

CITY ON A HILL

I CAN ONLYTM
IMAGINE



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This journal is designed to take you on a journey through Jesus' encounters with broken people, found throughout the Gospels. Each day will include scripture, reflective questions, and prayer—all working together to reveal God's incredible heart for you.

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INTRODUCTION

AND A VOICE FROM HEAVEN
SAID, "THIS IS MY SON,
WHOM I LOVE; WITH HIM I
AM WELL PLEASSED."

— MATTHEW 3:17

How many of us long to hear those words—that we are deeply loved and fully accepted? We hope to hear these words from our friends, our siblings, and especially our fathers. But the need goes deeper. Whether we are aware of it or not, we all long to hear our heavenly Father saying, “You are my child; I love you, and I’m pleased with you!”

But how many of us feel and daily live with the sense of God’s love and acceptance?



Jesus lived with this certainty: the love and acceptance of his eternal Father flooded his life, filled his conversations, and formed the basis for his teaching and ministry. Knowing you are loved by God changes everything!

We may not be like Jesus just yet, but all who believe in him are said to be “children of God” (1 John 3:1). As God’s very own sons and daughters, we can be as certain as Christ of our Father’s love and acceptance!

DISCOVERING THE FATHER’S LOVE

In the film, *I Can Only Imagine*, the life story of MercyMe lead singer Bart Millard is told for the first time. Bart grew up with an abusive father and a distant mother, and in early adulthood, came face to face with his own deep need for acceptance. His lack of love from his earthly father challenged his faith and hope in his heavenly Father.

But our God is in the business of redemption—of working miracles. Bart’s story mirrors so many of our own lives and gives fresh hope to those of us longing to hear the words, “With you, I am well pleased.”

What does it look like to discover God’s love and acceptance firsthand?

WALKING WITH JESUS THROUGH THE GOSPELS

In this study journal, we will take a four-week journey into the Father’s heart. And the best way to discover God’s heart is through the life and ministry of Jesus. Jesus’ life demonstrates his eternal connection to the Father and best reveals the heart of God.

By walking with Jesus in the four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—over 28 days, we will find the smiling face of God Almighty in the words and actions of his Son.

Imagine a loving Father. Imagine complete forgiveness. Imagine restoration to God and others. Imagine discovering your true home in the Lord.

God is love. Let’s walk with Jesus through the Gospels to discover this life-changing reality.





HOW TO USE THIS JOURNAL

My hope and prayer for you is that this journal serves as a guide for your walk with Jesus into the Father's love.

Consider making this more than just another book, or another task to complete. Consider committing to a 28-day journey into the Father's heart!

This study journal has 28 days, including four days to catch up and review. That's four weeks saturated in the story of Jesus' life, a whole month of discovering God the Father in the face of God the Son.

Imagine what God might do in your heart and mind through this four-week journey with Christ!

Each day, you'll reflect on a portion of Scripture, stories, scenes from the 2018 film, *I Can Only Imagine*, and reflection questions to help you grow in your nearness to God.

If you're doing this journal with the *I Can Only Imagine* Series, watching each week's video BEFORE completing the Journal is recommended. For example, watch Episode 1, then complete Week 1 in the journal.

Watching the *I Can Only Imagine* movie is not necessary for completing this journal, but seeing Bart's story come to life in film will help you understand some of the illustrations given in this journal. We suggest watching the film before you start the journal if you choose to do so.



RECALL, REORIENT, REIMAGINE

Each week, we'll follow a pattern: Recall (days 1-2), Reorient (days 3-5), and Reimagine (days 6-7). This pattern can serve as an intentional guide to:

- **Recall** your own past through the stories of Bart Millard and of the Scriptures; by recalling the past with vulnerability, we can put the past “in its place”—neither dominating us nor unknown to us.
- **Reorient** to the present moment by finding our identity in Christ; by reorienting in the present with honesty, we can face our daily reality with faith, hope, and courage.
- **Reimagine** a better future; by reimagining a different future, we trust Christ to bring all things under his lordship and to guide us in each new season of life.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Each day, you'll read a short devotional based on Scripture and the themes of *I Can Only Imagine*.

Following the reading, you'll be asked to reflect on a series of questions. These questions are meant to cultivate

a deeper understanding of the Scriptures' meaning and to help you experience God through prayerful reflection.

REMEMBER, WE
READ AND REFLECT
NOT MERELY TO
LEARN. WE READ
AND REFLECT TO
EXPERIENCE.

The God of the universe—the Father of love and restoration—invites you to get to know him personally through his Word.



READING THE GOSPELS AS STORIES

Almost every devotional passage in this book is from one of the four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. These passages give perspective on Jesus’ life and meaning from other New Testament or Old Testament passages. As you read the passages from the Gospels, keep a few things in mind.

THE GOSPELS ARE STORIES.

The four firsthand accounts of Jesus’ earthly life and ministry were written by his closest friends or most devoted followers. Each of the four books is primarily “narrative,” the literary genre we know as stories full of meaning. Since many of these narratives span several verses and even chapters, in many cases, I will paraphrase sections of Scripture in my own language. My goal is to maintain a unified voice in retelling the stories in a fresh way, and I’ll include as many Scripture references as possible.

THE GOSPELS ARE PERSONAL.

Jesus’ ministry was often focused on one person at a time, and each of the four Gospels is intimately personal.

The stories invite us to imagine the scenes; the teaching may pierce our hearts, and the accounts of our Lord’s death and resurrection may trigger strong emotions. In some cases, I may fill in the gaps with details to provide a personal reading. I won’t make changes to Jesus’ teachings, invent new characters, or make speculations beyond the biblical text. But to keep a unified voice and make your reading personal, I may fill in the gaps with reasonable reflections, and again, Scripture references will usually be included for your own reference and later study.

THE GOSPELS ARE POWERFUL.

