



LIKE  
FATHER  
LIKE  
SON

— HOW KNOWING —  
GOD AS FATHER CHANGES MEN

PETE ALWINSON

"Every once in a while a book comes along that is life-changing. *Like Father, Like Son* is that kind of book and it's that in spades. Pete Alwinson has given us a gift of profound biblical insight and he's done it with clarity, humor, and freshness. If you're a man, you'll 'rise up' and call Pete blessed. If you're a woman, you will too . . . because you'll understand about men and also about your heavenly Father. Give this book to everybody you know. They will thank you."

**Steve Brown**, Key Life radio broadcaster; professor (emeritus), Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

"If ever a book deserved to become a bestseller it's the uplifting, winsome, and tightly written *Like Father, Like Son*. An ineffable feeling that I'm going to be okay swept over me as I read this book. I hope you will experience it too. You'll never read anyone who has a better grasp of the gospel of God's grace than Pete Alwinson. The result? He doesn't write to beat you up, but set you free."

**Patrick Morley**, Author; Bible teacher; founder, Man in the Mirror

"Imagine this. The God who created all things, visible and invisible, becomes the spiritual Father of everyone who believes in Jesus. Nothing is more reassuring and invigorating than experiencing how this is true. Pete Alwinson speaks from this experience. He knows God as his Father and he has charted a course for others to follow as they seek to live in the love of the Father as well. You want to read this book."

**Richard L. Pratt, Jr.**, President, Third Millennium Ministries

"We guys struggle with what gnaws at us on the inside, what creates that edge, that fear of not measuring up. This book answers that question and shows us the answer to being who we were meant to be. Pete's book is crucial to our journey to be men. He illuminates our identity, our value, and our freedom by calling us into grace—a real relationship with our perfect Father."

**Jeff Kemp**, Former NFL QB; VP at FamilyLife; author of *Facing the Blitz*

“Pete Alwinson is onto something huge. The disquiet, the uncertainty, the insecurity that all men feel can be traced to an emptiness that only the Father can fill. In the pages of this book, we meet the Father again.”

**Nate Larkin**, Founder of the Samson Society; author of *Samson and the Pirate Monks: Calling Men to Authentic Brotherhood*

“Although some fathers are distant or abusive, my father was not. He loved me and I knew it because he said it and he showed it. As a result I wanted to honor my father and not disappoint him, even though I knew whatever I did would never change his love for me. It was natural, therefore, for me to relate to my Heavenly Father the same way. God loves me eternally in Christ and I know that. As a result of his amazing grace, I desire to honor and obey him. Read this book to understand more about the motivating and freeing love of a good father, whether an earthly father or your Heavenly Father.”

**Robert C. (Ric) Cannada, Jr.**, Chancellor Emeritus,  
Reformed Theological Seminary

“Most men remember their fathers with a mixture of both fondness and disappointment. We could use help in constructing a healthy way to deal with both our past and our future, not just for ourselves but to better love those in our lives now. Dr. Alwinson gives us the spiritual and emotional empowerment to love others the way our heavenly Father has loved us.”

**Joel C. Hunter**, Senior Pastor, Northland, A Church  
Distributed

“Pete knows what makes a man a man; first because he’s a man who is tough and tender. He also has wisdom from working with men, but most importantly he directs us to the True Man, Jesus Christ. This book is a compelling and healing message of the power of the Father in making men that we will recommend to all our clients and partners.”

**Tom Wood**, President, CMM, Inc.; coauthor of  
*Gospel Coach*

“This is the book I wish I had written on fatherhood. No guilt, lots of encouragement, and appropriate challenges.”

**Larry Kreider**, Founder, Gathering of Men, US; author

“In the high-stakes, high-performance, success-driven system that is American culture today, it seems that most men have one feeling in common: they don’t measure up. The insecurities of men run deep because their identity is almost wholly performance based. For that reason, I believe *Like Father, Like Son* is a refreshing reminder men are desperate to hear. Pete Alwinson does a masterful job of connecting a man’s identity to the fundamental nature of our heavenly Father, bathing the reader in the healing balm of God’s grace. When a man reads this book, I think he will see himself with new, Christ-like eyes, he will hold his head up a little taller, and he will be more equipped to love and serve because he will be doing so out of a cup that is now full—the cup of God’s gracious love.”

**David D. Swanson**,

Senior Pastor, First Presbyterian Church of Orlando;  
author of *Everlasting Life: How God Answers Our Questions about Grief, Loss, and the Promise of Heaven*

“Pete Alwinson is onto something! The father wound runs deep in men leaving them ill-equipped for parenting, and their children are languishing for lack of father affirmation and engagement. As men are re-parented, however, by the Father love of God, old wounds are healed and grace is received to give their children. *Like Father, Like Son* is the right prescription for healing our culture’s deepest wounds and unleashing dads to give the father love their kids crave.”

**Ray Cortese**, Pastor, Seven Rivers Presbyterian Church

“In father and son relationships, there is always the good, the bad, and the ugly. What I so appreciate about *Like Father, Like Son* is the redemptive message without regard to one’s earthly father or circumstances. Here’s a formative and transformative book for men to live into authentic victory and to be on-purpose.”

