

## A True Father's Love

### Hosea 11:1-9 (ESV)

<sup>1</sup> When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. <sup>2</sup> The more they were called, the more they went away; they kept sacrificing to the Baals and burning offerings to idols. <sup>3</sup> Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk; I took them up by their arms, but they did not know that I healed them. <sup>4</sup> I led them with cords of kindness, with the bands of love, and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws, and I bent down to them and fed them. <sup>5</sup> They shall not return to the land of Egypt, but Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me. <sup>6</sup> The sword shall rage against their cities, consume the bars of their gates, and devour them because of their own counsels. <sup>7</sup> My people are bent on turning away from me, and though they call out to the Most High, he shall not raise them up at all. <sup>8</sup> How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. <sup>9</sup> I will not execute my burning anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.

"You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made." (Psalm 139 13-14a NIV) Each life, each pregnancy, is nothing short than a miracle from God. How the mother's body shifts and moves to accommodate a little person from their conception to birth, is amazing. Yes, it's painful. Makes the mother queasy, sick, swell up, have back pains, but it's all worth it when you see that little boy or girl now brought into the world.

The father, though, plays a different role in the child's formation. Yes, his genetics are a necessary component in making a baby, but his body does not alter to accommodate for the child. (That includes the "pregnancy weight" that some guys claim...) He does not have to personally go through the morning sickness, the aching back, swelling joints, or the actual pain of childbirth.

Yet, God the Father is actually involved in the formation of every single child. He proudly takes on the name Father for all of us. You hear his delight as he says through the prophet Hosea: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son." (verse 1) God the Father not only formed people, but he also chose them. Here specifically he chose to adopt Israel as his son and make them a family with him. This was done when he rescued them from their slavery in Egypt. It was also fulfilled in Matthew's gospel account in reference to Jesus' time in Egypt. The people of Israel and us have been chosen and named sons along with Jesus.

The Lord continued in his father role. "It was I who taught Ephraim to walk; I took them up by their arms, but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of kindness, with the bands of love, and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws, and I bent down to them and fed them." (verses 3-4)

Do any of us remember who taught us to walk and when? Maybe you have pictures or videos of it, but probably not vivid memories of your parents taking you by the hand and teaching you how to walk. At the same time, you know that they did. They spent the time lifting you up by your arms, steadying you, being your safety net as you tried to keep your balance. The patience. The care. The compassion. God is wanting to invoke these feelings when it comes to his care for us.

I understand, though, that maybe your father wasn't there for you like that. Maybe your memories of your father are ones of pain and heartache. Maybe you didn't connect with your father. Maybe your father just wasn't there for you – physically or emotionally or intellectually or spiritually. Maybe he abandoned your family or he was there but he abused you, insulted you, or worse. Many of us have known horrible experiences with fathers. We have known evil fathers, fathers who leave scars.

Those of us who are fathers now, we have to admit our failures as well. Yeah, we have done a lot for our kids. We've provided shelter, clothing, and food for them. We taught them how to ride bikes, fix things around the house, etc. We listened to them. But we also know that there have been times when we have not been there for our kids, not been available for them, not taught them the basics of life, not been aware of what they were going through, not been able to rescue them from every evil this world brings. Some of us have been very hands off when it comes to the spiritual needs and training of our kids. We have neglected our duty as the spiritual leaders God called us to be. Fathers, we often have not been enough for our kids and they are the ones to suffer for it.

No matter who your earthly father is or was, that's not God the Father. He's better than any father ever known. He took a hands-on approach with us. He gave us the ability and strength to actually learn to walk. He nursed us back to health through every sickness – often using natural means that he gave our bodies with our immune systems or through doctors and nurses and the medicines and care they provide. He provided all our food, all our daily bread – often through the natural means of parents and work. He has provided for us our whole lives.

He has also provided us with spiritual life – from start to finish. Through the waters of baptism, he gave us spiritual rebirth. When we first heard the gospel and believed it, we were given a new life. He fed us with his Word, nourishing us with his promises. With his warm and tender compassion, he did not give us up. He did not neglect us. He has always been with us. He has always been available to us through prayer. He released us from our slavery to sin, healed us with the forgiveness of sins. He guards and protects us from every evil.