These narratives from Jesus’ life are not mere stories; they are passages from the divinely-inspired Word of God. I hope to preserve the power of God’s Word throughout the study



journal, supplementing the text only with reflections that honor the Scripture's integrity and magnify the most powerful moments in the narrative.

So, to summarize, in many cases I will take a particular verse and paraphrase it as a personal, powerful story that remains true to the biblical text, and I'll include the Scripture reference. For example:

THE ORIGINAL VERSE:

“When Jesus came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him. A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, “Lord, if you are willing, make me clean.” Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!”

- MATTHEW 8:1-3

MY PARAPHRASE:

When he had finished his teaching on the mountain, Jesus returned to the gritty realities of life in a broken world. Immediately, he was greeted by a sick man, a social outcast, who fell down at his feet. With nothing to lose and no fear of others' opinions of him, he wept before Jesus. “Lord, I believe you can heal me. Please, make me clean!” And so Jesus reached down, and to the crowd's dismay, touched the man—he hadn't felt the warmth of human touch in years. Smiling, Jesus said softly, “You are healed.”

- MATTHEW 8:1-3 PARAPHRASE

I hope this form of biblical storytelling enhances your reading and gives you a greater love for Scripture. Some great examples of this form of narrative paraphrasing can be found in Sally Lloyd-Jones's *The Jesus Storybook Bible*, Eugene Peterson's *The Message Bible*, and Russ Ramsey's *Behold the King of Glory and Behold the Lamb of God*.



Questions for Reflection

Before starting Day One, complete these short Reflection Questions.

WHAT'S THE FIRST THING THAT COMES INTO YOUR MIND WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT GOD?

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE GOD TO SOMEONE WHO DIDN'T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT CHRISTIANITY?

REFLECT ON YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR OWN FATHER. WHAT POSITIVE MEMORIES COME TO MIND? HOW HAVE YOU SEEN YOURSELF LONG FOR A PERFECT, HEAVENLY FATHER?

Call to Action

At the end of each week, you'll receive a Call to Action. This section moves beyond mere reflection and into immediate application. Some aspects will include reflection, but this section is action-oriented. You may find yourself journaling, writing a letter you never send, imagining a conversation, and other activities.

Before starting Day One, complete this short Call to Action.

IN THE SPACE PROVIDED, MAKE A LIST OF THREE THINGS YOU WANT TO GET OUT OF THIS STUDY.



PICK A PERSON WHO CAN PRAY FOR AND ENCOURAGE YOU WHILE YOU DO THIS STUDY. TAKE A MOMENT NOW TO CALL OR TEXT THEM, ASKING FOR THEIR PRAYER AND SUPPORT WHILE YOU COMPLETE THE FOUR-WEEK JOURNAL—OR EVEN ASKING THEM TO PARTICIPATE WITH YOU!



1





IMAGINE

a loving father

Day 1

FINDING GOD IN THE SCRIPTURES

In *I Can Only Imagine*, Bart Millard's past became a defining and controlling factor in his life. In order to become spiritually healthy, he had to recall the past:

his mother's absence, his father's abuse, and his own leaving. On some level, we can all resonate with Bart's past.

RECALLING THE PAST

Maybe your mother never left you; maybe your father never abused you verbally or physically; maybe you didn't run from home at first chance. But Bart's past is our past, because we all come from broken homes, live in a broken world, and bear the wounds of our own mistakes and the wrongs committed against us by others.

By recalling the past with vulnerability, we can put the past "in its place"; we can be neither dominated by the past nor unaware of its influence on us.

Why can't we just forget about the past and move forward?

God has hard-wired us as a remembering people. In fact, a memory of the past is central to biblical faith—the Scriptures are full of commandments to remember all that God has done for us. As people with full memories, we can't simply ignore or reject or forget the past; it's as if the past is woven into our bodies like our own DNA. To deny our own past is to put a lid on what God can do to bring about redemption and renewal in us. Spiritual growth requires a healthy recalling of our own past.



But there's another sense in which we must recall the past.

The biblical encouragements to “Remember” most often call us back, not to our own individual pasts, but to the past provision of God in history. Psalm 105 is a perfect example: The psalmist calls us to remember God's promises to Abraham, His saving work in the Passover and exodus, and in leading His people through the wilderness. Remembering these things, according to Psalm 105's conclusion, enables us to live rightly before God and others.

LOOK TO THE LORD AND HIS STRENGTH;
SEEK HIS FACE ALWAYS.

Remember

THE WONDERS HE HAS DONE,
HIS MIRACLES, AND THE JUDGMENTS HE
PRONOUNCED...

- PSALM 105:4-5



FINDING GOD IN THE SCRIPTURES

Each day in this study, we'll strive to find God in the Scriptures as a way of recalling our spiritual heritage. One of the best ways to discover God is to look to the earthly life and work of his own Son, Jesus Christ.

Use your imagination to recall the past:

What would it have been like to walk with Jesus in the first century—to work with him in Nazareth, to follow him along the dirt roads of Galilee, to sit across the table from him at a dinner in Jerusalem?

We can get some idea of what it would be like to be physically with Jesus by reading the stories of the Gospels, which were written by some of his closest friends and most loyal followers.

And as we put ourselves within the narratives of the gospels, we find Jesus inviting us into the heart of God.

THE SON REVEALS THE FATHER

JOHN 1 SAYS, “NO ONE HAS EVER SEEN GOD, BUT THE ONE AND ONLY SON, WHO IS HIMSELF GOD AND IS IN CLOSEST RELATIONSHIP WITH THE FATHER, HAS MADE HIM KNOWN.”

- JOHN 1:18

Jesus, the Son of God, best reveals God, his eternal Father. As you prepare to study the life and ministry of Jesus, do you believe that God will reveal himself to you?



JESUS TOLD HIS DISCIPLES, THE FATHER HIMSELF LOVES YOU
BECAUSE YOU HAVE LOVED ME AND HAVE BELIEVED THAT I
CAME FROM GOD.