**Kevin W. McCarthy**, Author, *The On-Purpose Person*

“If you’re a man—read this book. If you’re a son—read this book. If you have a son and you want him to be a man—read this book. Pete has captured the essence of real manhood and how it flows from a man’s relationship with his heavenly Father.”

**Bill Perkins**, Best-selling author; speaker;  
founder, Million Mighty Men

“Like a good father, Pete gives men permission to examine their sorrows, to understand why guys are the way we are, and to emerge from our isolation, strong and true, into the community of light and life.”

**Wes Yoder**, Author of *Bond of Brothers*

“I’ve become exhausted by the many how-to books on being a man or fathering. Pete’s new book, *Like Father, Like Son*, is a refreshing challenge to parent BY GRACE and swim in adventurous freedom. Such gospel-centric parenting is not only energizing for dads, but also able to captivate the hearts of young men. Pete’s creative ideas and engaging stories are tried and proven. I should know. Pete’s adult son, Jon, is an active, vibrant husband and leader in the church I help lead.”

**Alan Scott**, Lead Pastor, Cumberland Community  
Church, Atlanta, Georgia

“In Psalms 32:8, the LORD says, ‘I will guide you along the best pathway for your life. I will advise you and watch over you.’ In this book, *Like Father, Like Son*, Pete Alwinson has written how the fatherhood of God plays this out in the context of a man’s life. The relationship that God desires with each of us is the same as God desires for each man to have with his son or daughter. This is an encouraging book for every man of God and his desire to make a difference in the lives of his sons and daughters.”

**Darrel Billups**, Executive Director,  
National Coalition of Ministries to Men

“What is a ‘real man’? With definitions hurled at us through every medium, where should we turn? Culturally, the idea of ‘father’ and ‘son’ have many connotations, which have a profound impact on how a man relates to God. Why then have men been burdened with behavior modification, generalized rules of what constitutes a ‘real man’? *Like Father, Like Son* replaces the checklists with God’s grace. By exploring men’s biblical identity as sons of the Father, Pete Alwinson unpacks the greatest news proclaimed, the gospel. And the gospel changes everything about what it means to be a ‘real man!’”

**Bobby Raulerson**, Grace Church  
Pastor, Oviedo Campus, Florida

“*Like Father, Like Son* is different from any book I have read in my own journey to become a better man and follower of Christ. It starts at the foundation of understanding the depths of God’s love for man. It’s not a self-help manual or quickstep guide; it truly begins to transform your heart into a new way of living under the grace and love of God.”

**Mitch Todd**, Senior Pastor – River Run Church

“For a father or son, Pete Alwinson encourages us to first know our heavenly Father, so our earthly father-son relationship will thrive. What a guide he has provided for dads to be godly fathers. And driving home the point that it is never, never too late to connect with God or our son(s).”

**Jay Crouse**, Founder, Men and the Church



LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON





# LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON

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How Knowing God as Father  
Changes Men

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Pete Alwinson



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# To Those Who Have Shaped Me by Grace . . .

The Father who, because of Jesus and by his Spirit, said he would never leave me nor forsake me, and has always been true to his word.

My wife Caron, whose love, faithfulness, and wisdom for me, our family, church, and friends are a warm and constant reminder of undeserved favor.

Our children Joel, Jon, and Jessie Alwinson, and our incredible daughters-in-law Aly and Sandra Alwinson, and granddaughters Maggie and Molly Alwinson, who fill me with joy and give me more love and support than I deserve.

Steve Brown, my beloved mentor for more than thirty years (that long?!), who accepted me unconditionally as a young and raw pastor (and man). He modeled and poured grace into me sacrificially, and he was loyally unafraid to have my name associated with his. Never wanting to be a guru, Steve has taught me more about grace, the gospel, and God the Father than any other human being. I owe him more than I will ever know.

George Bingham and the staff at Key Life Network, Inc., who have encouraged my every step and who live radical grace with me every day.

The church family of Willow Creek Presbyterian Church, who welcomed the gospel of grace and taught me grace for more than twenty-five years.

Pat Morley, Brett Clemmer, David Delk, and the team at Man in the Mirror, who understand and serve men more any other team I know.

The guys at Key Life Men who “get it” that grace builds men and drink it in gladly each week, impacting their families, community, and churches in powerful ways.

And thank you to Barbara Miller Juliani, an incredibly intelligent, experienced, wise, kind, and encouraging editor who made a first-time author’s words worth reading, along with all the tremendous staff at New Growth Press!

# Introduction

“Tell me about your relationship with your father.” I’ve said this to countless men over the years because I’ve found it cuts to the heart of a man’s identity. The response usually tells me it is a tough subject. Many guys will pause, look down, and struggle to describe a subject that they probably wished I hadn’t brought up. Then I often hear some variation of, “It’s complicated. It’s a long story.”

Yes, it is. For many men the very word “father” or “dad” can elicit a wide range of emotions: fear, rejection, loss, guilt, anger/rage, anxiety, and ambivalence. Sometimes they just shake their heads as if to say, “I don’t get him. I have more questions than answers about him and about our relationship.”

