is beyond the scope of the paper to make those aspects inclusive. Rather, we shall look into how the term “Father” in relation to God is used in the Bible. Obviously, God as Father is found in the Bible, “Several passages of Scripture imply that God is the Father of angels and humans as their Creator (Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7; Luke 3:38).”² Cameron adds, “But it is chiefly in connection with Israel, the David king, and Messiah that references to the fatherhood of God occur in the OT.”³ Happily enough, it is good to know that God has used the term “Father” for himself in many instances in the bible. So, it is important to know that, the term is not an invention by human beings. In the father/son or father/child relationship imagery, God is seen as the Father in the bible. Of course, this is not biological, in terms of human procreation. Rather, it is a figurative language that shows us how God relates to man the way it is understandable to be in father/son relationship. Now let us cite some instances where God has portrayed himself or is described as Father in the bible.

Though, it is not the goal of this article to do in-depth word study or exegetical analysis, it would be helpful to briefly interact with few terms. The two meanings of the term *pais theou* are: “child of God” or “servant of God” depending on the context.⁴ In the New Testament, the term is used eight times: one time for Israel (Luke 1:54), two times for David (Luke 1:69; Acts 4:25), and five times for Jesus (Matt 12:18; Acts 3:13, 26; 4:27, 30).⁵ Space will not permit us to trace more instances where the terms refer to child or servant of

² W.J. Cameron, “Father, God as,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 439.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 1 vol., trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1992), 765. See more of its usage on page 765-769.

⁵ Ibid., 767.

God. But, the already mentioned passages give us support that God is in relationship with human beings, in terms of father/son or father/child relationship. Let us add here in passing that, the imagery of God as Father, is an indication that He is real; He is a being. As Elmer Towns puts it, “We object to the denial of His actual and literal existence as a being. God is an essence or a substance, not an idea.”⁶ Also, it shows that God is a person. “Everything that we attribute to a person is attributed to God. A person is one who feels, thinks, wishes, desires, and has all expressions of personality.”⁷ Having gone this far, we will now move into some places in the bible where God as Father in relationship with man are mentioned.

In Exodus 4:22, God calls Israel his firstborn son. This is a figure of speech, to show the intimacy between God and the Israelites. We could see a similar imagery in Deuteronomy 1:31 where God is described with a fatherhood image. It reads, “. . . There you saw how the LORD your God carried you, as a father carries his son, all the way you went until you reached this place.” Furthermore, in his father/son relationship term, God again calls himself, “Israel’s Father.” God says, “They will come with weeping; they will pray as I bring them back. I will lead them beside streams of water on a level path where they will not stumble, because I am Israel’s father, and Ephraim is my firstborn son (Jer. 31:9). In addition, Hosea shows us the role of God, as a father is to his son, in a nurturing relationship. “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son,” (Hosea 11:1). God continues, “It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; . . . I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love; I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them,” (Hosea 11:3-4).⁸ This is but to mention few passages where the imagery father/son relationship are found in the Old Testament. Next, we shall point out few places in the New Testament on the father/son relationship of God.

⁶ Elmer L. Towns, *Theology for Today* (Mason, OH: Cengage Learning, 2008), 97.

⁷ Billy Graham, *Peace with God*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis, Minnesota: World Wide Publications, 1984), 37-38.

⁸There are more places in the Old Testament, where either God uses the term “Father” for himself or the term is used for him. However, because of space limit, we cannot go into all those passages.

First of all, we would have a look at the term *pater*. *Pater* is defined as “father” or “forefather,” as “initiator,” “revered person,” “old man,” or “teacher.”⁹ In its plural form, it means, “ancestors” or sometimes “parents.”¹⁰ Furthermore, in its ancient usage, *pater* could refer to head of family or the legally law maker. In the Greek usage, it could mean the head of the house or a teacher.¹¹ Also, it relates to the male hierarchical authority. Similarly, it goes with “patriarchal” control that commands the subjects’ obedience, “The Stoics regard children as subject to their fathers as elders, benefactors, and superiors.”¹² But, for our purpose in this article, it is interesting to know that in its Greek concept of the father’s control, it talks of his love too. That is, in the father/son relationship of God, authority and love go hand in hand. Thus the heavenly Father, “combines love with discipline”¹³

Relevantly, the aforementioned meanings of *pater* describe God as Father and his relationship with us. The terms summarize his authority and love, supremacy and nurture. There is a combination of “Fatherly Authority and Fatherly Care.”¹⁴ That is how God relates to the Israelites, as their Father who rules over them and their care taker, as we have seen in his role in the Old Testament. In the continuity of the imagery father/son relationship of God, there are some places in the New Testament that refer to God as Father. It is amazing to note that, the Israelites are aware of their father/son relationship with God. So, in their disobedience, when Jesus calls them the children of the devil, they protest and say, “The only Father we have is God himself,” (John 8:41). The good news is, the inclusion of the Gentiles in salvation has extended the father/son relationship to the believers in Jesus Christ. We will talk more on this later. But, we can see how God as Father, in his relationship with the Israelites has become the Father of the believers too. For example, in Matthew 5:16, God is

⁹ Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 805.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 811.