- JOHN 16:27

RECALL

As you prepare to step into this four-week journey in the Gospels, do you believe that God himself loves you because you have believed in his Son?

In the words of Jesus' beloved disciple, "And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love" (1 John 4:16). As you start this study journal, would you say that you know and rely on the love God has for you? Have you experienced this reality: God is love?

Perhaps you have never experienced love and acceptance from your father or mother. Perhaps you wonder if there's anyone who loves you unconditionally and accepts you just as you are. Perhaps this is God's invitation to you to discover, through the life of Jesus in the Gospels, just how deeply the Father loves you. ■



Questions for Reflection

READ JOHN 1:18 AGAIN. WHAT DOES IT MEAN THAT JESUS IS GOD AND IN RELATIONSHIP WITH THE FATHER? HOW IS JESUS UNIQUELY POSITIONED TO REVEAL THE FATHER TO US?

READ JOHN 16:27 AGAIN AS WELL. HOW IS GOD ABLE TO REVEAL HIS LOVE TO US? WHY IS IT NECESSARY THAT WE BELIEVE IN JESUS BEFORE WE CAN HAVE AN EXPERIENCE WITH GOD?

WHY IS IT NOTEWORTHY THAT THE SCRIPTURES COME TO US PRIMARILY IN STORY FORM—NOT JUST LAW AND TEACHING? WHAT DO YOU THINK GOD—AS THE ULTIMATE AUTHOR OF THE BIBLE—IS TELLING US BY HIS USE OF STORY?

HOW FAMILIAR ARE YOU WITH THE FOUR GOSPELS? WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU READ ONE COVER TO COVER? WHICH OF THE FOUR BOOKS RESONATE WITH YOU MOST DEEPLY?

AS YOU START THIS STUDY JOURNAL, HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD? HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR RELATIONSHIP TO HIS WORD, THE BIBLE?

THE APOSTLE JOHN SAYS, SIMPLY, “GOD IS LOVE” (1 JOHN 4:16). WHY IS THIS SO SIGNIFICANT? EVEN IF YOU’VE HEARD THIS PHRASE MANY TIMES IN YOUR LIFE, TAKE A MOMENT TO REFLECT ON IT DEEPLY. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO YOU TODAY?

Day 2


WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT GOD?

For many of us, our view of God is based largely on our life experiences—particularly with our own fathers and mothers. By recalling truths about God and by recalling our own life experiences, we can become aware of who God is, how he has moved in our lives, and how his promises for future hope can be trusted.

The film *I Can Only Imagine* follows MercyMe lead singer Bart Millard's life story. Bart's mother left home while he was still a child. He was raised in a broken home by his angry and abusive father. It was a childhood of pain, abandonment, disillusionment, and brokenness.

WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT GOD?

A twentieth century pastor and author named A.W. Tozer once wrote,



“WHAT COMES
INTO OUR MINDS
WHEN WE THINK
ABOUT GOD IS THE
MOST IMPORTANT
THING ABOUT US.”

A.W. TOZER

Think about it: What comes into your mind when you think about God? What words, thoughts, phrases, images, promises, or experiences come to mind?

Next, consider: Why is your original thought about God so important? Why does what you think about God define you so deeply?

Our thoughts about God determine much more than how we view him—they reveal and determine how we will approach all of life. When Jesus walked this earth, he demonstrated an eternal connection to the Father and revealed the heart of God. By looking

to Jesus—in his actions, in his teachings, and in how his closest friends characterized him—we find the most accurate picture of God.

WHAT IS GOD LIKE?

One of Jesus' closest friends and followers, the disciple John, would go on to write the Gospel of John, Revelation, and the three letters we know as 1, 2, and 3 John. These five books are excellent places to discover not just the life and teaching of Jesus, but how Jesus thought about his Father. Summarizing God's true character and ways, John wrote this:

DEAR FRIENDS, LET US LOVE ONE ANOTHER, FOR LOVE COMES FROM GOD. EVERYONE WHO LOVES HAS BEEN BORN OF GOD AND KNOWS GOD. WHOEVER DOES NOT LOVE DOES NOT KNOW GOD, BECAUSE GOD IS LOVE. THIS IS HOW GOD SHOWED HIS LOVE AMONG US: HE SENT HIS ONE AND ONLY SON INTO THE WORLD THAT WE MIGHT LIVE THROUGH HIM. THIS IS LOVE: NOT THAT WE LOVED GOD, BUT THAT HE LOVED US AND SENT HIS SON AS AN ATONING SACRIFICE FOR OUR SINS.

— 1 JOHN 4:7-10



So, what is God like?

FIRST, JOHN SAYS THAT GOD IS A FATHER.

By sending “his one and only Son,” God demonstrates that fatherhood is central to his identity and being. He has eternally existed as a Father, and the Son, Jesus Christ, has eternally enjoyed the fellowship of a good and perfect Father.

SECOND, JOHN TWICE WRITES THE FAMOUS WORDS: GOD IS LOVE.

God is not simply loving or full of love; he is love. In other words, love is not the primary thing and God secondary; “love comes from God,” meaning love can only be understood as an offspring of God’s nature.

THIRD, JOHN TELLS US THAT GOD IS FOR US.

The Father did not wait for us to find our way to him; we could never make it on our own, not given our sin against him. God demonstrates his love for us—you and me and the whole world—by sending his only Son, so “that we might live through him.” God is not against us. Quite the opposite: God is self-giving (he sacrificially gives what we need) and life-giving (we enter a new life by being “born of God”).

What is God like? He is a Father; he is love; and he is for us.

IMAGINE A LOVING FATHER

Think back to Bart Millard’s story. Even in a broken home, Bart was not beyond God’s sight. Even his father, Arthur, the drunk and abusive older man, was not beyond God’s grace. Although Bart didn’t feel Arthur’s acceptance and affection throughout his life, God would still reveal himself as the good and perfect Father to Bart—and to Arthur.