Guys who have a great earthly father have no problem with the dad question and usually fire back something like, “My dad was always there for me. He came to my games. We did stuff together. I knew he loved me.” Those men often have a confidence, security, and strength that other guys pick up on, but cannot quite decipher. *What*



*is it about that guy that is different?* we wonder. Often the most pronounced difference in these men is the positive influence their fathers played in their lives.

Fathers play a key role in the formation of all their children, but there is something unique about the way this plays out with their sons. A boy learns (or doesn't learn) to be a man primarily from the most significant man in his life. If that man—his father or father-figure—is absent, abusive, or disengaged, that will shape the kind of man a boy becomes, whether by molding himself in that image or by battling against it.

This is not to say that mothers are not key influences on their children as well. But too often moms are expected to raise children on their own—without help from the men who fathered those children. The result is children left adrift—especially boys, who are trying to find their way in an increasingly complicated world without a man to guide them.

My deep conviction is that as the men go, so goes the culture. A culture stands or falls on the quality of its men. The same holds for the church: as the men of the church go, so goes the church. A man's role is so crucial in all spheres of life that from the first man Adam to today, their actions—both good and bad—have profoundly shaped the course of history. And fathers play a central role in shaping boys into men who know how to use their strengths, talents, and gifts to love well, care for those who are weaker, and become faithful husbands and fathers.

Perhaps that rings true for you—you do feel adrift without the love and guidance of a father. The good news is that when a man becomes a Christ-follower, he gains a father—and not just any father, *the* Father. Even men who've experienced a wonderful earthly dad need a relationship with their heavenly Father for the simple reason that all dads are finite, imperfect, and temporary. God the Father makes all the difference in a man's life and in the lives of all around him. Why? Because like Father, like son.

God the Father builds sons who come to grips with their core identity as *his sons* and develops his character in them to thrive in their various roles in life. When men thrive and flourish, they become the sons, husbands, fathers, brothers, and friends that encourage others to grow and flourish. Our world desperately needs more men like that.

I hope you'll join me in the adventure that follows in this book as we see how God as Father creates, nurtures, provides, protects, bestows identity, sets free, leads the way in adventure, guides, provides wisdom, and gives daily grace to his sons. It all starts with knowing the love of your heavenly Father. That's what makes all the difference. Like Father, like son.

Like most adventures, you will want to gather some companions for your journey. Please consider going through this book with a small group of fellow adventurers—guys who also want to spend time thinking through what it means to know their heavenly Father's unfailing

love and learn to live out of that love. I've included questions at the end of each chapter that can be used to go deeper into the truths presented in that chapter.

A note to women: If you are reading this book, please don't take the focus on men as sons to mean that women are not also dearly loved daughters of the living God. Although I am choosing to focus on men and their relationship with their heavenly Father, all that I say about identity equally applies to women. This book is simply focused on how the fatherhood of God plays out in the context of a man's life. I hope it encourages you and the men in your life!

# 1

## The Irreplaceable Father

“I believe in God the Father, Almighty,  
Maker of Heaven and Earth.”

*Apostles' Creed*

“I find my father everywhere—in the mirror, of course, in the cupid’s bow of my four-year-old son’s lips, in the tugging of my heart toward rage even as my hair goes white, and in the hate and hurt whetted in my family’s soul. I find my father because I want to find him, because I grew up without him, starving for him, because I’m still greedy to redeem our love.”<sup>1</sup>

*Scott Raab*

Ask any man about the importance of his father to him and you will get a story—some positive and some more negative—that confirms his father’s significance in his life. Talk to some guys in prison, as I have, and you will get specifics from men who trace their life’s missteps to being unfathered, underfathered, or rejecting their father’s counsel. On the opposite track are the stories from guys who have had a great earthly father train them and point their way into manhood. When you think about

the role of a father in the life of his children, there's an inherent logic to the reality that dads are critical. *Of course, we think, the most dominant man in the home, maybe the only other man in the home, is going to significantly impact the young boys in the home. That just makes sense.*

Men hunger for a great relationship with their fathers. The lack of that relationship marks their lives and affects all their other relationships. And, sadly, many men today are trying to make their way through life without the help, guidance, and love of their father. Too many men are marked by what some have called the "father wound,"<sup>2</sup> and stronger still, "the absent-father neurosis."<sup>3</sup>

How does it affect a boy when his father is absent, abusive, uninvolved, or just plain uncaring? Here is a sample from what many men have shared with me about the impact a difficult relationship with their dad had on their life:

"When I became a teenager, my father's relationship with me became very difficult and essentially came to an unofficial, functional close. It was as if he could no longer relate to me. It seemed that there was a sudden disconnect, like he could not understand me. By ninth grade, I was empty and distant. I couldn't cry. It was that year that I started cutting and made plans for suicide."

"If I am perfect, then my dad won't criticize me."

“It was during my late elementary and middle school years that I began to understand that my father was an alcoholic. The end result was fatherless teenage years, and really a mostly fatherless adulthood. I grew more and more distant from my dad simply because he was unable to relate to me at any level.”

“My father died, so the only father figure I had was my father-in-law. He often said that I wasn’t really a man because I was not a millionaire.”

“I remember running after my dad when he was pulling out of the driveway—trying to catch him so I could spend time with him. He just kept driving. I knew that I was an inconvenience to him.”