¹⁴ Ibid.

called “Our Father in heaven.” He is addressed as “Father in heaven,” in chapter 6 verse 9. Wayne Grudem says,

One of the greatest privileges of our adoption is being able to speak to God and relate to him as a good and loving Father. We are to pray “our Father who art in heaven” (Matt. 6:9), and we are to realize that we are “no longer slaves, but sons” (Gal. 4:7). Therefore, we now relate to God not as a slave relates to a slave master, but as a child relates to his or her father. In fact, God gives us an internal witness from the Holy Spirit that causes us instinctively to call God our Father.¹⁵

Furthermore, God plays many roles, “But the role that is more intimate, and the role that conveys the highest privileges or fellowship with God for eternity, is his role as our heavenly Father.”¹⁶ Grudem continues, “The fact that God relates to us as Father shows very clearly that he loves us (1 John 3:1). . . .”¹⁷ In Romans 8:15, Paul refers to God as Father in his father/son relationship with the believers when he says, “For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba,’ Father.” He continues, “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children,” (verse 16). To be sure, we will not attempt to exhaust the passages on the sonship of the believers here. We will have ample opportunity to talk more on that later at the appropriate place. Meanwhile, we will briefly look into God as Father and our salvation.

B. Unmerited Salvific Fatherhood of God

As we have mentioned in this article, God has been in relationship, in terms of his sovereignty, supremacy, control, authority, provision, protection, love and care. It is necessary to know how he has demonstrated all these to bring about our salvation. That is our goal in this section. First of all, the significant thing about salvation is to know what is behind it. This is nothing else than the love of God. The basis of the act of God in saving humanity is his love. This writer wants to emphasize that, irrespective of the often debated conditional and unconditional views of election (which is

¹⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 739.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

outside the scope of this paper), salvation cannot be described exclusive of the love of God as the motivating factor behind it. God, who has described himself as Father, shown himself as Father and called Father, has planned, initiated and provided salvation. Our key passage on this is John 3:16, where the basis for the act is love and the result of it is salvation.

The second thing to know is, the love of God, with its salvific apex, is unmerited. Now, if the love of God, the root of salvation is unmerited, by parity of thought, salvation, the outcome of his love, is also unmerited. This unmerited favor is what grace means. Quoting from W. Curtis Vaughan, Towns writes, “The words ‘by grace’ assert that God was under no obligation to save man, that salvation is a bounty from God, not a reward for merit.”¹⁸ Further, Towns’ quotation from Tozer summarizes the aforementioned unmerited favor and how it has placed us in an unmerited relationship with God, even in heaven. Let us see what he says,

Grace is the good pleasure of God that inclines Him to bestow benefits upon the undeserving. It is a self-existent principle inherent in the divine nature and appears to us as a self-caused propensity to pity the wretched, spare the guilty, welcome the outcast, and bring into favor those who were before under just disapprobation. Its use to us sinful men is to save us and make us sit together in heavenly places to demonstrate to the ages the exceeding riches of God’s kindness to us in Christ Jesus.¹⁹

Towns adds, “Salvation never has or will exist apart from the grace of God. Conservative Christians agree that salvation is all of grace and not of works. Most Christians would wholeheartedly agree with the following observation of Tozer.”²⁰ Then he quotes, “No one was ever saved other than by grace from Abel to the present moment. Since mankind was banished from the eastward Garden, none has ever returned to the divine favor except through the sheer goodness of God.”²¹ In line with this, Robert Culver states, “Specifically, grace is the method of God apart from and in spite of all human merit or demerit and work or lack of it – whereby on the basis of redemption and

¹⁸Towns, 425.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

upon the occasion of faith God saves sinful men.”²² Having said these, we now need to pursue the “welcome of the outcast” into the family of God. That will lead us to the next theme, which is our unmerited relationship with God. Adoption is how Jesus Christ has brought the undeserving heirs to the family of his Father.

C. Unmerited Relationship with God as Father

As we have studied in this paper, by and large, the fatherhood of God in the Old Testament was in terms of his relationship with the Israelites. However, as already said, the inclusion of others in salvation has extended such an intimacy to all believers. The doctrine of adoption explains that intimacy with God. We will now talk more about the agent of our relationship with God.

D. The Basis of Our Unmerited Relationship

Our unmerited relationship with God is rooted in Christ, because our adoption rests on him, by grace through faith. “Yet to all who received him to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, not of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God” (John 1:12-13). “Adoption implies an intimate relationship between God and the believers.”²³ To have a relationship with God, one has to come through Christ. “. . . the Father works through the Son in such a way that ‘no works are done either by the Father without the Son or by the Son without the Father.’”²⁴ Theologians differ on the order of adoption in connection with other aspects of salvation. For example, Millard Erickson believes that adoption “occurs at the same time as do conversion, regeneration, justification and union with Christ.”²⁵ However, for Bruce Demarest, what follows conversion and justification is adoption. He mentions, “Adoption is that act of grace,

²² Robert Duncan Culver, *Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical* (Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publication, Ltd), 2005, 657.