There are no prodigal sons too far from home. There are no fathers too poor to be changed by God.

Imagine a good, ever-present Father.

Imagine the God who is love.

Imagine: God is for you.

How could you not be transformed, encouraged, and strengthened by such a great God?

To help you better understand your view of God, go through the exercise on the next page. Remember, no one has a perfect image of God. We all hold false images of him, doubt his love for us at times, and question his ability to fully provide for us. But he nonetheless invites us to bring those false images, doubts, and fears to him. He already knows what's in our hearts and minds; bring these things before his throne of mercy and find healing in the love and power of his presence. ■

Exercise

Put a check mark next to the word, phrase, or image that you associate with God. Be as honest as possible.

- | | |
|------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> LOVE | <input type="checkbox"/> INDIFFERENT |
| <input type="checkbox"/> FATHER | <input type="checkbox"/> DEITY / RELIGION |
| <input type="checkbox"/> SAFE | <input type="checkbox"/> HARSH |
| <input type="checkbox"/> CLOSE | <input type="checkbox"/> DISTANT |
| <input type="checkbox"/> HAPPY | <input type="checkbox"/> ANGRY |
| <input type="checkbox"/> INVITING | <input type="checkbox"/> DEMANDING |
| <input type="checkbox"/> FULL OF GRACE | <input type="checkbox"/> HARD TO PLEASE |
| <input type="checkbox"/> FULL OF TRUTH | <input type="checkbox"/> DETACHED FROM REALITY |
| <input type="checkbox"/> FORGIVING | <input type="checkbox"/> UNFORGIVING |
| <input type="checkbox"/> REDEEMING | <input type="checkbox"/> NO SECOND CHANCES |
| <input type="checkbox"/> PROMISE KEEPING | <input type="checkbox"/> UNABLE TO PROVIDE |
| <input type="checkbox"/> PATIENT | <input type="checkbox"/> IMPATIENT |

IN THE LEFT COLUMN, WHICH TRUTHS ABOUT GOD SEEM MOST NEAR TO YOU? HOW DID YOU COME TO TRUST GOD FOR THESE ATTRIBUTES OR CHARACTERISTICS?

IN THE RIGHT COLUMN, WHAT NEGATIVE IMAGES OF GOD HAVE YOU ADOPTED? HOW DID YOU DEVELOP THIS THOUGHT?

Questions for Reflection

IN 1 JOHN, THE APOSTLE SAYS, “GOD IS LOVE.” WHY DO YOU THINK HE PUTS IT THIS WAY—NOT “GOD IS FULL OF LOVE” OR “GOD IS LOVING”?

HOW CAN IT BE THAT “WHOEVER DOES NOT LOVE DOES NOT KNOW GOD, BECAUSE GOD IS LOVE”? WHY IS IT IMPOSSIBLE TO LOVE FULLY APART FROM FIRST RECEIVING LOVE FROM GOD?

WHY DOES WHAT YOU THINK ABOUT GOD DEFINE YOU SO DEEPLY?

**WHAT PEOPLE HAVE MOST INFLUENCED
YOUR THOUGHTS ABOUT GOD?**

**THINK OF YOUR OWN EARTHLY FATHER:
HOW DID HE RESEMBLE THE GOOD AND
LOVING HEAVENLY FATHER—OR HOW
DID HE FALL SHORT? HOW DOES YOUR
RELATIONSHIP TO YOUR DAD AFFECT THE
WAY YOU THINK ABOUT GOD THE FATHER?**

Day 3

IN NEED OF A FATHER

Each week, we're following a pattern: recall, reorient, and reimagine. To reorient to the present moment means receiving and living, not in our past, but in our identity in Christ. By reorienting in the present with honesty, we can face our daily realities with faith, hope, and courage.

One of the primary spiritual "reorientations" that must take place involves seeking God as a good and loving Father. But we can't assume that finding God as Father is a naturally life-giving thought.

In America, millions of people grow up every year without knowing their father, with an absent father, or in a conflicted relationship with their father. David Blankenhorn has written:

"The United States is becoming an increasingly fatherless society. A generation ago, an American child could reasonably expect to grow up with his or her father. Today, an American child can reasonably expect not to. Fatherlessness is now approaching a rough parity with fatherhood as a defining feature of American childhood."

DAVID BLANKENHORN



IN NEED OF A GOOD AND LOVING FATHER

As a pastor for the last seven years, I have talked with countless men and women who were raised without a father. Although most still mature into fully-functional adults and contribute to society alongside everyone else, they often carry a deep “father hunger.” In regular relationships and at work, they find themselves striving for others’ approval, fearful of being abandoned, and doubtful that their own families will remain intact.

But fatherlessness is not limited to the literal absence of a father. Many grow up and live as adults with fathers who are neglectful or detached. There is a father, but he isn’t present. When he is present, he doesn’t make his presence felt. When his presence is felt, it’s not full of affirmation and affection.

Similarly, others grow up with a father who was physically present but emotionally damaging. Perhaps you can vividly remember your father scolding you, punishing you cruelly for childish activity, embarrassing you in front of your peers, questioning your life plans, or expressing disappointment with you. Perhaps it’s even a current reality, not a distant memory. Indeed, father wounds run just as deep as father hunger.

Fatherlessness is one of the great epidemics of our time.

We were all created to be cared for and provided for by a good father. In the Bible, fathers are called to be providers, care-givers, instructors, and models of holiness. But many people never experienced the affection, protection, and provision of a biblical father.

Mike Wilkerson, a counselor, has written:



“Tragically, for many of us the father-child relationship is fraught with fear, shame, dread, disappointment, or absence. For some of us... the word father has been darkened by the worst evils. Can you ever hope to know God as your Father if your view of father is so broken?”