“From the very beginning my ‘dad’ (an uncle who was taking care of my brothers and me) sexually abused all three of us. We would do devotions in the morning, and he would abuse us at night.”

Sadly, those are just a few of the unsettling things men have shared with me about their fathers. As a pastor who is committed to developing men, the importance of the father in a boy’s life has been affirmed again and again in talking with men from all kinds of backgrounds, but amazingly the role of fathers is a relatively *new* area of psychological and sociological study.

Clinical psychologist Ditta Olikier points to family structural changes at the beginning of the twentieth century that resulted in the sidelining of fatherly influence in children's lives and the redefinition of a man's worth.<sup>4</sup> Increasingly, a man was defined by how well he provided for his family. As the field of psychology developed, research on the healthy development of children focused on the moms, who were the primary caregivers. Dads, if mentioned in the studies at all, were in the category of "other influences." But for the past thirty to forty years, more and more studies have been conducted that show the critical importance of fathers. As one researcher put it, "Fathers are far more than just 'second adults' in the home. Involved fathers bring positive benefits to their children that no other person is as likely to bring."<sup>5</sup>

Although the social sciences might be just catching on to the importance of fathers, in the Bible God always affirmed the key and central leadership role that a father has in his family. God gave Adam, the first human father, the lead in naming the animals and caring for creation (Genesis 2:15–20). God called Adam and Eve to partner in the job of being fruitful and multiplying (Genesis 2:23–24). Dads and moms are not supposed to go it alone. God designed families to function with a dad and mom working together with the mutual love and respect that forms the foundation for a healthy family. And in the context of mutual love, God calls fathers to be the spiritual leader in their home (Ephesians 5:22–6:4).

## The Difference Your Heavenly Father Makes

So fathers are important! Of course you probably already know that and you might be wondering *what now?* If you didn't have a good relationship with your earthly father (and no father-son relationship is perfect), are you doomed to figure life out on your own or, even worse, repeat the same mistakes you saw in your father?

Well, here's the good news—you have a perfect heavenly Father! It makes all the difference in the world when you realize that God is *your* father, the most important father in *your* life. God *the* Father and God *as* Father is the truly irreplaceable Father. When we start relating to God as Father, it's absolutely amazing how it transforms us and changes our lives for the better. That's the bottom-line thesis of this book.

I'm not saying that you should minimize the impact your earthly father has made in your life. I believe that a man has to come to terms with the reality of what it was like being his father's son, and how their relationship has shaped, guided, and possibly wounded him as a man. Like many men, I've had to grieve a distant, abusive, and uninvolved father. As a young man, I was adrift—trying to figure out what it meant to be a man on my own. What has made all the difference in the world to me is knowing that God is my irreplaceable heavenly Father.

Even though I couldn't fix my relationship with my dad, God the Father stepped in. When I became a Christ follower, I found that I was no longer a nameless street



boy abandoned by his preoccupied, demanding, and unhappy father. I was an individually valued son—known and specially loved before the foundation of the world by the only One of ultimate status (Romans 8:28–29). My value to the Father was proven by Jesus’s rescue of me on the cross (John 6:37; 10:14–15). As I became convinced of God’s love for me despite what I really deserved, the Spirit of God drew me into a relationship with the Father that will never end (John 3:5–8).

I am still shocked that I’m not an interruption or an inconvenience to my heavenly Father. Growing up with a father who always seemed angry at me (Why? What did I do?), I was stunned to realize that my Father in heaven wasn’t angry at me. All his anger had already been poured out on Jesus. No longer was I alone in a hard world trying to figure everything out on my own (Hebrews 13:5). Now I had a completely available Father who wanted to and was determined to develop this rough boy into a man. Grief over the abandonment of my earthly father gave way to joy because of the Father’s never-ending attention and love. Because I have a Father through Jesus, I have power to live in this crazy world through all the stages of my life (Philippians 2:12–13). I’m changed and changing because I am loved forever by my Father in heaven.

## Created for Relationship

We were made for a close father-son relationship with God. Do you remember how things started between God and Adam? The all-powerful God spoke the world into existence, making something beautiful out of nothing at all. Finally, the pinnacle of his creation was Adam and Eve. He made his son Adam in his own image and literally breathed life into him. The two walked together in the garden every day. God spoke with Adam, explaining his purpose and responsibilities (Genesis 1:26–2:7).

In the creation account, God the Father gives his sons (and his daughters too) the identity that is foundational for a confident and bold life. Genesis 1 and 2 teaches us that we are not cosmic surprises, anomalies, or mistakes, but that we are the intentional creations of a personal God. Unlike the rest of creation, we are made in God's image, exhibiting intellect, emotions, and will, just like God. God made people in his image so he could have a unique and personal relationship with us.

A man's *core identity* is that he is a special creation of God, an image-bearer, and more relationally, a son of God. The word *son*, when spoken with warmth and dignity by a loving Father, strikes a deep chord of joy in a man, confirming his worth. You are a son of the living God because your Creator-Father made you in his image so he could have a close Father-son relationship with you.

## A Ruined Relationship

You probably already know that Adam's relationship as God's son was too quickly ruined. When Adam and Eve were tempted to distrust God's love for them and to believe the words "you will be like God," they turned away from God to go their own way and ushered in all of the brokenness we live with today. Instead of a close relationship with God and each other that would last forever, Adam and Eve were sent from the garden.

