

How To Think About God

1. Warm-up question: The way people address us often reflects how close (or not) they are to us. At work, people may refer to you formally by your title. Friends another way. Family another. Those who know you best may even use a term of endearment or nickname. Have you ever had a nickname? Does your pet have one?
2. Craig Groeschel says, “Tell me how you address God in prayer, and I’ll tell you how close (or not) you are to God.” If nothing else, his statement causes us to think about how we relate to God. In the Old Testament, as we humans were first grappling to understand God, we tended to see almost exclusively through the lens of God’s functional role in the cosmos – king, ruler of the universe, who establishes and enforces the moral laws of the realm. In this view, God is enforcer, judge, and ruler. For a classic example of this perspective, read Exodus 19:10-19.
 - a. Imagine yourself being someone in the foregoing scene who was just beginning to understand what God is like. Based on what’s said there, how would you describe God? And how would you feel about God? Would you want to be close to this God? Why or why not?
 - b. Do you think the way God is portrayed in Exodus 19 is true and accurate? What strikes you as true? What, if anything, strikes you as inaccurate?
 - c. Has there ever been a time in your life when you viewed God primarily through the lens described in the passage we just read? How did that affect you? How did it affect your relationship with God?
3. Jesus taught us a revolutionary new way of seeing, and relating to, God. In his book “New Testament Theology,” Joachim Jeremias says, “Jesus came bringing Good News. At the heart of that Good News was a new relationship to God. The most important characteristic of the new life [Jesus calls us to], more important than anything else, is a new relationship to God. In the Gospels, reverence and hesitation [still] form the basis of the human relationship with God. God is the one who is utterly unfathomable. Reverence before God, the unconditional Lord, is an essential part of the Gospel, but it is not the center of the Gospel. At the center of the Gospel is [a new way of seeing God].” For an example, read Mark 14:32-41.
 - a. Mark wrote in Greek, but Jesus spoke Aramaic. In this passage, when Mark relays Jesus’ prayer, he feels compelled to retain the exact Aramaic word Jesus used to address God. *Abba* was derived from the babblings of infants; it became the primary term of endearment Aramaic children (young and old) used to refer to a beloved Father. The word speaks of intimacy and trust. The closest English equivalent is Daddy or Papa. Imagine addressing your prayers to “Papa God.” How would that feel? How might it affect your relationship with God?

- b. Scholars say *Abba* is the word Jesus used in the Lord's Prayer when teaching us how to pray. "Our Father who art in heaven" was actually "Our *Abba* who art in heaven." Jeremias says, "It would have seemed disrespectful, indeed unthinkable, to the sensibilities of Jesus' contemporaries to address God with this familiar word. [Yet] Jesus dared to use *Abba* as a form of address to God." Why do you think he dared to do this? Why was this new way of seeing God so important?

- 4. Jeff highlighted three ramifications of relating to God as *Abba*. **First, if God is *Abba*, that means, when I fail, God is merciful.** To illustrate, Jeff told how Anne Graham wrecked the family car at age 17. She expected major punishment. Instead, her Dad (Billy Graham) told her he loved her, that the car could be fixed, and that she would become a better driver because of it. That's how an *Abba* responds when we fail.
 - a. Tell us about a time you experienced a major failure. At the time, did you imagine God reacting to your failure through the Old Testament lens or through the lens of God as *Abba*? How do you think *Abba* wants to use that experience of failure to make you better?
 - b. A wise person once said, the difference between religion and Gospel is: Religion says, "I messed up. My Dad is going to kill me." Gospel says, "I messed up. I need to call my Dad." What's the point here?

- 5. **Second, God as *Abba* means that nothing delights God more than seeing me grow into my full potential.** Jeff offered the example of the *Andy Griffith Show* episode where Opie faced a bully. For those who weren't present Sunday, share what happened and how Andy responded.
 - a. What can we learn from that episode about how God deals with us when we face bullies in our life?
 - b. What is one of the biggest bullies (i.e., scariest things) you've ever faced? Did God step back and insist you handle it? Did you grow because of it? How so?

- 6. **Third, if God is *Abba*, that means God longs to be close to me.** If God loves me like that, but I push away, God hurts. Imagine God being emotionally vulnerable.
 - a. Do you feel like your relationship with God right now is close? Why or why not?
 - b. Jesus tells the famous parable of The Prodigal Son. Jeff shared an ancient Asian variation on that parable that ends very differently. For those who weren't present Sunday, recount the differences in the two stories. What do you think Jesus was trying to teach us about God through his version of the story?
 - c. The last sentence of Sunday's sermon was, "Let God love you." Do you think you are? Why or why not? How can we more fully open ourselves to that love?