MIKE WILKERSON

What does it look like for those with a broken image of father to discover the true and better Father?

THE FATHER ATTENDS THE SON'S BAPTISM

As a father myself, I make it a point to attend my sons' important moments. Whether it's a baseball game, a school awards ceremony, or a show at the end of art camp, I want to be there whenever possible. My own dad was almost always present for my big days—first days of school, basketball games, my wedding, after the births of our children. Those are distinct memories for me.

In the same way, God the Father occasionally revealed himself to Jesus during his earthly ministry. In a much greater way than a dad's trip to the school gym, God shows up to his only Son's baptism, a defining moment that formally launches his earthly ministry of teaching and healing.

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented.



As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

— MATTHEW 3:13-17

How did God reveal himself as a good and loving Father at Jesus’ baptism?

When Jesus was baptized, his Father was present. God was not absent from his eternal Son’s baptism and he is not absent from your own life either.

The Father sent his Spirit to make his presence felt. God was not only present, he made sure his Son felt his presence; in the same way, God wants you to know and feel that he is always with you.

The Father spoke words of affirmation—“This is my Son... with him I am well pleased.” God did not remain silent, but voiced his thundering affirmation of his Son: “I am pleased with

you!” In the same way, we who are sons and daughters of God, take confidence that he is pleased with us too—not because we’re perfect, but because we are one with Christ, and his perfect life covers our imperfect lives.

The Father expressed his love and affection—“This my Son, whom I love.” God is not only affirming, he is affectionate. He loves his Son. Perhaps you remember many times your earthly dad said, “I’m proud of you.” But how many times did you hear, “I love you”?

As he spoke over Christ, so our heavenly Father now speaks over all of his children, “You are my beloved!” ■



Questions for Reflection

WHY DID JESUS SAY HE NEEDED TO BE BAPTIZED BY JOHN? WHY DO YOU THINK IT'S SIGNIFICANT THAT JESUS WANTED TO BE BAPTIZED BEFORE THE START OF HIS TEACHING AND HEALING MINISTRIES?

HOW DOES MATTHEW 3:13-17 REFLECT THE TRUTH WE READ YESTERDAY, THAT "GOD IS LOVE" (1 JOHN 4:7-10)?

GOD RARELY SPEAKS IN AN AUDIBLE VOICE IN HUMAN HISTORY. WHY DO YOU THINK HE MADE AN EXCEPTION AND SPOKE LOUDLY OVER HIS SON IN THIS MOMENT? WHAT DOES THIS SAY ABOUT GOD AS A FATHER?

IF YOU THINK ABOUT GOD SIMPLY FROM THIS PASSAGE ALONE, WHAT ARE THE FIRST WORDS, THOUGHTS, PHRASES, OR IMAGES THAT COME TO MIND?

WHICH OF THESE REALITIES DO YOU FIND HARD TO BELIEVE? WHY DO YOU THINK THAT IS?

GOD IS PRESENT AND MAKES HIS PRESENCE FELT.

GOD AFFIRMS, ACCEPTS, AND LOVES YOU.

LASTLY, WRITE OUT THE END OF MATTHEW 3:13-17 IN YOUR OWN WORDS, WITH YOUR OWN NAME IN THE TEXT. FOR EXAMPLE, "THIS IS JEREMY, MY VERY OWN SON. I AM PROUD OF HIM. IN FACT, I LOVE HIM!"

Day 4

RETURNING HOME TO THE FATHER

Perhaps it is a struggle for you to think of God as a good and loving Father.

In *I Can Only Imagine*, Bart wanted nothing to do with his dad and left home as soon as he could. Even after years away, he couldn't imagine returning home to his father. Years later, Bart hit rock bottom and finally did arrive back home. When he did, he certainly didn't expect a transformed, loving dad. But God is full of surprises.

In one of his most famous stories, Jesus tells a parable—a fictional tale meant to convey a simple truth in a personal, powerful way—about a son who ran away from home. Perhaps you have read it many times. But consider the story again, in a paraphrased form.

THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL

Jesus once told this story to a crowd who struggled to see God as Father. “There was once a father who had two sons (Luke 15:11). The younger son wanted nothing to do with his dad, asked for his inheritance early—effectively wishing his father dead and breaking away from the family. Amazingly, the Father consented, sold off much of his assets, and let his son run away with his hard-earned life savings (v. 12).

So the younger son set off for the big city, spending



money like it would never run out. But it soon did. In fact, the economy bottomed out and he found himself broke and unemployed. The only job he could get was as a laborer on a farm—a worse position than those serving in his family’s own house. But still his pride remained, and he was so desperate for food, he even tried the pig slop (v. 13-16).

Finally, he hit rock bottom. He couldn’t do it anymore. His hard heart melted, and he knew his only way to stay alive—to truly live—was to go back home. As he walked the long road back, he rehearsed his apology speech over and over aloud. He knew he’d have to explain himself; he’d have to get his story just right (v. 17-20).

That’s when he saw something totally unexpected: His father, dressed up in his work clothes, running toward him and waving his arms frantically. Before the son could get out a word of apology, his father tackled him, hugging him and sobbing uncontrollably (v. 20).

“Dad, I’m sorry...” the son began. But the father only shouted back to the family, “My son is home! My son is alive and he’s home! Stop everything. Let’s celebrate!” (v. 21-24).

THE FATHER’S LOVE

For many years, I thought this was a parable about the prodigal son—and it’s about him to a degree. But it’s really a story about the father. Think about it: Jesus wasn’t telling his followers that they needed to turn from their lives of sin. If the son had been accepted back as a servant, a common laborer, as the son had hoped (v. 19), that would have made sense as a story about the son’s change of heart. But the parable is not about getting it right and pulling it together. It’s not about finding the right words to use or the right attitude to have.



THE PARABLE IS ABOUT THE LOVE OF THE FATHER.

