

Word of God or Fairy Tale: can I trust the Bible? Christianity for Sceptics: Part 6

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 8 May 2005 (Mother's Day)

Last week we discussed *The Da Vinci Code*, Dan Brown's best-selling novel, and how in that book he makes the claim that Christianity is fundamentally anti-women. Another claim that he makes is that the Bible – the book that we hold in our hands today – is not the divinely inspired Word of God, but a collection of fairy tales compiled by a few men in the fifth century to serve their own political agenda. There's so much that could be said in response to that charge. We could talk about the remarkable internal unity within the Bible: sixty-six books written by perhaps forty different authors with diverse backgrounds over the space of 1,500 years and yet – incredibly – all telling one continuous story with one central message. You could talk about the documentary evidence: the unprecedented number of manuscripts that can be dated so closely to the original writings that there is no question that the Bible we hold in our hands today accurately records the life and message of Jesus. We could talk about the hundreds of archaeological discoveries that have confirmed the historical accuracy of the Bible. Then there is the issue of prophecy: the Bible is the only book in the world that records precise and specific predictions made hundreds of years in advance that have been literally fulfilled. You could talk about the Bible's transforming power: from the beginning it has served to give people hope, purpose, wisdom. There's so much evidence I could present this morning to suggest that the Bible is the inspired Word of God. But most of the data would be reasonably technical. And most of you would probably get up and leave. So listen: For those of you who would like to dig into some of the more technical evidence for the Bible's authenticity: there's material this morning in the foyer for you to take home and read.) But I think – fortunately – the best approach that we could probably take this morning – on Mother's Day – is to simply look at the picture of God recorded in these pages and see whether or not it rings true.

If you were to flick through all the images that the Bible uses to describe God and his relationship with us what would be the most commonly used image? That of a parent. "How great is the 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). The emphasis tends to be on God as a father. But there are several passages that encourage us to think of God as a mother too: Through the prophet Isaiah, for example, God said to his people: "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!" (Is 49.15)

Now the problem is that some people really struggle seeing God as a father or a mother. The memories they have of their father or mother were anything but positive. This year, for example, in New Zealand over 8,000 children will seek safety in a refuge from one of their parents. If God says that he is a parent to us, what exactly does that mean? What sort of parent is he? How are we to understand him? Let's briefly flick through the album of images we find in the Bible.

Tenderly affectionate

First of all, if God is a parent – a perfect parent – it means that he is tenderly affectionate towards us.

One of my favourite verses in the Bible comes from an obscure little book, Zephaniah, written at a time when Judah, God's people – God's children – had run away from home, rejecting him. Through the prophet, Zephaniah, God warns his children that he is going to have to punish them. But he also says this: "The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing" (Zeph 3:17). The image is of a mum or a dad scooping up a crying son, caressing him to sleep in his arms, marvelling at the beauty and intricacy of his little face, singing to him a love song. I can't tell you the number of impromptu love songs I've composed and sung to our daughters as I've carried them around a dark house in the middle of the night. When Emma was born this was my favourite: "Emma, Emma, you're the one;/you are sweeter than a sticky bun./We are going to stick to you/like chewing gum on the bottom of your shoe." I know it's not going to top the charts, or get airtime on *Classic Hits* "Love Songs 'til Midnight," but I'm going to keep singing it. I can't help but sing it. I actually think Emma and Sophie are the sweetest, most beautiful little girls in the world.

That's the sort of tender affection that God has for us. Floyd McClung writes this: "It was actually God who heard you speak your first real word. The hours you spent alone exploring new textures with baby hands were a delight to your heavenly Father. Some of his greatest treasures are the memories of your childhood laughter. There has never been another child like you, and there never will be." You may have never heard your human mother or father say, "I love you." But if you listen, God is saying it, singing it. You are the one – the centre of his affection.

Constantly available

Flick through the pages of the Bible, and you come to another attribute of God that even the best parent can't hope to imitate: God is constantly available. King David wrote, "I can never escape from your Spirit. I can never get away from your presence. If I go up to heaven you are there ... If I dwell by the farthest ocean, even there your hand will guide me and your strength will support me" (Psalm 139:7-10). Generally, we can't focus on more than one thing at a time (at least men can't!). None of us can give anyone our attention for 24 hours a day. We're finite beings. But God isn't bound by our limitations. He's infinite. He's everywhere – always with us, always looking at us. He's even numbered all the hairs on our heads (Matthew 10:30) – easier in some cases than others.

John Cooney from *Grapevine Magazine* recalls how one day his little grandson said to him, "Granddad, how long is one day?" Cooney replied, "It's 24 hours. Why do you ask?" The little fellow answered, "You keep saying that 'one day' you'll help me build a tree house." Some children never have a mum or dad because of death or divorce. But lots of other children are orphaned because of their parents' career or priorities. Mum or dad just doesn't have time for them. God does. He was there when you took your first step as a child, celebrating your every achievement. He was there when you stumbled and fell, through the worst hurts and disappointments of your life. He'll always be there when we need him, to hold us and guide us. We just have to call out.