Away from God's presence, they would struggle in their relationship with each other. Adam's work became hard, and in the end death would come to both (Genesis 3:14–19). God created men to be his sons—to image him by using their strength to protect and care for all he made—yet in one short generation men's nature turns violent as one son kills another out of jealousy and rage (Genesis 4:1–8).

All of our difficulties with our earthly fathers and our struggle to know our identity and purpose are inherited from our first father, Adam. All men (and women, but we are focusing on men here) have followed in Adam's footsteps—going their own way instead of God's way and suffering the loss of their identity as sons of the living God. Your struggles with your earthly father, your struggles to know who you are as a man, your struggles in relationships, your fears, your anger—they are all inherited from Adam, your first father.

## Relationship Restored

Going your own way, what the Bible calls “sin,” has radically distorted our nature and made it impossible for us to experience the fatherhood of God. But even as God was telling Adam and Eve about the destruction their sin caused, he held out the hope of a savior. There would be a son who would crush Satan (Genesis 3:15). A man would arrive on the scene who would do what Adam failed to do. His name is Jesus, and he is the perfect son. He always did his Father’s will. He always loved his heavenly Father and the people around him. God calls him his “beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17).

This perfect son would set in motion the Father’s plan to restore relationship with his children. Jesus’s perfect life and willing death on the cross for the sins of his people destroyed death forever. The resurrection—God’s amen to Jesus’s work on the cross—has begun a whole new era. Jesus accomplished in his death, burial, and resurrection what we could never achieve: restoration of our relationship as sons with the Father. “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God” (Galatians 4:4–7).

Your adoption as sons is by grace, freely available to all who turn to Jesus and accept his sacrifice by faith. No performance on your part, no great success, no failure, no damning words from other people, can ever change who you are: a son. In Christ your identity as a son of the living God is restored. Your *core identity*—that which will never change throughout every phase and season of life—is that you are a special creation of God, an image-bearer, and a son of God.

Because of Jesus all that was twisted and broken in the fall is being restored and redeemed. Your relationship with your heavenly Father is restored when you go to Jesus and ask for forgiveness for your many sins. In him, your relationship with your heavenly Father is remade. In Christ, the Father's words to Jesus also become his blessing on your life, "You are my beloved son with whom I am well pleased."

## Your High Status and Worth

The creation account clearly displays that, as God's image-bearer, you have an incredibly high status. The story of redemption shows that you are a wanted son. Like Father, like son. There is a principle of life at work here: the higher status the father and family, the higher status his children. Since there is no one higher in status than God, his offspring bear high status and worth. A man gains his worth not by what he accomplishes or how he fails. His worth is directly tied to origins.

Did your own father give you the impression you were not wanted? When you don't believe your own father wanted you, it's easy to spend your life trying to prove to yourself and others that you are worthy. But you don't have to do that anymore. Jesus's death for us proves that we are loved and wanted sons. As you learn to live out of your identity as son, instead of repeating the mistakes of the past, you will learn to live a whole new life as a son of your perfect heavenly Father. When the Father gave us life in Christ, he restored our worth and status. Knowing who you are in Christ will change your life.

## **The Irreplaceable Father**

"I find my father everywhere . . ." The quote at the beginning of this chapter needs reinterpretation in light of the cross. While we must know our earthly father story and how it has affected us, as Christ-following men we are on a new adventure now: seeing our heavenly Father everywhere. Since the day we became Christians, the Father has been seeking to show us that our great or average or failed dads no longer ultimately define us.

Difficulties in your relationship with your earthly father are significant and have an impact. But in Christ, you have all that you need. You are accepted and loved by the one irreplaceable Father—your heavenly Father. The Sovereign Creator-Father of the universe completely defines you as his beloved son. As men made in the image of God and adopted as sons, we have been given

incomparable worth and high status. We are irreplaceable to our heavenly Father.

He who is irreplaceable counts us worthy to him, and involves himself in our lives every day. Believe in *this* Father. Make *this* Father your focus. Allow *this* Father's words of love, grace, and acceptance to run through your mind and heart. Doing so will change everything. It will make you into the man you want to be and were designed to be—the kind of man the world needs.

### Take It to Heart

1. Read again the quotes from men about their relationship with their fathers. Can you relate to any of them? How would you describe your relationship with your father?
2. What kind of man did you learn to be from your father? What kind of man do you not want to become from watching him?
3. Are you the man you desire to be? In what ways are you on track? In what ways would you like to develop (Philippians 2:12–13)?
4. How does living as God's son change how you view yourself and your life? What does it say about your successes? Your failures? Your relationships (Ephesians 5:22 –6:9)?
5. If you don't know God as your father, you can start a relationship with him right now by asking for

forgiveness in Jesus's name. What do John 3:16, Galatians 4:4–7, and 1 John 1:9–10 tell you about how to get to know your heavenly Father?