“You’re not my servant... You are my son!” the father responds (v. 24). Why would Jesus tell this story? What does he want his followers to think about God?

Jesus wants his followers—even you and me—to approach him just as we are, without getting our stories straight and cleaning the pig slop off our faces. He wants us to come home and receive his love. He’s not looking for servants; he owns the cattle on a thousand hills (Psalm 50:10).

No, he’s looking for his beloved children to come home. ■

“THE SON SAID TO HIM, ‘FATHER, I HAVE SINNED AGAINST HEAVEN AND AGAINST YOU. I AM NO LONGER WORTHY TO BE CALLED YOUR SON.’

“BUT THE FATHER SAID TO HIS SERVANTS, ‘QUICK! BRING THE BEST ROBE AND PUT IT ON HIM. PUT A RING ON HIS FINGER AND SANDALS ON HIS FEET. BRING THE FATTENED CALF AND KILL IT. LET’S HAVE A FEAST AND CELEBRATE.

FOR THIS SON OF MINE WAS DEAD AND IS ALIVE AGAIN; HE WAS LOST AND IS FOUND.’”

- LUKE 15:21-24

Questions for Reflection

WHAT IS THE MAIN MEANING OF THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON? WHY DO YOU THINK JESUS TOLD THIS PARABLE?

HOW DO YOU SEE JESUS DEMONSTRATE GOD AS THE ULTIMATE FATHER IN THIS PARABLE IN THE FOLLOWING WAYS:

GOD IS PRESENT, AND MAKES HIS PRESENCE FELT.

GOD AFFIRMS, ACCEPTS, AND LOVES YOU.

IF YOU THINK ABOUT GOD SIMPLY FROM THIS PASSAGE ALONE, WHAT ARE THE FIRST WORDS, THOUGHTS, PHRASES, OR IMAGES THAT COME TO MIND?

IN WHAT WAYS DO YOU IDENTIFY WITH THE PRODIGAL SON? EVEN IF YOU HAVEN'T LIVED AN EXTRAVAGANT, OUTWARDLY BROKEN LIFE, HOW HAVE YOU RECOGNIZED THE FATHER'S ACCEPTANCE OF AND AFFECTION FOR YOU, DESPITE YOUR SIN?

If you find it hard to identify with the prodigal son, read the rest of the story—Luke 15:25-31.

WHAT IS DIFFERENT ABOUT THE OLDER BROTHER? HAVE YOU EVER FOUND IT HARD TO FORGIVE SOMEONE WHO HAS SQUANDERED SO MUCH OF THEIR LIFE? HOW DOES THE FATHER IN THE PARABLE DEMONSTRATE LOVE AND PATIENCE TO HIM AS WELL?

Day 5

OUR FATHER IN HEAVEN

How do we reorient our lives around our heavenly Father? One way we refocus ourselves on the true God is by discovering how Jesus presents him to us through his teaching.

One day, Jesus and his disciples were being followed by a large crowd, so they went up on a mountainside (Matthew 5:1-2).

Just as Moses had ascended a mountain to receive God's Word—the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20)—so a new and better prophet was on the mountainside, giving a new and deeper Law.

“You have heard it said...” Jesus would often begin, but then—capturing the attention of his Jewish hearers—he would surprise them. “But I say to you...” he would continue (for example, Matthew 5:21).

Jesus wasn't giving a new Law, but he was

personalizing it (Matthew 5:17-21). He was saying, in effect, “You thought you were good enough to keep this law... But your hearts aren't in the right place.”

Throughout his teaching, Jesus was turning the world upside down: “Blessed are the poor in spirit... those who mourn... the meek... who hunger and thirst for righteousness...” (Matthew 5:2-6). The world values strength and independence; Jesus values weakness and dependence. The world values ambition and achievement; Jesus values the pursuit of humility and goodness.



But when he began to teach on prayer, he didn't flip us upside down. No, he taught us to, through prayer, turn our hearts right-side up.

APPROACHING THE FATHER

When you pray, Jesus told them, don't pray to impress others (Matthew 6:5-8). Instead, pray simply:

OUR FATHER IN HEAVEN...

Did you catch that? Jesus gives us permission to approach God directly—and as our Father! Having God as our Father means that we as his children, get regular, uninhibited access to him.

I remember seeing a picture of President Obama with his daughters when they were still young girls. They knew he had just become President, but to them, he was still just Dad. As his children, they had total access to him.

Imagine if you or I tried to get immediate access to the President. Unless you are a high-ranking government official, you most likely couldn't get an appointment. And if you didn't have an appointment, the Secret Service would certainly stop you if you got too close on your own. But the President's children don't need an official position in the Cabinet; they don't need an appointment; they don't even need a good reason to see him. They can simply walk right up to him, jump on his lap, distract him from his work, and enjoy his company. They are his children! Children have regular, complete, uninhibited access to their father.

How great it is to be a child of the Most High God! How wonderful to have regular, complete, uninhibited access to the most powerful, most patient, most loving Being in the cosmos. Simply put, we can approach him wherever we are, no matter what we've done, with no hint of fear. He is our Father.



When we realize who God is and how much he loves us, our whole lives can be reordered around his life-giving presence.

Remember the disciple John, one of Jesus' closest friends? This is how he puts it:

SEE WHAT GREAT LOVE THE FATHER HAS
LAVISHED ON US, THAT WE SHOULD BE
CALLED CHILDREN OF GOD. AND THAT IS
WHAT WE ARE!

- 1 JOHN 3:1

HOW DEEP THE FATHER'S LOVE FOR US

God has lavished his love on us by calling us his own sons and daughters. But John also tells us that God's love is most fully visible not in receiving us, but in how much he had to give to receive us back. Since every one of us has broken God's law and broken our relationship with God, the Father had to make a way for us to be restored—he had to give his own beloved Son up to death. John writes:

THIS IS HOW WE KNOW WHAT LOVE IS:
JESUS CHRIST LAID DOWN HIS LIFE FOR US.

