

The Father and You

BELIEVERS' BOOT CAMP

Matthew 23:9, Ephesians 4:1-6

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Wesley J. Gabel

It was March 27th, 1994. Palm Sunday. Believers had gathered at Goshen United Methodist Church in Alabama to worship Jesus and remember his entrance into Jerusalem. As they celebrated with pageantry, they were unaware of the weather. Meteorologists had not observed the conditions that usually accompany severe weather. There was no advancing cold front. The jet stream was positioned northwest of Alabama. Thirty-nine minutes had elapsed at the 11 o'clock worship service. Meteorologists spotted a severe thunderstorm two minutes earlier. However, its distance from the weather radar did not immediately reveal the presence of a F4 tornado. F4 means that tornado wind speeds range between 207 and 260 miles an hour. These devastating tornados level well-constructed houses, throw cars around, generate large missiles and blow structures off their weak foundations moving them some distance. When the tornado struck the church, its roof collapsed. Ninety worshipers were injured. Twenty were killed... including the pastor's five-year-old daughter.

All of us have experienced grief, but I can't begin to imagine theirs. To be struck down is awful. To be struck down or to watch your children struck down as you worship, that is beyond awful. It strikes at the foundation of faith. One asks: "Does God exist? Is God in control? Is God good? Does God care? And for goodness sake, why?"

I confess. I think most of us, myself included, deal with evil like this by ignoring it. We don't want to think about it. We don't want to ponder it. Its pain is too great, its questions too

piercing. Thus, we are unprepared to deal with it. We may quickly construct comfort walls. One wall sugarcoats the evil. If we focus on a silver-lining in the clouds, it makes the evil more palatable because we are not looking at the harm. That is most often how we deal with the idea of hell. We dismiss or minimize it. Yet its reality keeps poking its way into our lives. A second wall falsely suggests that evil is distant. Many of the religious leaders of Jesus' time thought that trouble came only on those who deserved it. Some Christians today are slightly more sophisticated. They think that if we walk close enough with God (or exercise the authority we've been given as God's children) we will never taste evil like this. Of course, Jesus tasted this kind of evil in the cross. In a moment of anguish, he cried, "***My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?***" Just hours before that, he said to his disciples:

In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.
(John 16:33, NIV)

Jesus' words suggest that trouble is unavoidable. Obviously, some troubles can be avoided. Stop fooling with matches. Don't play Russian roulette! However, some troubles come with living here. Therefore, he calls us to courage. "Take heart!" he says. Why? Has he overcome the trouble? No, Jesus said that he overcame the world. Why is that relevant? It is relevant because there is more to trouble than trouble. There is more to trouble than pain and suffering. Trouble is not pointless!

Months ago, when I began planning a sermon series on truths essential for walking with Jesus, I considered truths that Jesus emphasized with his disciples. He spoke them over and over and even modeled them. One of those teachings focuses on God as our father. In the gospels, Jesus speaks of God as father some 162 times. The only recorded time he fails to address God as father is those moments of anguish on the cross. Why then didn't Jesus say: "Abba, Papa, where are you?" No, his words revealed a deeper anguish: "My God, my God, why have you

abandoned me.” Nearly a thousand years earlier those words were penned in Psalm 22 by his ancestor David. They now became his words and his cry as he tasted the evil of the cross. Why were they appropriate? Because they exposed the very point of evil!

What was the point of trouble? Alienation from God! Trouble is not merely an assault on our bodies. It is an assault on our identity. From the viewpoint of Scripture, trouble is an assault on our identity and our relationship with God, our father. That was the point of Job’s trials. The book of Job is thought by some to be the most ancient of all Scriptures. What does it say? It tells of Satan’s scheme to use trouble to divide Job from God.

That scheme surfaces in the New Testament. When Satan appeared to Jesus in the wilderness, his temptations began: “If you are the son of God.” He challenged Jesus’ identity in order to separate him from his Father.

The two most repeated themes in Jesus’ teaching are the coming of God’s kingdom and our relationship to God as father. St. Paul understood the latter teaching as pivotal. To pagans in Athens, Greece, he said:

We are God's offspring. (Acts 17:29, NIV)

To Christian believers in Ephesus, he wrote:

(There is) one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.
(Ephesians 4:6, NIV)

Our identity as children of the heavenly father is central. Jesus was so emphatic that he said:

Do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. (Matthew 23:9, NIV)

The central issue for us human beings is separation from our father and reconciliation with our father. That is so critical that any other teaching must not obstruct this.

In a recent clergy gathering, a colleague told me how offended he is by male imagery for God and the use of “father” in prayer. I share his concern for the mistreatment of women. I acknowledge that brokenness exists with many people and their fathers. The term *father* carries a lot of pain. I don’t wish to accentuate or deepen that pain. However, according to Jesus you really have only one father. Every relationship is awkward until you know each other’s name. The name Jesus gave you and me to use in relating to God is “father.” When Jesus taught that, there were bad parents; and women had been mistreated. You can be certain that Jesus called God our father not so that we’d be handicapped or hindered. He called God father because that is exactly who God is. Relating to God as father can lead to our healing.

Early in my years as a pastor, I worked with a woman who was abandoned by her mother and then tortured and raped by her father. For years, she avoided thinking about it. However, it relentlessly consumed her. The worst thing one could do was gloss over what happened. She carried such rage in her soul that her children and husband suffered greatly. Through Jesus she discovered her real heavenly father. As she step by step forgave her parents and received forgiveness herself, she tasted more of her heavenly father’s love. God became so precious, that her life changed significantly.

St. Paul knew trouble. He wrote the Corinthians:

We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed and broken. We are perplexed, but we don't give up and quit. We are hunted down, but God never abandons us. We get knocked down, but we get up again and keep going.
(2 Corinthians 4:8-9, NLT)

Just in case we think he might be exaggerating, this is what he suffered:

Five different times the Jews gave me thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea. I have traveled many weary miles. I have faced danger from flooded rivers and from robbers. I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles. I have faced danger

in the cities, in the deserts, and on the stormy seas. And I have faced danger from men who claim to be Christians but are not. I have lived with weariness and pain and sleepless nights. Often I have been hungry and thirsty and have gone without food. Often I have shivered with cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm. (2 Corinthians 11:24-27, NLT)

Paul knew this was not his father's hand against him. He knew instead that this was a battle with his fathers' enemies. He wrote to the Romans:

Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or are hungry or cold or in danger or threatened with death? No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us. And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from his love. Death can't, and life can't. The angels can't, and the demons can't. Our fears for today, our worries about tomorrow, and even the powers of hell can't keep God's love away.
(Romans 8:35, 37-38; NLT)

Paul told us that our father can be trusted whether we are pierced by nails, struck by disaster, dogged by enemies or weakened by disease. Our Father stands with us and will prevail.

On that first Thanksgiving Day the pilgrims to this new continent made a choice. Around fifty percent of them had died. Mothers, fathers, husbands, wives, sons and daughters had been buried. They could mourn their losses, or they could count their blessings and celebrate. In choosing so, they embraced their identity as the eternal children of the heavenly father. They would not be divided from him. They recognized their father's blessings even in their trials.

Your father is eternal in the heavens. His enemies hate you. You are called to courage because in Christ you can't be separated from him or his love. Christ has defeated those enemies ability to destroy us, and some day soon they themselves will be destroyed. We are a part of that unfolding plan. Until then, you and I are sent by our father to rescue his children. We are his mission to this battle-torn world. Embrace the passion of your father's love and understand the point of trouble is to cloak it. There will be hours of darkness, but they are only hours. They are only hours because only our father is God. Therefore, we can always give thanks.