6. How can your walk with God be different starting now by viewing him as an engaged and loving Father?



## 2

# The Father Who Knows You *and Is Known*

“Because I know he is for me,  
because I know he cares, because I know he loves me,  
I can deal with almost anything. If God is in charge,  
it helps a whole lot to know he is for us.”<sup>1</sup>

*Steve Brown*

One assignment I always give my seminary students is to tell their life story by focusing on their experience with their fathers. I ask them to do this because what we know about our earthly fathers, what we piece together from the way they treat us, shapes who we are and what we become—after all, “like father, like son.” Some stories are heartrending. One young man shared with me that his biological father had never called him “son.” Here is the beginning of his story:

I was conceived in an adulterous affair. My mother was with her then-husband’s best friend, somewhere in Texas, and that is where it all began for me. When my mother told my

father that she was pregnant, he said, “I don’t want anything to do with it.”

How do you think it affected that young man to know that his own father called him, not son, but “it”? Don’t get me wrong, I like “its” and have some pretty cool ones. One birthday some guys from my church surprised me with the gift of a 1911 model .45 caliber pistol. Whenever I look at it, I think of them, and I’m glad. It’s one of my prize possessions. But it’s not a person—it’s an “it.”

If you are an “it,” your value is only as high as your current owner. When the owner changes, your value changes. “Its” are sold, traded, given, or thrown away. Things usually lose value over time. You put “its” on the curb for whoever wants them when you don’t need them anymore. If no one picks them up, they go to the landfill. People have useless “its” they throw away all the time, and apparently this man thought my student was one of them.

The good news for that student—and for all of us—is that we have a heavenly Father who doesn’t treat us as an “it.” He calls you his son. He knows you inside and out as his well-loved son and he wants you to know him as your dearly loved father. Knowing that you are loved and valued as a son by the most powerful person in the world changes everything for men. Here’s how the young man who entered life as an “it” got to know his heavenly Father:

Then came the nightmares. Not metaphorical nightmares but real, terrifying nightmares. Growing up with my stepfather had molded me into a person who wasn't scared of much of anything. When you get used to abuse and living underneath the cloud of threat, a certain hardness forms that takes no mustering of courage to exhibit fearlessness. But these nightmares went beyond childish night terrors. They drove me to my Bible. I read and read and read. The nightmares continued. Then one night my world changed.

It was in the evening, but still light out. I was falling asleep reading my Bible. I was in one of the Gospels. I don't remember the story; all I remember was drifting off to sleep, but then I snapped awake. It was pitch dark. I didn't have any drowsiness to shake off, there was no transition between sleep and waking. I was just awake, as if it were the middle of an ordinary day. Did I just hear something? My body was turned toward the wall, and my back was to the bedroom door. Then I did hear something, and there was no question what woke me up. I stiffened. For the third time I heard, "Steve." I could not turn over and look in the direction of the Voice. I did not want to, anyway. Instead I pulled the covers over my head, terrified. An eighteen-year-old who thought he was tough,

pulling cheap, worn-out sheets over his head in hopes of avoiding the Voice and all the implications that echoed behind it. I never said a word. I just waited for . . . something. I don't know if I was expecting to die, but I just lay there.

A wind passed over my ear through the street. It rippled the sheet and sounded, over my ear, like someone gently blowing into a microphone. Immediately all fear was gone. Not just was all fear gone, but a peace that passes understanding entered and remained. The nightmares left—never to return. My life was changed literally overnight.<sup>2</sup>

What had my friend heard? He heard the voice of his heavenly Father, the One who Jesus taught us to call Abba—literally “Daddy” (Mark 14:36; Galatians 4:6). Over time he learned about the love of his heavenly Father who sent his Son to die for his sins and give him a new life and a new Spirit. The voice of his heavenly Father led him to a transformed life with a wonderful wife and children of his own. You won't meet a more soft-spoken and kind man. Knowing his heavenly Father has changed everything for my friend. Instead of being chained to the past, my formerly broken friend is now a wounded healer. He has the deep peace, the shalom, that only a grace experiencer can know. The kind of peace that can only come when deep pain is met by overwhelming love, the total love of a perfect Father.

Far too many men have experienced the tragedy of being treated as an “it.” After thirty years as a pastor I think I’ve heard it all, but then someone tells me another story that rises to my top-ten list of a father’s inhumanity to his son. I also hear the stories of many men who had great dads who treated them as beloved sons. But whether you had a great father or one who treated you as an “it,” no earthly father can replace a man’s need for a growing relationship with his heavenly Father.

Human dads are limited and finite. They can give love, but they cannot give infinite love. They can give wisdom, but they cannot give infinite wisdom. Dads can give temporal help, but they cannot give eternal salvation. Dads can open up their lives and hearts to their sons, but they can’t change their children’s heart. The love of a father can help his son, but cannot transform his son. For that kind of change you must experience *the* Father.

As you grow to know your heavenly Father, you will also grow to know yourself. And that will change you from the inside out into someone who can love and open his own heart to others.

## **The Father Who Wants to Be Known**

It’s not always easy for men to be open and honest. Most of us were taught from an early age that openly expressing our feelings and sharing our struggles is not a particularly “manly” thing to do. We learn to hide who

we are from an early age. This was highlighted during a study trip to the Georgia mountains when my wife Caron and I walked in the early mornings and evenings. We often saw lots of deer—all of them does. We never once saw a buck—they were all hiding. Of course, men aren't exactly like bucks. But it did remind me of guys in one way: we hide well. We can live in isolation and feel like we thrive, staying hidden and unknown. It hurts us more than we know to be this way, and it hurts our sons even more.