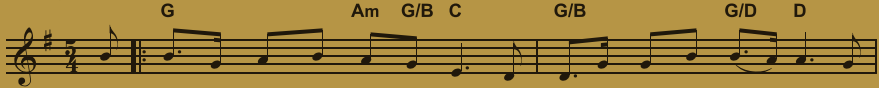
- 1 JOHN 3:16

Take a moment now to read and reflect on the lyrics from the hymn "How Deep the Father's Love for Us." ■

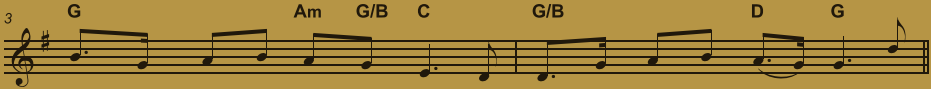
How Deep The Father's Love for Us

Words and Music by
Stuart Townend

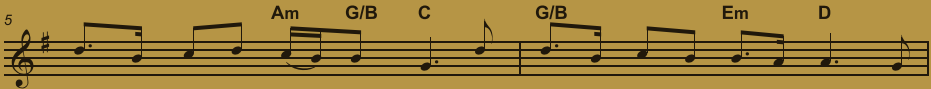
♩ = 54



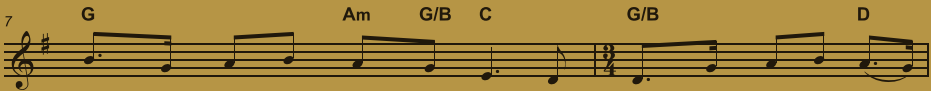
1 How deep the Fa - ther's love for us, how vast be - yond all meas - ure That
2 Be - hold the Man up - on a cross, my sin up - on His shoul - ders. A -
3 I will not boast in an - y - thing: no gifts, no pow'r, no wis - dom. But



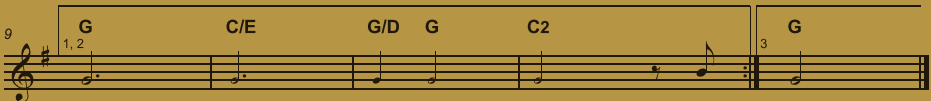
He should give His on - ly Son to make a wretch His treas - ure. How
shamed, I hear my mock - ing voice call out a - mong the scof - fers. It
I will boast in Je - sus Christ: His death and res - ur - rec - tion. Why



great the pain of sear - ing loss. The Fa - ther turns His face a - way As
was my sin that held Him there un - til it was ac - com - plished; His
should I gain from His re - ward? I can - not give an an - swer. But



wounds which mar the Cho - sen One bring man - y sons to glo -
dy - ing breath has brought me life. I know that it is fin -
this I know with all my heart: His wounds have paid my ran -



ry.
ished.

2 Be - som.
3 I

Questions for Reflection

WHY DO YOU THINK JOHN EMPHASIZED BECOMING CHILDREN OF GOD AN ASPECT OF OUR SALVATION?

HOW DOES JESUS STARTING THE FAMOUS LORD'S PRAYER WITH "OUR FATHER" CHANGE THE WAY YOU THINK ABOUT IT?

HOW DOES THE DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS DEMONSTRATE THE LOVE OF GOD?

REFLECT ON THE LYRICS OF THE HYMN ON P.45. HOW DOES LOOKING TO THE CROSS—JESUS' CRUCIFIXION, BURIAL, AND RESURRECTION—GIVE YOU INCREASED LOVE FOR GOD? HOW DOES JESUS' SACRIFICE FACTOR INTO YOUR DAILY LIFE?

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE FOR YOU TO EMBRACE GOD AS A GOOD, PRESENT, LOVING FATHER TODAY?

Day 6

ADOPTED BY GOD

This week, we've been learning a new pattern of spiritual renewal: recall, reorient, and reimagine. Once we have recalled our past, and after reorienting ourselves to the truths about God in Scripture, we can reimagine a better future with God.

By reimagining a different future, we trust Christ to bring all things under his lordship and to guide us in each new season of life.

For instance, we have already looked at the remarkable reality that we are sons and daughters of God through faith in Jesus (1 John 3:1). But how are we made children of God? Through adoption! By reimagining our own adoption, we discover much about who God is—and who we are as well.

For [God] chose us in [Christ] before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love, he predestined us for adoption

to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. (Ephesians 1:4–6)

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE ADOPTED?

Some close friends of mine are in the process of adopting a child. Their desire is to become parents through adoption, to offer a home and a family to a child that has neither. One day soon, they will have a child—most likely, a young boy or girl



from a broken home within their state—offered to them for adoption. They will be able to choose to adopt this child, and at that point, the boy or girl would legally become their own son or daughter.

Think about the spiritual analogies.

IN ADOPTION, AN ORPHAN IS GIVEN A FAMILY AND A HOME.

As we saw yesterday, Jesus invites us to approach God as Father—with regular, uninhibited access. But our adoption also gives us a family and a home. The Church becomes our brothers and sisters in Christ. Imagine being adopted in to a large family: Children all from different backgrounds, different languages, different worldviews, all of a sudden thrust into one house together.

That's the church. No wonder it's both amazing and wonderful, and exceedingly difficult. There will always be challenges of living in a family of different backgrounds, but we can all recognize that none of us were anything when God chose us, so we can relate to one another with humility and love.

IN ADOPTION, OUR STATUS AS SONS AND DAUGHTERS IS PERMANENT.

As a dad myself, there are times when my young children disobey my directions, talk back to me in anger, or—in the recent case of my three-year old—throw Legos at me. I don't like their behavior, but I don't stop loving them. They're being children, and this disobedience is an unfortunate stage of their development. I certainly don't stop being their dad.