Appropriately firm

Tenderly affectionate. Constantly available. The next image is this: God is appropriately firm. Imagine this scene: The door bursts open in the middle of the night and a small boy is slapped awake and beaten mercilessly by a drunk and angry man. A man he calls daddy. *Once Were*

Warriors is played over again and again in thousands of New Zealand homes. No wonder some people cower and recoil from a God who is meant to be a father, or a mother. But listen to this: "Our earthly fathers – and mothers – disciplined us for a few years, doing the best they knew how. But God's discipline is always right and good for us because it means we will share in his holiness" (Hebrews 12:10). As a perfect parent God only ever disciplines us for our good, to bring our faith, our love, our lives to maturity.

Sometimes his discipline can take the form of his apparent absence (Isa 64:7). In the midst of pain or depression or busyness, any sense of his presence fades. And our doubts and darkness intensify. But listen to what the devil, Screwtape, says in C.S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*: "It is during such trough periods, much more than during the peak periods, that [they are] growing into the creature[s] [God] wants [them] to be. Hence the prayers offered in the state of dryness are those that please Him best ... He wants them to learn to walk and must therefore take away His hand; and if only the will to walk is really there He is pleased even with their stumbles. Do not be deceived ... Our cause [the devil's cause] is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do [God's] will, looks round a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys."

Unconditionally loving

This brings me to perhaps the greatest attribute of all. As a perfect parent, God is unconditionally loving. Think about it: "In nearly every human relationship we earn our way. Employers judge us by our skills and intelligence. Banks ... treat us according to our credit-worthiness. Even friends choose us based on our common interests. In a family, though, only one thing matters: birth. Try to imagine parents who would trade in their son when his IQ tests at only 90, or who disown their daughter after she fails to make the school soccer team. Although the rest of the world may operate like that, families do not. In a healthy family, love comes without conditions. The son with a birth defect or the Down's syndrome daughter merits the same love and affection as the star athlete and potential Rhodes' Scholar" (Philip Yancey).

God, the perfect parent, loves like that: unconditionally. You catch a glimpse of it in the story of the prodigal son. An ungrateful and rebellious son runs away from home, rejecting, shaming, and wounding his father. But it never crosses the old man's mind to give up on his son. Instead he's out there watching the road every day, hoping for his son's return. And at last, one day, when he does see his son stumbling up the road, he runs to him, embraces him, forgives him, restores him and throws a party to celebrate his return into the family. No matter who we are, what we've done, or where we've been, God loves and forgives us and wants us home. In fact, the Bible says "God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners" (Romans 5:8). While we were still a long way from home.

Fabulously wealthy

I guess this brings us to the final page in the family album, one more attribute. It's often forgotten. God is fabulously wealthy. You occasionally hear stories about some ordinary guy who, having done nothing himself to earn it, ends up inheriting an extraordinary family fortune when a wealthy parent dies. The Bible stresses that, as children of God, because Jesus died for us, we get to inherit an unbelievable fortune:

- We will be with God forever (1 Thessalonians 5:10, 4:17)

- We will receive rewards for our faithfulness (Mark 9:41, 10:30)
- We will be freed from all pain, death and suffering (Revelation 21:4).
- We will be completely changed to be like Jesus (John 13:35)
- We will share in Christ's glory (Romans 8:17)

We can live our entire life looking forward to that financial windfall or the next summer holidays or a leisurely retirement, but that would be tragically short-sighted. As God's children, we stand to inherit life beyond our wildest dreams. Let's live in the light of that hope.

But how? If this picture of God presented in the Bible rings true, how do we respond? Paul says, "Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us" (Ephesians 5:1). I kind of hope that my little daughter Sophie grows up to imitate and resemble her mum and dad (or at least her mum!) If she is half as loving as her mother, I'll be one happy old man. As God's children, born again, with his Spirit, his DNA, we are destined to one day be just like him. Until then, he wants us to grow up to increasingly reflect his loving nature by giving ourselves away to others. Maybe today, for some of us, that means forgiving our human fathers and mothers for the mistakes they made in raising us. Maybe that means reaching out in love and grace to someone else in our family – our natural family, our spiritual family, or someone without a family.

But the most important step we can ever take is to reach out to Jesus and become a member of God's family. All of this is empty theory unless we've asked God to be to us a father, a mother. He wants to be. He wants to hold you in his arms, to care for your every need, to carry you through this life and into the next. But he gives you the freedom to choose. You can keep going it alone. Or you can come home. He's waiting. Let God lift you up into his arms and be to you the perfect parent you never had. What better day to do that than Mothers' Day?

Questions

1. What were your parents like? What are your fondest memories of them? How are you grateful to them?
2. Tenderly affectionate, constantly available, appropriately firm, unconditionally loving, and fabulously wealthy. Reflect on each of those five qualities. How have you experienced those in God?
3. Are there any other qualities suggested by the image of God as a parent?
4. Read Hosea 11:1-11. What image does it present of God: mother or father?
5. Read Deuteronomy 21:18-21. In Old Testament times parents could sue their children if they were rebellious. Can you see the connection with the passage from Hosea?
6. In Hosea 11:1-7, what is the charge that God brings against his children? How are we guilty of the same sins today?
7. Look again at Hosea 11:5-7. Compare it with Deuteronomy 28:68. What is the sentence or penalty imposed on Israel for their sin? How can you reconcile that expression of wrath with a loving God?
8. Read the promise given in Hosea 11:8-11. How was it fulfilled? (See Matthew 2:14-15.)
9. What can you do for your mum or dad, children or grandchildren, to imitate God's gracious love this week?

