

And He will be called...

Everlasting Father

“Which of you fathers,” Jesus asked, “if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? Or if he asks for bread, will give him a stone? ... you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children.”^{viii}

I know how to give good gifts to my children. I really do. My children are grown now, but when they were at home I knew that if Sarah asked for help with her homework, telling her I was too busy was a bad response. I knew if Nicola spilled her juice, yelling at her didn't help. I knew if Adam got in trouble with a neighbour, sighing dramatically and saying, *I told you so*, solved nothing. I knew that long windy scolding lectures neither inspired nor enlightened nor motivated them.

I knew how to give fish, bread, egg – things that nourished them, helped them grow. And they trusted me. One of my favourite memories is the daily ritual of coming home and Sarah, unafraid and unhesitating, leaping from the top of stairs into my arms the moment I stepped through door. She trusted me that much.

All the same, sometimes I gave them snake, stone, scorpion – things that bit them, bruised them, stung them. And it made them wary of me.

I knew better. I knew enough.

I just don't always act on what *I know*.

Because – well, Jesus says it: I'm evil. It's a strong word in the original language: *wicked, depraved, demonic*. The good I want to do I don't do, and the evil I don't want to do, that I do.

Craig Barnes opens his book *Searching for Home* with the story of his father's funeral. His dad abandoned the family when Craig and his brother Gary were teenagers, and neither had seen nor heard from him in 30 years. Both sons grew up yearning for their father. Both spent a lifetime searching for him. And now both were embittered toward him.

After the funeral, the brothers went to their father's ramshackle Airstream trailer to collect any personal items. Craig found his father's notebook and began reading. He writes:

It was the end of the notebook that made my heart stop. Across the top of a fresh page was written, "Daily Prayer List." The first two names on the list belonged to my brother and me.... I had assumed that dad had forgotten us. But we were there, in his prayers, on his last day.^{ix}

We know how to give good gifts to our children.
We just don't always do it.

And he will be called *Everlasting Father*. Though the Old Testament has a few scattered references that *describe* God as father,^x this verse in Isaiah is the only Old Testament passage that *invites us to call him* Father. Calling God his Father, and teaching us to do likewise, is one of the most revolutionary acts of Jesus Christ.

For some, this comes naturally. Maybe you hear the word father and think: *fish, bread, egg. Dad was there for me. Dad protected, provided, guided, blessed.* Maybe you had a father like the Anglican Bishop Handley Moule:

I can only look back upon [my father], thankful that such a personality embodies to me the great word Father; a man so full of energy and capacity, so absolutely simple, so entirely fearless, so free from the seeking of his own glory, so ready both to bear and to do, a gentleman so true, a Christian so strong, so spiritual, so deep, such a pastor, such a parent, such a grandfather, such a friend.^{xi}

Fish, bread, egg. For Moule, and those similarly blessed, Everlasting Father is obvious good news.

But for others, it's not. It's a name with very different connotations: absence, silence, anger. For some, the idea that you're stuck with one of those kinds of fathers forever and ever hardly makes your heart leap.

Like Eustace Conway, whose father subjected him as a boy to nightly diatribes of mockery and shame. In his words,

Night after night, week after week, month after month, year after year, it was as if my father would cut my legs off. Then he'd cut off the stumps

where the legs had been. Then he'd cut off my arms. Then he would run the sword through my body.^{xii}

Snake, stone, scorpion. Would it be good news to Eustace to know he has one of these forever?

Did the people in Isaiah's time hear this announcement as good news? As we've seen, Isaiah makes the announcement in the face of war and rumours of war. The bloodthirsty Assyrians are coming. And, indeed, they do come.

How could a loving father do such a thing? This is not an idle question. Who at some point has not been disappointed in God's fatherly care? We asked – we begged – for fish, bread, egg – a marriage restored, a crisis averted, a sickness healed. But we got, it seems, snake, stone, scorpion.

But as we saw with the name *Mighty God* – or *Warrior God* – we don't really understand fully what that means until we dwell in the pages of the New Testament, and see Jesus fighting for us. Likewise, we won't grasp fully *Everlasting Father* until we see this played out in the life of Jesus.

Calling God his Father, and teaching us to do likewise, is one of the most revolutionary acts of Jesus Christ.

Jesus called God Father more than any name. He knew and experienced God's fatherly presence. He delighted in the Father's love, protection, provision – fish, bread, egg. “You are my son, whom I love, with you I am well pleased.”^{xiii}

But Jesus also was a man of sorrows, familiar with suffering – and at the Father's hands.^{xiv} Indeed, he was perfected through suffering.^{xv} And in his darkest hour, the Father turned His face away.

“My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”^{xvi}

How could a loving father do such a thing?

But something mysterious, beautiful, transformative is at work here. We see it all now, even though Jesus' closest companions had no idea at the time, and even Jesus in his darkest hour could not see it. But now we know: there was no other way. Jesus' suffering opened the way for our redemption. His darkest hour proved to be Creation's finest hour.

So for the joy set before him, Jesus endured the cross, in all its pain and shame.^{xvii} He endured the affliction the Father laid on him. He drank the cup the Father gave him.

But what looked like snake, stone, scorpion turned out to be fish, bread, egg, more than we could ask or imagine. The ugliest thing that ever happened turned out to be the most beautiful.

Jesus leapt into his Father's arms. And the Father not only caught him: He exalted him to the highest place.

He'll do the same with you.

Everlasting Father.

NOTES:

^{viii} Matthew 7:9; Luke 11:11-13.

^{ix} Craig Barnes, Searching for Home, 12.

^x Deuteronomy 1:31, 32:6; Psalm 103:13; Malachi 2:10.

^{xi} Cited in Gordon MacDonald, The Resilient Life, 193.

^{xii} Elizabeth Gilbert, The Last American Man, 35.

^{xiii} Mark 1:11.

^{xiv} See Isaiah 53.

^{xv} Hebrews 2:10.

^{xvi} Psalm 22:1.

^{xvii} Hebrews 12:2.

