

A FATHER'S FEARS

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A special Father's Day message. I'm taking two texts – one from the Old Testament and one from the New. The Old Testament text is from the book of Hosea, the minor prophet. Chapter 11:1-4, 8. And then Luke 15. Hosea: "When Israel was a child I left him and out of Egypt I called my son. But the more I called Israel the further they went from me. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images. It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arm. But they did not realize it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them."

Here is Father God in a soliloquy as he considers the rebellion of Israel, a grown up child. A child that had once been but a little one. That God had, if you will, put in a little red wagon and pulled out of Egypt with cords of human kindness. I don't think there's anything more picturesque than to see father pulling a son or daughter on a little red wagon. That's the mental picture that comes to my mind when I look at Hosea 11. God reminiscing now that his son Israel is full grown and away from him and away from his heart, reminiscing to the time when he used to pull Israel in the little red wagon.

Verse 8, God says to himself, "How can I give you up Ephraim? [another name for Israel] How can I hand you over, Israel?"

Jesus' great short story of the lost son in Luke 15. Verses 11-12. "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. [verse 20] While he was still a long way off his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him. He ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him."

Father's Day can be a fun day but it's like Mother's Day. It can be a very down day too. It really depends on how you see yourself. Maybe too it depends on how you see your earthly father from a positive context or a hurtful context. I'm sensitive to that as I minister on a Father's Day, the tremendous breadth of emotion and feeling that we have for fathers. Some have responded to me the difficulty of going to church on a Father's Day because they had such a traumatic experience with their own earthly father. When you talk about God as Father they're unable to identify with God because their father was anything but like God. I say to persons who say that we're not talking about an earthly father, but we're talking about the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. If you didn't have a good earthly father, Jesus had a great Father. A heavenly Father. And that's who we can identify with.

I want to share from my heart, some fears that I've had about being a father. I think if I could boil down all my fears of being a father it would be three basic fears.

The first fear is the fear of the times. This is supposedly not a good era to be bringing children into the world. A troubled time, a troubled society, a troubled economy. If you look at the immense problems in our society today and you wonder if anyone ought to be bringing children into this society. Unprecedented drug epidemic. War. Family breakups that can be traumatizing to children obviously as you know. The threat of nuclear war. Christian parents are concerned with exposing our children to the non Christian world. The prospect of cults. The fear of the end times.

A FATHER'S FEARS

You look at all the negatives and you really wonder if this is an age to be bringing children into the world. There's some counsel for us from scripture. We find some of the great persons of scripture were born at a very inopportune time.

Amram and Jocabed, the parents of Moses. They brought a child into the world when the condition of their people couldn't have been any worse. There was an edict that a boy child was to be taken and drowned in the river. Yet they had faith in God that somehow if they brought a child into the world God would take care of the child and have a plan for him.

I think of Hanna who had Samuel and when he was weaned she took him to the priest Eli. Eli had two wicked sons. I wonder when Hanna saw the two older sons she didn't have second thoughts. But somehow God took care of that little boy Samuel and he grew up to a prophet and the anointer of the kings of Israel.

I wonder what the parents of Daniel felt like. They knew they were bringing a child into the world at a time when their nation was falling into war and the young men would be carried off into captivity. Yet into that home Daniel came, a strong and resolute person.

Or what the parents of Esther must have felt. We never read about them. We only read about Esther's uncle Mordecai. Here's a young girl who wins a beauty contest and the prize is to go into the king's harem. Yet she stood loyal and true to God.

Somehow when I see those precedents in scripture I realize that as fathers, as parents, we can always look at life from two different kinds of focus. We can look at it from the standpoint of the ten spies who said all that's going wrong. You can always focus on the negative. Or you can be like the two spies who see the promise and the prospects and believe.

I'm glad my parents didn't get paralyzed by the era and went ahead and gave me birth. I think we as Christians need a greater sense that Jesus is the Lord of history. Some of us come from a background that is always building on a climate of fear and paralysis and the times are always following apart. Times are always going to get worse. Where sin abounds grace also abounds. While we ought to be ready any moment for the return of the Lord we ought not let the prospect of end times scare us in a frightful paralysis.

There has never been a better time for a child to be born into the world and grow up than right now! Why? I look at the opportunities Christian young people have today that I didn't have. No Christian colleges, no Campus Crusade ministry on a secular campus and very little Inter Varsity Christian fellowship. High school young people didn't have opportunity to go on teen missions and get dirty for God. There were very few vital youth groups. Little literature to help the family. If you were Pentecostal or charismatic and went to an evangelical seminary you were one of a handful. But twenty years later it's the second largest body of students on campus preparing for the ministry. The church of Jesus Christ has had in the last thirty years the greatest explosion of growth and the greatest extent of missionary activity that it has ever had in any comparable period of world history. Unparalleled explosion.

