

# Our Loving Heavenly Father



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Matt. 7:9–11, John 14:8–10, Luke 15:11–24, Matt. 6:25–34, Heb. 9:14.*

**Memory Text:** “Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him” (1 John 3:1, NKJV).

Jesus delighted to speak of God as the Father. According to the Gospels, Jesus applied the name Father to God more than one hundred thirty times. On various occasions, He added adjectives: “‘heavenly Father’” (*Matt. 6:14, NKJV*), “‘living Father’” (*John 6:57, NKJV*), “‘Holy Father’” (*John 17:11, NKJV*), and “‘righteous Father’” (*vs. 25, NKJV*). The name describes the intimate bond that should unite us to our Lord.

Traditionally, a “father” provides love, protection, security, sustenance, and identity for a family. A father gives a name to the family and keeps its members together. We can enjoy these and many other benefits when we accept God as our heavenly Father.

Though it is so essential for us to know the Father, our aim should not be just intellectual and theoretical knowledge. In the Bible, to know someone means to have a personal, intimate relationship with him or her. How much more so with our heavenly Father?

This week we will explore what Jesus taught about our Father and about His infinite love for us. We will look, too, at the close relationship of the Father with the Son and with the Holy Spirit.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 5.

## Our Father in Heaven

Father was not a new name for God. The Old Testament sometimes presented Him as our Father (*Isa. 63:16; 64:8; Jer. 3:4, 19; Ps. 103:13*). However, it was not the most used name for Him. For Israel, the personal name of God was YHWH (probably pronounced Yahweh), which appears more than six thousand eight hundred times in the Old Testament. Jesus did not come to reveal a different God from YHWH. Rather, His mission was to complete the revelation that God had made of Himself in the Old Testament. In doing so, He presented God as our heavenly Father.

Jesus made clear that the Father is “in heaven.” It is important to remember this truth in order to have the right attitude toward God. We have a loving Father who is concerned with the needs of His children. At the same time, we recognize that this caring Father is “in heaven,” where millions of angels worship Him because He is the only Sovereign of the universe, holy and omnipotent. The fact that He is our Father invites us to approach Him with the confidence of a child. On the other hand, the truth that He is in heaven reminds us of His transcendence and the need to worship Him with reverence. To emphasize one of these aspects at the expense of the other would lead us to a distorted concept of God, with far-reaching consequences for our practical, daily lives.

**Read** Matthew 7:9–11. What does it tell us about how a human father can reflect the character of our heavenly One?

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Not everyone has had a loving, caring father. For various reasons, some may not even have known their father. Therefore, for them to call God “my Father” may have little, if any, meaning. However, all of us have an idea of what a good earthly father would be. Besides, we may have known some people who did portray the characteristics of a good father.

We know that human fathers are far from perfect, but we also know that most fathers love their children and, in spite of their shortcomings, they try to give them the best they can. Imagine, then, what our Father in heaven can do for us.

**What does it mean for you, personally, to address God as your heavenly Father? What should it mean to you?**

## Revealed by the Son

Talking about the Father, John says: “No one has ever seen God” (*John 1:18, NIV*). Since the fall of Adam and Eve, sin has hindered us from knowing God. Moses wanted to see God, but the Lord explained to him: “ ‘You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live’ ” (*Exod. 33:20, NKJV*). Nevertheless, our priority should be to know God, because eternal life is to know the Father (*John 17:3*).

**What** do we especially need to know about God? See *Jer. 9:23, 24*. Why are these things important for us to know?

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In the great controversy, Satan’s main attack has been against the character of God. The devil made every effort to convince everyone that God is selfish, severe, and arbitrary. The best way to meet this accusation was for Him to live on this earth in order to demonstrate the falsehood of the charges. Jesus came to represent God’s nature and character and to correct the distorted concept that many had developed about the Godhead. “The only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known” (*John 1:18, RSV*).

**Read** *John 14:8–10*. Notice how little the disciples knew about the Father after being with Jesus for more than three years. What can we learn for ourselves from their lack of comprehension?

