



CHILDREN OF DIVORCE, EARTHLY FATHERS AND THE IMAGE OF GOD

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By Wayne D. Stocks

February 11 & 13, 2013



Over the last month or so, we have published a number of articles about [the 6/50 Window](#). [The 6/50 Window](#) is a new name for an existing mission field for the Church represents the number of children of divorce who eventually end up as born again Christians with a biblical worldview (6%) as compared to the total number of children who will witness the dissolution of their parents' marriage/relationship (50%). In order to understand [6/50 Window](#) though, we need to have some appreciate for how divorce impacts a child's spiritual journey. Today, we will look at the dynamic between a child and their earthly father and how that impacts their view of God. Obviously, this can have a substantial impact on a child's faith journey.

God the Father

The father image of God is pervasive in scripture. Indeed, the Holy Trinity consists of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. The Bible refers to God as Father over 250 times (primarily in the New Testament). The image of God as a personal father to those who put their faith in Jesus Christ is clear. Here is just a sampling of some of the many verses describing God as Father:

There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:4-6 ESV)

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. (Galatians 4:4-7 ESV)

...for you have one Father, who is in heaven. (Matthew 23:9b ESV)

Pray then like this: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. (Matthew 6:9 ESV)





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For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6 ESV)

To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 1:7 ESV)

The Image of God and Our Earthly Fathers

Indeed, I know that in my own life, my understanding of the character and image of God has been greatly increased based on my own experience as a father. We get a glimpse of the love and mercy and grace of God as we relate to our own kids as fathers. The opposite is also true. We formulate our view of God, at least to some extent, based on our relationship with our own father. Numerous studies bear this out. If our own fathers were loving and caring, we (at least initially) attribute the same characteristics to God. If our father was cold and distant, we have to overcome that view in understanding the true attributes of God.

This image transference is common to all of us, but imagine if you will what it must be like for a child of divorce. If your history includes a father who cheated on your mother and eventually left the marriage, how will that impact your view of God? If your childhood was marked by a Father who walked away from his family, what does that do to your trust in God in the Father? If you had a “Disney Dad” who spent four days a month buying you things and letting you get away with murder so that you would “still love him,” how does that impact your view of a God of Justice?

Fatherlessness and Children of Divorce

The instance of children of divorce not having a relationship with their fathers is epidemic. One study showed that by the time children of divorce are between the ages of 12 and 16, fewer than 50% of kids living with separated, divorced, or remarried mother had even seen their father in more than a year, and only about one in six saw their fathers once a week. Another study showed that 56% of all divorced children had no contact whatsoever with their fathers in the first year after divorce. Even in those instances where the father does not entirely abandon the children, studies show that many children of divorce end up with a much more distant relationship with their non-custodial parent.

As we work with children of divorce, we must keep in mind that they do not come to the “idea of God” with a clean slate. Oftentimes, embracing the God of the Bible will mean having to overcome a view of father that has been severely altered by their relationship with their earthly father. Things that we might take for granted like, “you have a Heavenly Father who loves you unconditionally” may be hard for a child of divorce to accept and embrace.





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In Their Own Words

At Divorce Ministry 4 Kids, we are conducting [an ongoing survey](#) of children of divorce. The purpose of this confidential, eight question online survey is to gather information about the experiences of children of divorce to help children currently going through their parents' divorce. Many of the respondents have expressed how their view of their earthly father impacted their view of God the Father. The following represent selected excerpts from some respondents (names have been changed to maintain confidentiality, the first number reflected after the name represent the age at time of divorce, the second number represents age at the time the survey was completed).

Isabella was very forthright in her explanation of how her relationship with her father here on earth affected her relationship with God:

"So much of my view of God is tainted by my view of my father." (Isabella, 5, 34)

The divorce of Kayla's parents when she was 5 has left her still struggling to grasp the idea of God as father nearly 30 years later:

"To date I seem to struggle with the picture of God the Father...It is a concept that I find very difficult to grasp." (Kayla, 5, 34)

Jacob grew up not understanding that he had another father infinitely superior to what he experienced in his earthly father:

"Not having a father around I didn't understand that God was my ultimate father." (Jacob, 2, 32)

Daniel expressed a similar sentiment and spoke to the years it took for him to finally overcome his view of God based on the actions of his earthly father:

"It took years to understand that my heavenly father, unlike my earthly father, would always keep His promises and never leave me." (Daniel, 8, 52)

Anna is still wrestling with her view of God based on her relationship with her Dad. Her view on prayer is particularly notable:

"It's affecting my view of God now... growing up without Dad has messed me up, and that's affecting my relationship with God the Father. I can talk to Jesus, His Incarnate Son, a lot easier." (Anna, 7, 23)





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Laruen still struggles with an image of God born out of her relationship with her father some 35 years after her parents' divorce:

"I often felt afraid / intimidated by my father. He provided for me materially, but he worked a lot and also drank a lot. He was distant. I have applied that to how I see God sometimes - distant, towering, dissatisfied and disappointed in me. Even at 40, at times I struggle to see God as my loving Parent." (Lauren, 14-15, 40)

How Can We Help?

These kids, and many like them, come to God with a viewpoint which has been tainted by their relationships with their fathers following their parents' divorce. In order to reach out to these kids, we must understand this hurdle and provide these kids (and adult children of divorce) with the tools to help overcome these views. This involves:

1. Providing a firm basis in scripture that reveals the true nature of God. When children of divorce begin to revert back to their distorted view of God based on their own earthly fathers, it is important that they be firmly rooted in scripture in order to maintain a right view of God the father.
2. Pray for them that they would develop an understanding of the true nature of God the Father. Pray that God would work in their life to overcome whatever damage their relationship with their earthly father may have had. Pray for reconciliation and healing in the relationship between the child of divorce and their father.
3. Provide an ear to listen and understand. So many times, these kids are left to suffer these things in their own heads and hearts without anyone to talk through these issues with. Be willing to listen and empathize with these kids. Help them to work through the issues they are having, or have had, with their fathers and talk about how our relationship with God the Father is different.
4. Provide role models of earthly fathers. One way to help these kids overcome the hurdle of their own relationships is to show them earthly fathers who better exhibit some of the characteristics of God the Father.
5. Be persistent. While simply telling kids that their Heavenly Father will never leave them or forsake them may fall on deaf ears. If they hear it often enough, it is more likely to stick and become something they can rely on in the long term.
6. Be a trustworthy friend. Many children of divorce say that they had trouble trusting their fathers following a divorce. Demonstrate in your words and actions that you can be trusted and that you are there for them.



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7. Exhibit the character of God in your all interactions with them. Reflect the light of Jesus to them in your own life and in your relationship with them.