I believe that if Jesus Christ carries the church is going to get stronger and stronger and Christian families are going to get stronger and stronger because where there is sin abounding grace is going to abound. God is raising up a wholesome and healthy people and this doesn't have to be

A FATHER'S FEARS

the Laodicean age. There may be Laodicean churches and there may be Laodicean Christians but there are also Christians who abound in the work of the Lord. I believe this is positive time to bring children into the world. Christians ought to be filled with faith, not with fear. The Lord hasn't told us to panic til he comes. He's told us to *occupy* until he comes.

The second fear that I have had as a father is the fear of my own inadequacy. I really think that inadequacy is a problem all of us fight with. We have fear in this economic time about financial inadequacies.

The key to spiritual fathering is Ephesians 6:4 "Fathers don't provoke your children to anger but bring them up in the discipline and the instruction of the Lord." Two parts: negative part –

"Don't provoke your children to anger". How do you place anger in children? You get anger if you neglect them, if you unreasonably discipline them, if you physically or verbally abuse them, if you're inconsistent between how you act and what you require of them. All these are anger builders in a child's life. Rage in your own life will have the effect as Proverbs says "The father has been eating sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge."

But, Paul says in Ephesians, "Bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." When you think of discipline what do you think of? I instantly think *belt* or *rod*. That's part of discipline. What is discipline? Discipline is not a belt. It's a way of life. Discipline is far more than a belt. Discipline is that which you follow on a regular basis. Discipline and instruct your children in the Lord. The best way to discipline your child is to be what you want your child to be. That's the best discipline there is. You be disciplined in your own life to be what you want your child to be. Be kind, be considerate, be gentle, be spiritual, be godly. Be. And somehow the Lord can help us with our own inadequacies which are many.

The third fear that I have had as a father is the fear of freedom.

The fear that one day our children are going to grow up and they're going to make choices. Choices that I don't approve of and don't like. How am I going to handle that? Will they be good choices? Will they choose like I would chose?

I don't care what they choose to eat. But I do care who they choose to marry. Our children will make choices. Job was aware of that. That's why every day he'd pray for his seven sons and three daughters. He'd pray for them and offer sacrifices for them. He was concerned about their choices.

That's really what the Bible verses I read today are concerned about – Hosea tells us about a God who led his people out of Egypt, pulled them with cords of compassion. But now the child has grown up and has not made God's choices and they rebelled. God realizes that a consequence of giving freedom is that a child may not choose when he is grown what you would choose for him.

The Lord in the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15 presents the same dilemma. God our heavenly Father has the child brought up in an ideal environment, not every child goes astray because there was a bad thing in his home life. Even in the ideal family the younger son went astray and the elder son never had the father's heart. In that situation the father had to stand and wait. And wait and wait. He had given his son freedom and love knows that freedom has a price to it.

A FATHER'S FEARS

But would we have it any other way? Would we want our children not to be free? Not to make their own choices? I don't think any of us would. Freedom involves a risk. God could have made robots. But he wanted people who freely responded to him in love. God made us to be able to respond to him and this is what's going to happen with our children. That makes the story of Hosea and the story Jesus told in Luke 15 so poignant because even though a child may make the wrong choices a father's love can never be broken. A father's love is the one bond that cannot be severed. God tells us in regard to we being his children that our wrong choices can not separate us from his love.

I don't know if fathers here today have children that are now grown and you perhaps in your opinion have made wrong choices. I encourage you to have the attitude of God our Father whose cords of compassion for his children never were cut by the child's disobedience. The child could go away from home and do his own thing but one thing he could never get away from and that is his father's love was always there waiting.

For those of you who have young children and that is yet a concern before you, what is going to be their response to freedom? Before God be the man of God as best you can be. When you make wrong choices, when they make wrong choices you cannot break the love that God has put in your heart for your children.

Fears. If we operate our life by fears we'd never do anything. As men of God and as women of God, God calls us to operate with faith and to live life on the positive.

On this Father's Day we acknowledge you, our heavenly Father. We realize that in causing us to be born you risked our rejection, you risked our spending forever without you when you love us so much. Yet because love is so precious and because love cannot exist where there is no choice, you risked and you gave. You gave again in the sending of your Son that we might know without a single doubt how deep your love is for us. As we fathers bow our hearts in prayer we pray to be men of faith. Men of faith who are not afraid of the times. Men of faith who are strong in the times and provide the sturdy foundation upon which a later generation can build. Men who are not afraid of their own inadequacies, who recognize them but are not afraid of them instead become strong in the Lord and by the Lord's help become better than they ever expected. Men of faith who are not afraid of freedom. Who do not needlessly shelter their children from life's adversities. Or spare their children from the consequences of wrong choices. But men who because of freedom know the gentle balance between the need to protect a child and the need to expose a child to reality. So that the child can grow and in due time service his father's God and his father's Lord. May the homes in this church fellowship be strengthened by your love, O Lord God. May we men on this special day that belongs to fathers renew again our dedication to serve you and our family with the strength of Jesus Christ. Amen.