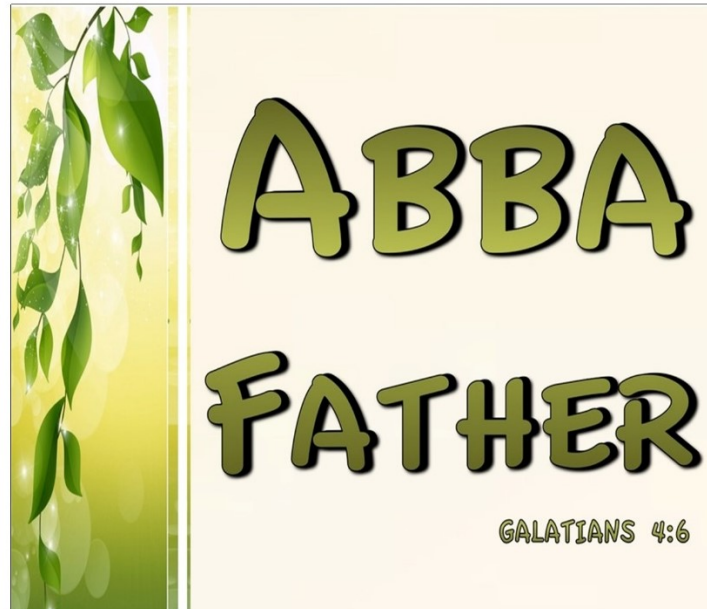


Abba is not your Daddy



Peter McArthur

It's often claimed that the word "abba" is pretty much the same as our English word "daddy." But is that really true? No, it's not.

Where did the idea come from? Well, one of my favourite authors from Theological College days was Joachim Jeremias, the German Lutheran theologian (died 1979). His work on the *Parables of Jesus* was instrumental in my understanding the parables from a middle eastern perspective. He had spent his formative years in Jerusalem, where his father worked as Provost/Pastor at the Church of the Redeemer there.

So, as special as Jeremias was to me, I was somewhat taken aback when I discovered he was responsible for first introducing the idea that the Aramaic word "abba" means "daddy" in relation to God. He believed the word was commonly used by children in their day to day family chatter, and that was how Jesus used it (Mark 14:36).

Yes, it was commonly used in Jesus' time, not formally, but more as a familiar term of endearment. But saying it was a kind of childish expression like "daddy" in relation to the Heavenly Father is not accurate – close perhaps, but not precise.

When Jesus addressed His Father, we see it expresses a mature relationship of adult affection toward the Father, rather than simple childish fondness. In the Jewish Talmud, the word "abba" is used when speaking of rabbis who held positions of honour, dignity and authority. So we do have some evidence to show it wasn't simply a child's way of talking.

To be fair, it seems that soon after writing it in his book *New Testament Theology*, Jeremias backtracked on his comment, realising it was open to misunderstanding – which is precisely what happened!



Traditions can take hold very rapidly and so it was that once a few preachers started using the phrase in that particular way, there was an explosion of sermons mentioning the idea. And we've been stuck with it ever since.

But as always, let's go to the source first and look at what Scripture says about "Abba, Father". There are only three places where the phrase is mentioned.

- **And He (Jesus) said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for You. Take this cup away from Me; nevertheless, not what I will, but what You will. (Mark 14:36)**
- **For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father." (Romans 8:15)**
- **And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!" (Galatians 4:6)**

The first thing to understand is that the Aramaic word "abba" itself is NOT a translation, but an actual word used 'as is' in the texts. The idea that "abba" was solely a child's term, is rejected by nearly all scholars, because at the time of Jesus even adults used the word as a term of endearment towards their father. It seems to have the notion of an adult son or daughter having affection toward their father because they had a privileged status as heir. Galatians 4:6 has this idea.

The next thing to notice is that in each case the Aramaic word "abba" is immediately followed by the Greek word "pater" and that particular word is certainly not the Greek word for "daddy" – it simply means "father". The Greek language *does* have a word for "daddy" which is "pappas" – so why doesn't the New Testament use that word instead? Because of the important issue of how we treat God with a healthy mixture of intimacy and dignity. We should be careful when addressing Father God and not be too flippant and forget the reverence and decorum due Him.

Perhaps the phrase could be best translated as something like "dearest Father" or "Father dear". The notion behind this is to try and capture a lovely balance between a childlike dependence of intimacy on God, yet a sober adoration from a redeemed adult person, toward Him.

I fully understand why some believers delight in using the word in relation to the Heavenly Father, after all Christianity is the only world religion that has such a beautifully intimate concept of God. But that shouldn't mean we can be careless about words when addressing the Godhead.

So what do we do about this in a practical day-to-day manner, especially in relation to prayer? You may (or may not) have noticed that there's been a drift of late for some Christians to pray to the Father directly in their prayers, and not to Jesus. In fact this is the way I've prayed for years now, addressing my opening prayer to the Father, and finally concluding "in the name of Jesus my Saviour/Redeemer/Lord etc", then sometimes adding "in the power of the Spirit".

It's not that I'm trying to be over-theological and cover every base, but it's just me trying to be a bit more precise in my prayers – because that's where I am spiritually in this season of my life. I totally understand that God (Father, Son and Spirit) hears my prayer no matter to "Whom" I address it, but I've found that after consistently doing this publicly in prayer meetings, home groups, church, etc, people will occasionally ask me why I pray that way.

It then opens up a great opportunity to stress how important public prayer is because young believers do actually listen to what we as mature believers, say – and pray! They'll take on board what we say even down to precise words we might use, like that awful word "just" that has crept into common use amongst believers. "Lord we **just** come to you today". "Father we **just** need you to..."

So, "careful precise prayer" isn't such a bad thing, as long as we keep spiritually alert and not get too fussy and over-deliberate with our words. Be purposeful in prayer, yes, but not ponderous.

Now of course there's nothing wrong in addressing prayer to Jesus (I prefer the "Lord Jesus") or the Father in our opening words, but I think there is an issue about saying "daddy". Jesus Himself referred to God reverently and specifically as "My Father", "the Father" or "heavenly Father" and He encouraged us to pray to God as "our Father". Stick to how Jesus prayed, and we won't go wrong.

How you pray, and to Whom you prefer to pray to in private, is entirely up to you. It's a personal thing and will change from time to time often depending on what kind of spiritual season you're going through. Sometimes your devotions will be addressed to the Lord Jesus because that's where your focus in life is – you need to anchor yourself to the Saviour. Other times you might feel drawn to address prayer to the Father because you need His fatherly oversight and overshadowing protection.

Don't let it be an issue that bothers you, but we should be a little more attentive to what we say to Him in prayer, especially public prayer. However I certainly wouldn't want you to become a Pharisee in the matter.

The conclusion to all this is that God is more concerned with the intentions of our hearts than the precision of our words, but that shouldn't stop us from being wary of any flippancy or mediocrity as we approach Him in prayer – and that includes calling Him "daddy".

In Him, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Peter McArthur.