In the passage above, Paul writes, “In love, he predestined us to sonship” (Eph. 1:5). Think about how marvelous this is! (Set aside any disagreements over predestination.) God chose us to



be his sons and daughters before we were born—knowing full well how much we would sin, how often we would rebel, and how much patience we would require. And he adopted us anyway. This is God’s way of saying: “I gave everything to get you: It took years of effort and a huge cost for us to get you. There’s no way we’re turning back now!”

IN ADOPTION, THERE IS A HIGH COST TO THE PARENTS AND NO COST TO THE CHILD.

We are heirs of Christ’s Kingdom. In adoption, we become legal, official sons and daughters of God. It’s a permanent decision. Imagine being adopted into a very wealthy family: As a full member of the family, you receive a share from your parents’ riches, and you have those riches permanently. You didn’t earn them, you didn’t work for them; but they do legally belong to you through union. In the same way, everything that belongs to Christ now legally and permanently gets credited to your account.

Adoption comes at an enormous cost to the parents. What does this adoption cost the child? Nothing — “in accordance with the grace freely given us in the One he loves... in accordance with the riches of God’s grace lavished on us” (Ephesians 1:6-8).

THE
AVERAGE
ADOPTION
IN THE U.S.
IS ABOUT
\$40,000.





It required the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. Adoption came at a grace cost to the Father.

In adoption, a parent chooses to welcome the child into their family not because of anything the child has done or proven, but simply out of love.

We were adopted by God for the same reason that any parent adopts—out of sheer love. We are adopted “in love” and “to the praise of his grace” (Ephesians 1:4-6). God is not just full of love; God is love. Love is just an expression of God being God.

In his great love, he plans adoption, pays the cost, becomes our Father, unites us to a whole family of brothers and sisters, offers us his immeasurable wealth, and gives us the assurance that nothing can separate us from him. ■



Once adopted,
you belong
to the Father
forever.



Questions for Reflection

WHICH ASPECT OF ADOPTION SEEMS MOST SIGNIFICANT TO YOU? WHICH SPIRITUAL PARALLEL SEEMS MOST POWERFUL?

HOW DOES ADOPTION CHANGE THE WAY YOU THINK ABOUT GOD AS YOUR FATHER?

IF YOU THINK ABOUT GOD SIMPLY BASED ON HIS ADOPTION OF YOU, WHAT ARE THE FIRST WORDS, THOUGHTS, PHRASES, OR IMAGES THAT COME TO MIND?

READ AND REFLECT ON EPHESIANS 1:4-6 AGAIN. WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PHRASE “IN LOVE...”? DO YOU HESITATE TO BELIEVE THAT GOD LOVES YOU?

IS THERE ANYONE IN YOUR LIFE WHO WOULD BE BLESSED AND ENCOURAGED TO KNOW THAT GOD IS THEIR FATHER, THAT THEY HAVE A NEW SPIRITUAL FAMILY, AND THAT THEY ARE DEEPLY LOVED IN CHRIST? REACH OUT TO THEM TODAY!

Day 7

CALL TO ACTION

On the seventh day of each week, we're going to pause to review and reflect on the past week, and then we'll move forward with a Call to Action (see Introduction).

If you are behind a day or two, use this day to catch up. If you are caught up, use this day to review the previous six days' notes—especially all the Scripture references and stories.

Based on your week's reading and reflection, answer the following questions..

Recall

WHAT WAS THE MOST SIGNIFICANT THING YOU LEARNED ABOUT GOD THIS WEEK?

WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED ABOUT YOURSELF THIS WEEK?

Reorient

WHAT WAS THE MOST SIGNIFICANT THING YOU LEARNED ABOUT THE CHRISTIAN LIFE THIS WEEK?



WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE TO REORIENT YOUR LIFE AROUND THE REALITY OF GOD AND HIS LOVE FOR YOU?



Reimagine

WHAT WOULD YOUR LIFE LOOK LIKE IF YOU FULLY BELIEVED EVERYTHING YOU READ ABOUT GOD'S FATHERLY LOVE FOR YOU THIS?



HOW MIGHT YOUR LIFE BE DIFFERENT AFTER A TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE WITH GOD? IF YOU HAVEN'T HAD A TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE, DESCRIBE WHAT MIGHT BE HOLDING YOU BACK.



Call to Action

In the space provided or in your own notebook, write a letter to your father. You don't necessarily need to send the letter, so be as honest as possible.

HOW ARE YOU THANKFUL FOR HIM? WHERE DID HE FAIL YOU OR HURT YOU? WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE TO FORGIVE HIM?



I Can Only Imagine

CONSIDER READING OR SINGING ALONG TO THE LYRICS OF "I CAN ONLY IMAGINE" BY MERCYME.

Verse 1

I CAN ONLY IMAGINE
WHAT IT WILL BE LIKE
WHEN I WALK,
BY YOUR SIDE
I CAN ONLY IMAGINE
WHAT MY EYES WILL SEE
WHEN YOUR FACE
IS BEFORE ME
I CAN ONLY IMAGINE
I CAN ONLY IMAGINE

Verse 2

I CAN ONLY IMAGINE
WHEN THAT DAY COMES
WHEN I FIND MYSELF
STANDING IN THE SON
I CAN ONLY IMAGINE
WHEN ALL I WILL DO IS FOREVER
FOREVER WORSHIP YOU
I CAN ONLY IMAGINE
I CAN ONLY IMAGINE

Chorus

SURROUNDED BY YOUR GLORY,
WHAT WILL MY HEART FEEL?
WILL I DANCE FOR YOU JESUS
OR IN AWE OF YOU BE STILL?
WILL I STAND IN YOUR PRESENCE
OR TO MY KNEES WILL I FALL?
WILL I SING HALLELUJAH,
WILL I BE ABLE TO SPEAK AT ALL?
I CAN ONLY IMAGINE
I CAN ONLY IMAGINE