Wait. Guards and protects us from all evil? I've had plenty of evil come into my life that you, God, didn't protect me from. I fell and broke a bone. I got into that car accident. I got conned out of money. I had people break my heart. You didn't heal me from everything. I'm still battling congestive heart failure, COPD, bad cholesterol, diabetes, etc. You let my wife die. You let my son die. Why should I listen to you? Why should I love you? What kind of a Father are you?

Is this why, after all God the Father did for Israel, that, as Hosea prophesied, "the more they were called, the more they went away; they kept sacrificing to the Baals and burning offerings to idols." (verse 2) Israel, God's son, rebelled over and over again, refusing to turn to God, refusing to love him.

It reminds me of what went through my head about my parents when I was 16, a child. Now, I think I was a fairly respectful son, but I certainly was disobedient to my Mom and Dad more than once. I did push the envelope with them. I thought my Mom and Dad were a bit clueless, unable to know what I was going through, unable to relate to me to my social drama, unable to help me. My friends knew what my life was like. They knew what I was going through. I thought that they were in a better place to help me and get me through my high school life than my parents were. It wasn't until about 10 years later that I realized how foolish I was. That's about when I started to realize that my Mom and Dad were smart. They knew things. They had lived through things and come out on the other side. I could have benefited from taking the time to talk with them and listen to them, to follow their words.

We all need to stop thinking like a teenager when it comes to God, thinking that he's never there for me because he doesn't give me exactly what I want when I want it, thinking that he can't possibly relate to whatever I'm going through, that he can't protect me from the world, from harm, from heartache. We need to stop thinking this way because we have a God who actively loves us, who shows us what a true father's love is. He brought us into his family and called us "son" and "daughter." He is hands-on, taking us through life, like a father teaching his child to walk. He is nourishing us not only with our daily bread but also our spiritual bread – his Word, his forgiveness, his eternal life, all won for us.

But also as a good, active father does, he disciplines us. When Israel, his son, his people, continued to go away from him and worship other gods, he declared: "They shall not return to the land of Egypt, but Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me. The sword shall rage against their cities, consume the bars of their gates, and devour them because of their own counsels. My people are bent on turning away from me, and though they call out to the Most High, he shall not raise them up at all." (verses 5-7) In the immediate context of Hosea's time, this meant that the Lord would bring people from Assyria to overtake the Israelites and destroy their towns. This was done out of love to correct them, steer them away from their self-chosen path of spiritual destruction.

God our Father disciplines us as well. This is why we don't get exactly what we pray for when we pray for it. The Father knows what's best for us. This is why sometimes he says no, but ultimately he knows what we need. It's not that he's absent. It's not that he doesn't care. The truth is the exact opposite. He is the perfect Father who gives us exactly what we need. If we continue to refuse to return to him, if we reject God the Father's love, that is to our own detriment.

After the discipline, though, God the Father announces his intent to restore his people. "How can I give you up, O Ephraim? ... my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my burning anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath." (verses 8, 9) We have not been good, obedient sons and daughters of the Lord. This is why the Father gave us the Christ Child. He is the embodiment of God's warm and tender compassion in order to keep us with him. Christ was obedient to his parents, Mary and Joseph, and more importantly, to God his Father. He did not need discipline because he lived out his life clothed in human flesh perfectly. And when it came time to give up his life for ours, it was him who was abandoned by the Father because he took our sins on his shoulders. He took the eternal punishment of our disobedience and rebelliousness on himself. He took upon himself all our failings as fathers and as children. This is why God will not hand us over to destruction. This is why he does not come to us in wrath. This is why he will not give us up but will continue to be our Father.

God is our Father, who has shown us the true love of a father. In his warm and tender compassion, we are forgiven. We are loved. We are cared for. God the Father actively remains with us, continuing to care for us physically and spiritually. He has called us "son" and "daughter." This is a true Father's love. Amen.