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Jesus was sad and astonished to hear Philip’s question. His gentle rebuke actually reveals His patient love toward His dull disciples. Jesus’ response implied something like this: Is it possible that after walking with Me, hearing My words, seeing My miracles of feeding the crowds, of healing the sick and of raising the dead, you do not know Me? Is it possible that you do not recognize the Father in the works that He does through Me?

The disciples’ failure to know the Father through Jesus did not mean that Jesus had misrepresented the Father. On the contrary, Jesus was sure that He had fulfilled His mission of revealing the Father in a fuller way than had ever been seen before. Therefore, He could say to the disciples: “ ‘If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; . . . He who has seen Me has seen the Father’ ” (*John 14:7, 9, NKJV*).

## The Love of Our Heavenly Father

Jesus came to emphasize what the Old Testament had already affirmed: the Father looks at us with incomparable love (*Jer. 31:3, Ps. 103:13*).

“Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!” (*1 John 3:1, NKJV*). It is amazing that the Almighty God, who rules the immense universe, would allow us insignificant and poor sinners living on a tiny planet in the midst of billions of galaxies to call Him Father. He does so because He loves us.

**What** supreme evidence did the Father give us to demonstrate His love? See **John 3:16, 17**.

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Christ was not nailed to the cross in order to create in the Father’s heart a love for humanity. Jesus’ atoning death was not the means to convince the Father to love us; it happened because the Father had already loved us, even before the foundation of the world. And what greater evidence do we have, could we have, of His love than the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross?

“The Father loves us, not because of the great propitiation, but He provided the propitiation because He loves us.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 13.

Some tend to think that the Father is reluctant to love us. Nevertheless, the fact that Jesus is our Mediator does not mean that He has to persuade the Father to love us. Christ Himself dispelled this wrong idea when He said: “The Father Himself loves you” (*John 16:27, NKJV*).

**Read** **Luke 15:11–24** and meditate on the Father’s love of the prodigal son. Make a list of the many evidences the son had of his father’s love.

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**How are we, each of us in our own way, like the prodigal son? In what ways have you experienced something similar to what he did?**

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## The Compassionate Care of Our Heavenly Father

It is important to know that we are cared for. Even though some people may be indifferent and neglectful toward us, Jesus taught that our heavenly Father cares for us in every possible way. His mercy and tenderness are not subject to the ups and downs so common in human temperaments; His love is steadfast and unchanging, regardless of the circumstances.

**Read** Matthew 6:25–34. What encouraging words are found here? How can we learn to better trust in God, as He is revealed in these verses?

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“There is no chapter in our experience too dark for Him to read; there is no perplexity too difficult for Him to unravel. No calamity can befall the least of His children, no anxiety harass the soul, no joy cheer, no sincere prayer escape the lips, of which our heavenly Father is unobservant, or in which He takes no immediate interest. ‘He healeth the broken in heart, and bindeth up their wounds.’ Psalm 147:3. The relations between God and each soul are as distinct and full as though there were not another soul upon the earth to share His watchcare, not another soul for whom He gave His beloved Son.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 100.

Amid all the encouraging words here, we cannot ignore the fact that tragedy and suffering do strike us. Even in the texts for today, Jesus spoke of how “sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof” (*Matt. 6:34*), implying that not everything is going to go well for us. We do have to live with evil and its doleful consequences. The point is, even amid all that, we are assured of the Father’s love for us, a love revealed to us in so many ways, most of all, by the Cross. How crucial, then, that we constantly keep the gifts and blessings of our heavenly Father before us; otherwise, we can easily become discouraged when evil strikes, which it inevitably does.

**In what ways, during a time of crisis, were you able to see the reality of God’s love for you? What did you learn from that experience that you can share with someone else who might be struggling and, amid those struggles, questioning the reality of God’s love?**

## The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit

In different ways, Jesus taught and demonstrated that Three Divine Persons constitute the Godhead: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Although we cannot explain this truth rationally, we accept it by faith (like many of the truths revealed in Scripture), and together with Paul we strive to attain a full “knowledge of the mystery of God” (*Col. 2:2, NKJV*). That is, though there is much we don’t understand, we can seek by faith, obedience, prayer, and study to learn more and more.

