

“Heavenly Father”:

Should Christians
Address God Thus?

BY

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“HEAVENLY FATHER”:

Should Christians Address God Thus?

WITH some dear brethren no divine title is more frequently heard than that of “Heavenly Father,” sometimes with the additional adjective “loving”—thus “loving Heavenly Father.” The question having been raised as to the propriety of thus addressing God in this dispensation of exceeding grace, a few remarks are here submitted for the prayerful consideration of the saints.

It is a fact that no one can dispute that the title is never found in the Book of the Acts, nor in any of the apostolical Epistles. It disappears absolutely from the pages of Holy Scripture after the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. This fact is deeply significant, and should exercise our minds seriously. Why should we habitually use a form of speech which appears never to have been used by the early Church? Many other divine titles are found in the later New Testament writings. “The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” is used by both Peter and Paul (1 Pet. 1. 3; Eph. 1. 3). “Father of glory” (Eph. 1. 17), “Father of mercies and God of all comfort” (2 Cor. 1. 3), “God of love and peace” (2 Cor. 13. 11), “God of patience and consolation” (Rom. 15. 5) and “God of hope” (Rom. 15. 13) are a few of the many titles peculiar to Paul. “The only God our Saviour” is from the pen of Jude (verse 25), “the God of all grace” comes to us from Peter, and John delights to speak in his Epistles simply of “the Father.” But how many of these delightful titles, so full of spiritual significance, are heard from the lips of the saints?

4 "Heavenly Father": Should Christians Address God Thus?

Some may ask, "What does it matter, our addressing God as Heavenly Father?" If it were a mere question of phraseology, it would matter very little. But words and names have meanings. In the ordinary relationships of life we address persons according to the position in which we stand to them. A man does not speak to his wife as he would to his sister or daughter, neither does a servant address his master quite as he would a fellow-workman. Each relationship has its own proper language and title. In speaking to God, it is important that we should have spiritual intelligence as to how we stand in relation to the Father and the Son. To be at fault here is to miss great spiritual blessing. When the relationship is rightly understood our language will adjust itself naturally. The real question is this: "Is the Christian a heavenly man or an earthly?" When this inquiry is satisfactorily answered, the difficulty will be quickly solved as to how our God may be suitably addressed.

Now with reference to the title "Heavenly Father," what place has it in the Word of God? Some readers will perhaps be surprised to learn that it is practically limited to the Gospel of Matthew. It is not found elsewhere in the Gospels save in Luke 11. 13—"if ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children; how much more shall your Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him?" John uses the title "Father" more than any other inspired writer (about 120 times in his Gospel alone); but nowhere in his writings do we find "Heavenly Father," and it is admitted that he brings us nearer to the full grace of Christianity than any of the Evangelists.

The fact that the title we are discussing is thus a special feature of *Matthew's* Gospel should help us in our inquiry. The first Gospel is dispensational in character.

It records God's presentation of His Son to the Jewish people and their rejection of Him; and it also contains hints of a total change in God's dispensational dealings in consequence. Thus it is in *Matthew* that we find "the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven" in a series of seven parables, wherein is shown the new and strange form that the Kingdom was about to assume (chapter 13); and it is in *Matthew* also that we find our Lord's familiar pronouncement concerning the Church ("on this rock I will build My Church" chap. 16. 18). The Lord in His teaching was seeking to prepare the minds of His disciples for the great change that was impending, and it is in that connection the title "Heavenly Father" is found.

Let us remind ourselves that the disciples, being Jews, were accustomed to think of God as "Jehovah." This is His covenant name to His earthly people (Exod. 6. 3). But the disciples were favoured to have amongst them the Son of the Father's love. This blessed fact put them in a position of privilege so far beyond anything known before, that the Lord said to them in *Matthew* 13. 16-17, "Blessed are your eyes, for they see; and your ears, for they hear. For verily I say unto you, That many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them." Day by day He manifested the Father's name to the men whom the Father had given Him out of the world, and He gave them, for their comfort and joy, the words which the Father had given Him (*John* 17. 6-8). It was not that they always understood the words, but they received them; and (in contrast with the world) they knew surely that He came out from the Father, and they believed the Father had sent Him (*John* 17. 8). At a critical moment, when many were abandoning Him, and He asked them, "Will ye also go,

away?" Peter, speaking for them all, said, "Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life" (John 6. 66-68).

But although the blessed Lord sought to divert their minds from earth to heaven (the earthly blessing being impossible for the present) their poor dull hearts clung tenaciously to the old order. Hence the request of Zebedee's two sons in Matt. 20. 21. Neither their mother nor themselves were thinking of heaven, but of a visible Kingdom to be established in glory on earth. Hence also the inquiry of the whole apostolic band, apparently on the very day of His ascension: "Lord, wilt Thou at this time restore again the Kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1. 6).

The accomplishment of redemption has changed everything for God's saints. We know the Christ of God, not as King reigning in Zion, but as Man glorified in Heaven. Our associations with Him there constitute us a heavenly company here and now. Hence the Apostle's words in 1 Cor. 15. 48: "As is the heavenly (Christ), such are they also that are heavenly (Christians)." "The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ" (Eph. 1. 3), and we are even regarded as "sitting together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2. 6). "We are a colony of heaven;" for so Phil. 3. 20 might justly be rendered. "Both He that sanctifieth, and they who are sanctified are all of one" (i.e., the Risen Christ and Christians are one in life and status before God), "for which cause He is not ashamed to call them brethren" (Heb. 2. 11). All this being divinely true, it is incongruous that we should address the Father as the disciples did before redemption. The title "Heavenly Father" was admirably suited to men who were only beginning to look away from earth to heaven; but it is

wholly out of place for those who are in conscious association with Christ in His present glory. It amounts to a denial of the heavenly position into which grace has introduced us.

The Lord's Prayer (so-called) stands in the same category as the title “Heavenly Father.” Not a single blessing characteristic of Christianity is mentioned in it. “Our Father which art in heaven” does not put those who utter the words into association with a heavenly Christ. It merely means that men who amongst themselves had hitherto thought of God as “Jehovah,” now (amongst themselves) think of Him as Father (Matt. 6. 9).

The Lord announced the new relationship for the first time in His message to His own by Mary Magdalene: “Go to My brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto My Father, and your Father; and to My God, and your God” (John 20. 17). This is one of the “many things” that were in His mind for His disciples on the last sorrowful evening when He said, “but ye cannot bear them now” (John 16. 12). He must needs accomplish the great work of redemption, and take His seat as Man on high, and the Holy Spirit must come from heaven ere the full, exceeding grace of Christianity could be declared. All is told in the Apostolical Epistles, which will be searched in vain for the title, “Heavenly Father,” or any other title at all approximating to it.

Let us beware of drifting back into the shadows. Let us rather seek to enjoy by the power of the Spirit “the grace wherein we stand”—the intimate and precious relationships into which we have been called to the Father and the Son.