

The Dad Who Wasn't There

✖ About a year after our father died, my sister Kathy became suicidal and was admitted into the psychiatric ward of the hospital. She had attempted suicide in the past. Now her despair was an unprotested submission to defeat. Five years of counseling and prayer seemed to have changed little.

"I'm so tired of trying," she told me one day. "I don't feel close to God. I don't care about living. If it weren't for my kids, I'd just give up."

The situation stung with irony. Thirteen years earlier, Kathy had entered into a relationship with God. She accepted Jesus as her Savior and eventually led all her siblings to the Lord. Now she could not seem to find Him.

Distorted Images

The question is not whether God had failed Kathy or she had failed God. It is, rather, what kind of God did Kathy know? What kind of father did she imagine God to be?

Did she know a Father God who appreciated the smallest things about her and thought she was special? Or did she imagine a God who preferred more "together" Christians? Did she know a Father God who loved to spend time with her? Or did she imagine a God who would get on a train and leave her behind?

From the time I was 2 until our parents' divorce when I was 6, our father was addicted to amphetamines. As a result, he developed a drug-related psychosis, and his behavior often bordered on the bizarre and abusive.

Divorce made my father disappear from our lives. Looking back on those early years, I've often wondered, Daddy, where were you?

When you were a child, your own father modeled God for you, accurately or not. Perhaps you attended church and were told God was good. But if your father was absent or ineffective, you ran into the same problem my sister had. You couldn't reconcile a positive image of God with the distorted picture your father presented. This warped image of God hid the very thing for which you searched.

If you have finally let go of your father, you are free to find another Father in God. However, has your subconscious painted a picture of God for you that has disqualified Him for that role?

What Color God Did You Paint?

Imagine that you were given a blank canvas at birth. Your father's words and actions (or lack thereof) provided the tools, paints and brushes with which you would paint an image of God as you grew up.

If your father was absent due to divorce or abandonment, you were left with a blank canvas and only a few tools. Perhaps you

didn't even believe in the existence of God. You had no reason to believe in a loving earthly father, much less a heavenly one.

On the other hand, an absent father may have worked to your advantage. Daughters who don't have to fight negative father images are sometimes more receptive to a fatherlike God. Most of you, however, experienced some interaction with your father that left you negatively predisposed toward God.

If your father was emotionally distant and unattainable, you may have painted a picture of a God who was hard to find in times of need. You were unsure of God's care for you and imagined that He deliberately removed Himself from you.

If your father was ineffective because of a problem such as alcoholism, he may have depicted a God who was a mass of contradictions. You never knew what to expect from God.

The abusive, harsh or domineering father usually does the most damage. If you would describe your dad this way, you probably painted a God who was angry, volatile and demanding. You couldn't please Him no matter how hard you tried.

As you grew older these images colored your thoughts and attitudes about God. You probably wanted to avoid the concept of God as a Father, so you focused on Jesus.

Many father-deprived daughters cling to the person of Jesus to crowd out negative ideas about a God who might be like their

fathers. However, when we fix our eyes on Jesus so that we identify only with Him, we are not really seeing Jesus at all.

Jesus died as a sacrifice for sin, but He also came to revolutionize forever our view of God. Time and again Jesus referred to God as Father—and not only as “Father” but as “Abba,” an Aramaic word meaning “daddy” or “papa” (see Mark 14:36).

Jesus emphasized that God was our perfect Father, but perhaps His greatest testimony to the fatherhood of God was His own behavior. When we read about Jesus in Scripture, we can take comfort in His loving manner, His sacrificial life and the way He took the children into His arms. But when Jesus did these things, God the Father did them as well.

Jesus is God (see John 14:9). All His character traits are those of God Himself. Through Jesus’ words and actions, God endeavored to draw us closer to Himself.

Take a second look. As you fix your eyes on Jesus, what do you see? Do you see Him pointing the way to a loving, caring Father who is eager for His children to know His love?

If not, you need to repaint your canvas. You need to repaint God with such true colors that He becomes Daddy, your Abba Father. To do this, you need a revelation. But how?

God has given us the Holy Spirit, who is able to call what is not into being. You can ask Him to wipe away the old

picture on
your canvas. Cry out to Him for a revelation of God's father-
love for
you.

God's Part: The Faithful Father

If God is to become Father, we have a responsibility, and so does He. Does He have what it takes to be a good father?