In heaven I hope to sit down over a cup of coffee with my earthly dad because his story was hidden from me. He wasn't able to coherently lay it out for me while he was here on earth. It was one of the reasons that I slipped and tripped at the starting line of my manhood.

I'm sure there were many reasons he was so hidden. Perhaps one factor was that he lost his dad at age eleven—an earthshaking loss for a young boy. He said more than once to me that his dad was the person most like Jesus Christ that he had ever met. When the biggest person in his life was ripped away, he must have been cut to shreds. The dangling components of his inner life never came together as he became the man of the house way too early. How would this orphan boy become a man? Would he follow in his father's footsteps as planned and become a missionary doctor too? His Venezuelan grandfather rejected him when he wouldn't stay in Venezuela and instead came to the US for medical school. World War II yanked him away to fix bodies torn by bullets and flying

hot metal. The new normal of postwar Los Angeles must have been anything but normal. Marriage, two kids, a career out of medicine, divorce, remarriage, then death from cardiac arrest at eighty-seven. Unhappiness and darkness marked his life. He missed out on being a father to his son and daughter by his own decisions.

Sounds like I know a lot about him, right? Not a chance. Theories. Mostly theories. Sketchy details unwillingly given, painfully pulled out of him, told in contradictory ways over years, pieced together by the few who were near him and by his son who was trying to get his own story straight: “Who are we? Who am I again?” He was hidden and still is hidden from me. Too many men have “bucks” for dads and they just do not know their dads or themselves. Gabriel, the oldest son in the movie *The Patriot*, expressed my exasperation when he said to his father, “Strangers know more about you than I do!”

In my experience, sons want and need to know their fathers. A son that knows his father is like a sprinter with his feet firmly planted at the beginning of the race on the starting blocks. A father who lets his son know him, who opens his heart and his life to his son, acts like starting blocks for a boy. Feet firmly planted, he can move ahead more confidently and quickly in life, springing into manhood. Boys with a hidden dad slip and slide a lot at the starting point of manhood as they try to get some positive forward momentum in life.

When a son doesn't really know his father, he can't really know himself. A father who is unhidden—who

shares who he is with his son without holding back anything—is able to help his son find his own point of reference and identity in a chaotic world. A father differentiates his son from the crowd, focuses him, reinforces the point that his son is unique, and points to the trails in life that are consistent with their family.

If you had an earthly father who opened his life and heart to you, you know your father's story. That's a wonderful gift. But to really know ourselves, we have to go further than our earthly fathers. We have to know *the* Father—the one who made us and knows us intimately. We have to know him. All that our own earthly fathers can do only imperfectly (or not at all), our heavenly Father does perfectly.

The good news is that our heavenly Father wants to be known. He wants his sons to know all about him because he is not hidden. He is a totally committed “all-in” Father who wants you to know him and his love for you.

### **Knowing Your Heavenly Father Through Creation**

One way we can know God is simply by looking at what he has made. What a good way to get to know anyone. Just look at what a person creates and you will know so much about them. It's easy to take a close look at what God made—just look up. Psalm 19:1–2 says, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge.” God started talking from the very moment creation began and he has



not stopped talking since. What do we learn about God from what he made? That question could never be fully answered, but let's just make a small start.

Whether we're hiking in the Rockies or driving to work, it's easy to see in the world around us that there is a Creator God who is unimaginably powerful (Romans 1:18–20), and who exercised endless creativity in the varieties of animals and plants he has made (Job 39). God's infinite wisdom and provision for his creatures is seen in the very foundations and boundaries of earth's sea and geography (Job 38:8–11) as well as the cycles of the days and seasons (Job 38:19–20). Mapping the human genome stuns us with the intricacy of God's design. When you look at the world around you and consider who created it, you see the power, magnificence, and glory of God, your Father.

### **Knowing Your Father Through the Bible**

Even though we can learn much about God through what he has made, God hasn't finished revealing himself. The heavens declare the glory of God, and yet he still speaks to us through his words. He gives us the Bible because he intentionally desires to become a Father and to have a relationship with his children.

He tells us all about himself and ourselves from Genesis to Revelation. The Bible is the self-revelation of a Father who really wants to be known. He doesn't want us to misunderstand who he is. He specially selected people who would faithfully record his words, thoughts, actions,

promises, and desires for his people. When I emphasize that the Bible is the one book we men need to master and let master us, some of my friends have said to me, “Pete, it’s not a small book! And I don’t like to read that much.” I get that, but the Father talks as much as he does so as not to be hidden to his boys.

As we read the Bible, we learn that our Father’s power knows no limits. He creates something out of nothing. He raises the dead to life. What he decides to do, he is able to do. That’s omnipotence. You have an all-powerful Father who is all-in with his sons and daughters as well as everything else he has created. What he creates by his grace, he has the power to sustain by his grace.

We are also reminded that God knows everything about everything. That’s omniscience. He knows all about you. You are unhidden to him. He knows you better than you know yourself. Knowing all there is to know about you, he’s still wild about you! God tells us in the Bible that he knows when we sit, when we rise, what we are thinking at all times, and what we are going to say even before it comes out of our mouths. In fact, every day has already been planned for us by our loving heavenly Father (Psalm 139:1–4, 16).