**The Three Persons of the Godhead were active in the key moments of the life of Jesus. Summarize the role of each One in the following events:**

*Birth: Luke 1:26–35* \_\_\_\_\_

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*Baptism: Luke 3:21, 22* \_\_\_\_\_

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*Crucifixion: Heb. 9:14* \_\_\_\_\_

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When Jesus’ earthly ministry was about to finish, He promised His distressed disciples that He would send the Holy Spirit. Here again we see the Three Persons working together. “‘I will pray the Father,’” Jesus assured them, “‘and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever, . . . the Spirit of truth’” (*John 14:16, 17, NKJV; see also vs. 26*).

Jesus explained that there is complete harmony and cooperation between the Three Divine Persons in the plan of salvation. As the Son glorified the Father, demonstrating His love (*John 17:4*), so the Holy Spirit glorifies the Son, revealing His grace (and love) to the world, as well (*John 16:14*).

**Think through some of the other revealed truths that are difficult to comprehend through rational thought alone. At the same time, think about many things in the natural world that are similarly difficult to comprehend. What should these mysteries tell us about the limits of our rational thought and the need to live by faith? Bring your answers to class on Sabbath.**

**Further Study:** Ellen G. White, “A Personal God,” pp. 263–278, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8.

“In order to strengthen our confidence in God, Christ teaches us to address Him by a new name, a name entwined with the dearest associations of the human heart. He gives us the privilege of calling the infinite God our Father. This name, spoken to Him and of Him, is a sign of our love and trust toward Him, and a pledge of His regard and relationship to us. Spoken when asking His favor or blessing, it is as music in His ears. That we might not think it presumption to call Him by this name, He has repeated it again and again. He desires us to become familiar with the appellation.

“God regards us as His children. He has redeemed us out of the careless world and has chosen us to become members of the royal family, sons and daughters of the heavenly King. He invites us to trust in Him with a trust deeper and stronger than that of a child in his earthly father. Parents love their children, but the love of God is larger, broader, deeper, than human love can possibly be. It is immeasurable.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, pp. 141, 142.

“Our heavenly Father has expressed his love for us individually in the cross of Calvary. The Father loves us, he is full of compassion and tender mercy.”—Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*<sup>®</sup>, September 30, 1889.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 If someone tells you that he or she has difficulties in loving God and trusting in Him as a heavenly Father because of bad experiences with an earthly father, how could you help this person to love God and have confidence in Him?
- 2 We know God loves us. Why, then, is there suffering?
- 3 As a class, go over your answers to Thursday’s final question.
- 4 Think about the incredible size of the universe. Think, too, that the One who created it, Jesus, was the same One who died for us on the cross. How do we wrap our minds around this hopeful news? How can we learn to rejoice, moment by moment, in this amazing revelation of God’s love?

## *The Lesson in Brief*

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▶ **Key Text:** *1 John 3:1*

▶ **The Student Will:**

**Know:** Acquire a deeper comprehension of his or her heavenly Father's essential character as expressed through the teachings of Jesus.

**Feel:** Personally experience his or her heavenly Father's loving, compassionate care.

**Do:** Surrender his or her life without reservation to this loving Father who loves His children without limits.

▶ **Learning Outline:**

**I. Know: Our Heavenly Father's Essential Character Is Love.**

**A** What is the significance of ascribing the term "Father" to the First Person of the Godhead?

**B** In what ways did Jesus reveal the Father during His earthly sojourn?

**C** What characteristics of our heavenly Father are revealed through the teachings of Jesus?

**II. Feel: We May Personally Experience Our Father's Care.**

**A** Which of Jesus' parables have best helped you to experience God's tender care and devotion?

**B** Which of Jesus' actions have best helped you to feel our heavenly Father's love?

**C** What promises has our heavenly Father made that cause you to appreciate His love for you most?

**III. Do: Our Heavenly Father's Love Calls Us to Commitment.**

**A** What things can you do to establish a stronger connection with your loving, heavenly Father?

**B** How can you help others who have difficulty trusting their heavenly Father?

**C** What actions might you take to share the good news about our heavenly Father with those who have never known Him?

▶ **Summary:** All Scripture testifies to the loving nature of our heavenly Father. It is His essential character. Christ's ministry expresses it best.