The two most important things a father gives his child are love and discipline. The lack or warping of these two necessities hurts us most as children.

It is the little girl inside of us who needs to have a relationship with Abba Father. Only He can provide the needed love and discipline that will cause that little girl to grow into maturity and to stop seeking a daddy in the wrong places.

How does God handle the fundamentals of discipline and love?

Abba Father's Discipline. It hurts sometimes to allow God to deal with me as my Father when I've made a mistake. But I need to be dealt with firmly so that I don't sin again. And I know that after I have repented and cried for a while, He will comfort me.

The father-deprived daughter shudders at the idea of God's discipline. She imagines that God's discipline is like the fallible, earthly discipline she may have experienced growing up.

Let's look more closely at what makes God's discipline a good

thing:

- It proves we are His much-loved children (see Heb. 12:6).
- It is perfectly motivated by His love and desire for our best (see v. 10).
- It consists of guidelines given in Scripture, the conviction of the Holy Spirit and the natural consequences of sin. God makes the rules clear, lets us reap what we sow and then looks searchingly into our eyes when we blow it (see v. 11).
- It is individually tailored, not handed out randomly. Some of God's children need a loving Father to look them in the eye and confront them about their sin. Others, who grew up feeling as though they were never good enough, need to hear Abba Father say, "Relax and let Me love you. Get to know My mercy."

We can't fully understand God's discipline until we know more about His love.

Abba Father's Love. Only God's love is powerful enough to fill in all the cracks and crevices father-loss left in our hearts (see 1 John 4:16). Here's why:

- God's love is perfect. It is more than creator-object love or king-subject love. Perhaps above all it is parent-child love (see 2 Cor. 6:18; 1 John 3:1).
- God's love is unconditional. Maybe as a child you had to watch where you stepped around your father. But the unconditional love of Abba Father will never crumble or break beneath the

weight of
our mistakes.

Can you see how God is your Father in the most
down-to-earth, concrete way? He isn't a far-away God who makes
you feel
guilty all the time. He wants to relate to you in every area
of life.

Our Part: Becoming God's Daughters

God is faithful in love and discipline, the perfect
Father. But unless we respond to Him as His daughters, we
won't
understand His intent and devotion toward us.

Many of you may never have had the opportunity to be
little girls while you were growing up. Now you must learn
childlikeness. But how?

We learn much by watching young kids in a healthy
father-child relationship. Many of the ways they relate to a
daddy are
worth imitating in our relationship with Abba Father.

First, a little girl usually expects the best of Dad. He
is Superman, Batman and Mr. Rogers all wrapped up into one.
She brags
about him to her playmates, making him out to be anything but
ordinary.

Second, a young child wants to spend every available minute
with her dad. Just to be with him is a good and wonderful
thing.

Third, she is constantly displaying her affection for
Dad. She wants to hold her daddy's hand, kiss him and at
times, climb
all over him.

What kind of child are you with Abba Father? Do you brag about Him to others? Sing His praises?

How much time do you spend with Him? What is your posture before Him? What do you call Him?

The End of the Search

One morning soon after Kathy was released from the hospital, she awakened with a heavy heart but nevertheless attempted to pray. Suddenly she felt God pour His overwhelming love into her. She'd never experienced love like that before—love strong enough to touch the deepest parts of her.

She began to cry. She saw herself as a small child. Jesus was there and lifted her up onto God's lap.

God lifted her chin and looked into her face. He said He loved her, that she was priceless and special. She was on His lap for a long time, crying into His chest and letting Him love her.

For the first time in her life, she knew God really wanted to be her Father and that He loved her as His daughter.

The rest of us may never have a vivid experience as Kathy did. My own revelation of Abba Father has come slowly, bit by bit.

But I no longer need to ask, "Daddy, where were you?" Today I know where both my fathers are. My earthly father is finally whole, the man God created him to be. Someday I'll see him like that, face to face.

And my heavenly Father is where He has always been—watching over me.

Have you spent your life searching for a father? If so, stop and look up.

You no longer have to ask, “Daddy, where were you?” Your Father has been there all along. If you ask Him to, He will reveal His father-love to you in the way you need it most. Your search will end in His lap—and you will have found Him forever.

Heather Harpham Kopp is the author of seven books, including Praying for the World's 365 Most Influential People, which she co-authored with her husband, David. Adapted from Daddy, Where Were You? by Heather Harpham Kopp, copyright 1998. Published by Vine Books. Used by permission.