Jesus added to that picture of heavenly care when he told his followers that even the hairs on their head were numbered by their heavenly Father (Matthew 10:30). Your earthly father had a part in giving you life, but not every earthly father is able or even wants to faithfully care for his children. You can know for sure that God,

your perfect Father, created you and will certainly not abandon you because he reminds you of that truth again and again in his words to you.

Your heavenly Father is not only all-powerful and all-knowing, he is omnipresent. God is everywhere at all times (Psalm 139). The Father is able to keep up with us all simultaneously and still give each of us his full attention. Did you ever meet someone who gave you one hundred percent of their attention? You feel like the most important person in the world when you are with them. That's the way it always is with you and God. He is listening. He will always listen.

These few paragraphs can scarcely do justice to all that the Bible teaches about our Father in heaven. It's a lifelong journey to get to know your Father, and it's the greatest adventure of all in life. My exploration into knowing God was kick-started years ago by A. W. Tozer's statement that, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us."<sup>3</sup> Reading *Knowing God* by J. I. Packer hooked me for life in knowing God the Father.<sup>4</sup>

And how incredible that the Father doesn't just give us creation and words about himself, but he gives us his own Son Jesus to show us personally what his love and care look like in a broken and messed-up world. The Father who wants his children to know him sent his Son so that there would be no confusion at all about who he is and what kind of relationship he wants to have with his children.

## The Father Is Known Through the Son

Here's how Jesus explains getting to know your heavenly Father:

“If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves.” (John 14:7–11)

Jesus is God the Son who perfectly reveals the Father to us. Let that sink in. Grab some time and read a Gospel in one sitting. Pay particular attention to what Jesus reveals to you about the Father. To know our elder brother is to know our Father.

When we reflect on Jesus coming to this earth, we know that this unique event was motivated by love from God the Father as well as God the Son and God the Spirit. The cross reveals the love of the Father every bit as

much as it declares the love of Jesus. As Jesus walked this earth, he gave a living picture of the love of the Father for his people. When we see Jesus calling his disciples by name to follow him, we see the Father's love in action (John 1:35–51).

Jesus's encounter with an enemy of his people, a Samaritan woman who obviously had a painful and tumultuous relational past gives us another picture of God's love at work (John 4). Jesus is tired and hungry, but he sees her need is more important than rest and food. So he draws her into a conversation, using language she will connect with, and answers her questions to help her connect to God. In everything Jesus does, we clearly see the love, patience, and generosity of the Father.

## **The Road to True Manhood**

Put down the list of the five marks of manhood or whatever other list you are trying to follow in order to reach true manhood. Instead, look up at the sky and read creation to get to know your heavenly Father. Pick up your Bible and read those ancient stories with an eye to what they reveal about your God. Look to Jesus, the author and finisher of your faith. Ask the Spirit to fill you with the knowledge of God's love for you in Christ. Think much about God's love for his people and how he proved it on the cross.

Spend time thinking about how your Father wants to make himself known to his boys. How he wants his boys

to have the security, peace, and joy that can only come from knowing their Father. Sit back and rest in the fact that because of Jesus you can have a deep, real, and close relationship with the all-powerful God of the universe.

Remember, because of Jesus, the Father doesn't view you as an "it." You are his beloved son, and he's all-in with you and completely for you. The more time we spend reflecting on the Father, the more time we spend getting to know him and trusting his love for us, the more we want to be and, in fact do, become like him. It's an inevitable process. Sons who are deeply loved by their fathers want to imitate their fathers out of respectful love. And they do.

"Pete, you and I are so insecure we need therapy!" my mentor Steve Brown once said to me. Because Steve not only teaches grace but he models grace, I knew he had just given me a gracious challenge to look deeper inside my soul. I am insecure. I want to prove my worth to myself and others. But knowing God as my father is changing me. Getting to know him as my father, realizing that to him I'm not an "it" but his deeply loved and known son, gives me the capacity and desire to know and love others more deeply. The Father's self-revelation and acceptance of me fuels my interest in others.

A surprising result is how much easier it is to reveal myself to others—the good, the bad, and the ugly—without wincing as much. Sometimes after I share what I am really like with someone, I inwardly smile. It's so different for me not to cover up who I really am and not

to wallow in it either. I know I am a forgiven, accepted son of God. Now I am free to not guide a conversation to focus on me, but turn it to God and others. How amazing that the Father who knows me and is known is replicating himself in me. And you. Like Father, like son.

### Take It to Heart

1. Does it seem to you that God is difficult to really get to know? Why?
2. What can you know about God's love for you from looking at creation (Psalm 19; Romans 1:18–20)? From reading the Bible (Psalm 119:25–32; Psalm 139)? From knowing Jesus (John 4; 14:7–11)?
3. How can knowing that you're fully known and fully loved give you the freedom to make yourself known to the key people in your life—your family, wife, children, and friends (1 Timothy 1:12–17)?
4. What are reasons it is hard to share who you really are with those around you?
5. What are some practical ways that you could make yourself known to your wife, children, friends, neighbors, and coworkers?