## *Learning Cycle*

### ►STEP 1—Motivate

**Spotlight on Scripture:** *Luke 15:11–24*

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:** **Nothing—no matter how sordid—we have ever done, or ever could do, could negate God’s everlasting love for the lost human race.**

This lesson focuses our attention on the trait of God’s love. While one solitary study hour may not reverse accumulated disappointments that members may hold in relation to God, this hour is sufficient for introducing a wedge of truth regarding God’s loving character, which, given time, may split apart the bitterness that might, for some people, block their ability to personally experience God’s love. Class members who are already experiencing that divine love will reinforce that experience through their participation in our current investigation.

**Opening Activity:** For this exercise, you will need a portable, battery-powered light source, such as a camping lantern or a flashlight. If your class sits in a circle, place the light source in the middle. Using four colored plastic or cellophane panels (available from most office supply stores), block the lamp’s light. Ask students to name which color they are seeing. By rotating the panels in each direction (north, south, east, west), you should get four different answers. Point out that every panel obscures the light’s true color. In this illustration, the light source represents God’s authentic love, and the colored panels symbolize Satan’s distortions. (Should your class utilize traditional lecture seating, position the lamp forward and alternately obscure its light with each colored panel.) Discuss what the lamp (God’s love) really looks like compared with the colored filters (satanic distortions).

**Alternate Opening Activity:** Imagine that you are seated around a fire or any other source of light. Now imagine that a colored, translucent piece of glass or plastic comes between your eyes and the source of light. Examples might include sunglasses or the red-and-yellow colored panels on a car, bus, or bicycle taillights. Point out that every panel obscures the light’s true color. In this illustration, the light source represents God’s unadulterated, authentic love, while the colored glass or plastic symbolizes Satan’s distortions. Discuss what the light source (God’s love) really looks like compared with the colored filters (satanic distortions).

## ►STEP 2—Explore

### Bible Commentary

#### I. Like Father, Like Son *(Review Isaiah 63:1, 64:8, and John 1:18 with your class.)*

Throughout the Old Testament Scriptures, our heavenly Father is revealed through prophetic utterances. The prophets presented a multifaceted understanding of God that was conveyed within their cultures and in light of their personal backgrounds. The Eternal Word (Jesus) could effectively complete the portrait begun through the prophets because He Himself was essentially divine and One with the Father. “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being” (*Heb. 1:1–3, NIV*).

Christ’s living and teaching added flesh to the invisible concept called “God.” “He is the image of the invisible God” (*Col. 1:15, NIV*). But even Christ’s inner circle of the Twelve was slow to grasp this concept. “Thomas said to him, ‘Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?’ Jesus answered, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father, as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.’ Philip said, ‘Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.’ Jesus answered, ‘Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, “Show us the Father”? Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work’ ” (*John 14:5–10, NIV*).

Whatever Jesus did and how Jesus lived, as well as Jesus’ teachings, reveal the Father. Jesus taught about His Father’s loving character. With stunning visual appeal, narratives such as the prodigal son, the lost sheep, and the good Samaritan unveil the profundity of God’s incomparable love.

**Consider This:** Jesus claimed that to see Him was to see the Father. What did Jesus mean by this? In what ways does Jesus reveal the Father to us today?

#### II. Untethered Compassion *(Review Jeremiah 31:3, Psalm 103:13, and 1 John 3:1 with your class.)*

Jeremiah, the psalmist, and John the beloved collectively give us a portrait

of God's love. Not only does this love reveal to us who He is, it is an intimate disclosure of the depths of yearning in the divine heart.