²³Eunice O. Abogunrin, “A Comparative Study of the Concepts of Salvation in African Traditional Religion and Christianity” (Ph.D diss., Trinity International University, 1999), 205.

²⁴Keith E. Johnson, “Augustine’s “Trinitarian” Reading of John 5: A Model for the Theological Interpretation of Scripture” *JETS* 52/4 (December 2009), 801.

²⁵ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992), 961-962.

logically following conversion and justification, by which God confers on forgiven sinners the status of sonship.”²⁶ In this quotation, Demarest relevantly connects adoption with grace. This is in line with our previous study that grace and love of God are behind our salvation. Thus, adoption is an unmerited invitation to the family of God. “The reason for adoption is given in Ephesians 1:5: God’s love. It was not due to one’s nature or merit that the Christian was adopted (and thus receives the Spirit and the inheritance; Eph. 1:14-15), but to God’s will acting through Christ. Adoption is a free grant to undeserving people solely from God’s grace.”²⁷ The passage here makes clear that salvation is by grace through faith. Therefore, it is unmerited. It follows then, that the adoption of the saved ones into the family of God is unmerited. Next we will look into the duration of our adoption. Before then, the following results of adoption will be helpful to mention. By adoption,

Believers are given a new name and new identity (1 John 3:1). They have the intimate indwelling of God’s Spirit (Rom 8:14; Gal 4:6). They have God’s special love (1 John 4:9-11). They receive special care and provision from God (Luke 11:11-13). They can approach God freely (Heb 2:10-13, 4:14-16). Out of love, God can discipline and chasten them (Heb 12:7-8). They are the heirs of God’s kingdom and glory (Rom 8:17).²⁸

E. The Permanency of Our Unmerited Relationship with God as Father

What we have established this far, includes, the fact that God is our Father and he bases his relationship with man on his love, and that, through Jesus Christ, believers have been adopted to the family

²⁶ Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation: The Doctrine of Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1997), 376. Voicing similar view, Grudem believes that adoption follows conversion. See Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 738. However, our focus is not on the order of salvation here. Therefore, we are not going to talk more on that.

²⁷P.H. Davis, “Adoption” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., edited by Walter Elwell, 25. Space will not permit us to discuss in full the nature and benefits of adoption.

²⁸ Abogunrin referred to these benefits found in Demarest in her above dissertation, 205. See Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation*, 376-377). Space will not permit us to be detailed on the nature and benefits of adoption. For more on this, read, Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 963-965.

of God and they are co-heirs with him. We need to warn here however that our sonship is not of equal with the sonship of Christ. The eternal uniqueness of the only begotten son of God is beyond the scope of this paper though. But, our purpose in this paper is to emphasize that Christ has brought us into the relationship with his Father, by grace through faith. Yet, the adoption itself is based on the love of God and not on our personal merits. That makes our adoption unmerited, as we have said earlier. The next question is, how long is our new relationship going to be or what would be its duration? The answer to the question may not be explicit, but it is obviously implicit from the permanency of salvation. While arguing in favor of Eternal Security of believers, Norman Geisler asserts, “. . . if salvation does not depend on our efforts but only on God, our security is as eternal as He is.”²⁹

If we believe that we cannot lose our salvation, it implies that we cannot lose our adoption. Hence, we cannot lose our unmerited relationship with God. However, for those who do not support the perseverance of the believers, and think a believer can lose his salvation, such a view would affect an adoption as everlasting. So, to be consistent with non perseverance view, they would think, sonship of a believer is everlasting, if he does not lose his salvation while on earth. If one loses his salvation, consequently, he loses his sonship and everlasting relationship with God, they would argue.

But, the option in this paper is the permanency of our sonship with God, which necessitates our everlasting relationship with him. The point here is, if our salvation is everlasting, since, we shall not perish, but have everlasting life (John 3:16), our relationship with God is everlasting as well. If salvation is for eternal life, adoption, the benefit of salvation should be eternal too. If we cannot cease to be saved, it follows that we cannot cease to be adopted. If we cannot cease to be adopted, it means we cannot cease to be in relationship with God. So, our unmerited relationship with God is irrevocable, permanent and everlasting.

²⁹ Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2004), 315.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have talked about the imagery of God as Father in the Bible. We gave a brief survey of how God is known and called the Father in both testaments. We also mentioned some of his fatherly roles in the bible. We later moved to his fatherly role in our salvation. Related to that is our adoption into his family, through the death of Jesus Christ. Lastly, we looked into the irrevocability of our unmerited relationship with God as Father. In all these, the emphasis has been on the unmerited nature of our salvation, adoption and relationship with God. God as Father, out of love has made our salvation possible, has adopted us into his family and he is in relationship with us now and forever.



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