And what is it that the heart of God most desperately longs for? Jeremiah is a conduit for that answer: God longs to pour out His love upon His people. He personally appears to His prophet to affirm His profound love for Israel. " 'Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore with lovingkindness I have drawn you' " (*Jer. 31:3, NKJV*). This scripture begins with an emphatic affirmation, indicating God's intimate acquaintance with, and affirmation of, our deep need for assurances of His divine mercy and tenderness. He declares His love for His people and calls it everlasting. Like the essence of God's own being, His love has neither beginning nor end. It is indestructible and unchanging; once given, it cannot be revoked. What confidence and assurance such unconditional love should impart.

Notice the next great dimension of God's love as disclosed through Jeremiah. It is ever drawing us closer to Him. God's love is magnetic and demonstrative; it is no mere static emotion but the outworking of intimate action, a reconciling and redemptive principle in perpetual motion. It is because He has loved us that He has drawn us. God does not suppress the fact that His love has an agenda; He pursues it openly with single-minded obsession, bending all His attention upon it. Here He makes clear His love's one great aim: to draw us back into unbroken fellowship with His Spirit.

To add to this composite portrait of divine love, the psalmist gives us the assurance that the Lord is full of pity or compassion for those of His children who fear Him. Here Psalm 103:13 makes clear the connection between God's compassion for His children and our obedience. Obedience does not earn God's compassion; obedience is the outworking of God's love in us that places us in the most favorable position for Him to bless us with the fullest expression of that love. This great heart of love understands that we have an expiration date. It understands we are ephemera of carbon and nitrogen, hydrogen and oxygen, and that our flesh is weak and vacillating.

Our weak flesh and sinful choices notwithstanding, Scripture affirms that divine love is unconditional and paternal in nature. In 1 John 1:3 the apostle John picks up the paternal image of God as a loving Father, used by the psalmist, and is overcome by the mind-boggling implications of such a connection. If God is our Father, then we by adoption through Christ, His Son, are His children. This stunning realization is transformational in its impact, inspiring not only trust and assurance but a complete surrender of the heart to God. "As the inspired apostle John beheld the height, the depth, the breadth of the Father's love toward the perishing race, he was filled with adoration and reverence; and, failing to find suitable language in which to express the greatness and tenderness of this love, he called upon the world to behold it. 'Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God.' 1 John 3:1. What a value this places upon man!"—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 15.

**Consider This:** To say that a gift is unconditional is to say that it can never be earned or merited, only received. That's because it is not based on the receiver but on the goodness of the giver. As the special objects of divine love, what does God's unconditional gift of love mean for us? How can believers exhibit unconditional love for those who have wronged them or their loved ones?

### ►STEP 3—Apply

#### Thought/Application Questions:

- 1 How should believers counteract feelings of worthlessness and despair?
- 2 What practices or strategies have you discovered to help maintain your experience of God's love?
- 3 How can believers develop greater sensitivity to others who despair of not experiencing God's love?
- 4 What advantages might there be in working together as God's church, rather than doing so individually, when it comes to sharing God's love?
- 5 With suicide becoming more prevalent, particularly among teenagers, what should God's church do to communicate His unconditional love to all, including younger people?
- 6 How does sharing God's love with others enable believers to experience that love more deeply themselves?
- 7 What can churches attempt that might undo barriers erected by previous church generations who practiced conditional love?

### ►STEP 4—Create

**Activity:** Explore your community, searching for groups of unloved or “under-loved” people. These groups might include unwed teenage mothers, gang members, the elderly, the illiterate and/or non-native speakers of your language, the financially disadvantaged or poor, homeless individuals, or single-parent families. Allow the class to select from your unloved peoples one group wherein your class can make a positive difference in communicating God's unconditional love in concrete, positive ways. Brainstorm creative ways for (1) engaging their interest, (2) sustaining the contact so that Christ's love can be shared, (3) bridging from your Christian-oriented culture to theirs, (4) framing the gospel message in ways they can understand, and (5) involving them in meaningful experiences through which they can assimilate God's love.