Our Heavenly Father

"God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved."
—John 3:16,17

WHILE HE WAS WITH HIS disciples, Jesus taught them many things. Some were familiar, others were new. Still others they did not understand until they received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Jesus spoke to the people in parables, so even his disciples could not understand his message. When his disciples asked him why, "He [Jesus] answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given." (Matt. 13:11) These same truths have continued to be hidden during this Gospel Age to all except those who have received the begettal of God's Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul spoke of these truths as mysteries, "And for me, that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel."—Eph 6:19

One of the most beautiful truths Jesus taught concerned his Heavenly Father. While imparting the Golden Rule to his disciples, Jesus told them, "Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you."—Matt. 5:43,44

These must have been confusing words to his disciples, for what man could ever love his enemies and his persecutors? Could the Master really be teaching such a thing? Jesus was teaching his disciples a most important lesson about God. Continuing, we learn the reason for loving our enemies. "That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so? Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."—vss. 45-48

Herein lies a great truth, for we are 'children' of our Father which is in heaven. We are privileged to know that God is not merely our God, but is also our Heavenly Father. This is overwhelming when we consider what Jesus is teaching. If we are to be the children of God, we are to be perfect as God is perfect. It is impossible for anyone to be perfect as God is, so what did Jesus mean? He was turning our minds to a great fact, that if we are to be faithful footstep followers of our Master, and to develop

as New Creatures fit for a place in God's great kingdom, we must develop the character of God. It is this standard, and none lower, which God expects us to seek after. Our Heavenly Father has purposely set this standard very high, and it takes constant diligence to meet it.

God knows best what we need. We do not set the standard because any standard we might set would fall far short of what is expected of those who one day will share in the work of the kingdom. "Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world? and if the world shall be judged by you, are ye unworthy to judge the smallest matters?" (I Cor. 6:2) This is one of the rewards for being faithful until death so God's standard for us must be high, and we must never lower it. The standard is, 'Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.'

Jesus is teaching us the lesson that we must develop perfect love for all of God's children. He created all with the intent of blessing them for eternity, the evil and the good, the just and the unjust. "As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive." (I Cor. 15:22) John describes God's perfect love, "Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love." (I John 4:7,8) We have the great privilege to know God before the rest of mankind. How comforting to know that those who do not love him in this world and may oppose him are not doomed forever, but do so out of ignorance. While dying on the cross, Jesus did not ask for revenge on those who were unjustly putting him to

death, or those who mocked him, beat him, and cast lots for his clothes.

This is the perfect love of God, and the perfect love we are required to develop. The disciples of the Early Church may have thought this an impossibility. Jesus might have been able to have such love, but was it possible for them to also develop such love? They were quickly shown that it was possible. Not long after Pentecost, a young brother named Stephen was confronted by certain ones in the Temple while he was preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. "They were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake." (Acts 6:10) After these Jews bribed false witnesses to claim he had blasphemed God, Stephen recounted to them, as recorded in the seventh chapter of Acts, God's plan—beginning with father Abraham and covering their history down to the coming of Jesus as the Anointed One, finishing with the accusation, "Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers." (Acts 7:52) When they heard these words they were extremely agitated, but did nothing because they knew he spoke the truth.

Then Stephen next looked up and saw a vision, and said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God. Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord, And cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul."—Acts 7:56-58

As the stones rained down upon Stephen, he displayed the wonderful Spirit of God toward his enemies and persecutors that Jesus had previously taught to his disciples. "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." (Matt. 5:48) "And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep." (Acts 7:59,60) With God's help, he was given the strength to demonstrate that it is indeed possible for us to develop the perfect love of which Jesus had taught, and that is required of all who have taken up their cross to follow him faithfully even unto death. Without such a marvelous example as seen in the young brother Stephen, we would doubt that it is possible.

Jesus taught us that God is our only Father. He said, "Call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven." (Matt. 23:9) The term 'father' can denote the meaning 'respect of title.' Jesus makes it clear that such a title and respect is not to be observed by his people of human religious leaders, because 'one is your Father which is in heaven.'

We have learned many of the characteristics of our Heavenly Father which makes us appreciate him even more. Like any good father on earth, he is constant, and we can trust that he will never change. Most children are comforted by the knowledge that they can turn to their father at any time, and it is even more so with our Heavenly Father. James tells us, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights,

with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning." (James 1:17) Malachi also wrote, "I am the LORD, I change not." (Mal.3:6) What a blessing to know that our Heavenly Father gives us all the perfect gifts we need and is always there whenever we call upon him.

As a good father, God provides for us all that we need. Matthew describes the love God has for the birds of the air, the lilies of the field, and the grass of the field and asks, "Are ye not much better than they?" (Matt.6:26) He tells us that our Father which is in heaven loves us so much more than what we can see in nature, reassuring us we need not worry about the day-to-day activity of seeking raiment and food, for God "knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you."—vss. 32,33

The lesson does not teach us that we should not plan or take care of our temporal responsibilities, but that our Heavenly Father will watch out for all things because we are precious to him. We can focus on seeking first his righteousness and learning as much as we can about his character, plans, and purposes as described in his Holy Word.

We know that God, like an earthly father, will give us things we ask, when asked for properly. "I say unto you, Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone? or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? Or if he

shall ask an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?"—Luke 11:9-13

We are further told that like a good, earthly father, our Heavenly Father disciplines us so we might grow characters ready to be blessed and to be partakers of his holiness. Paul wrote, "Ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons. Furthermore we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live? For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but he for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness. Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby."—Heb. 12:5-11

Knowing these things of the Heavenly Father's character leads us to ask, how do we approach him? The disciples wanted to know this. "It came to pass, that, as he was praying in a certain place, when he ceased, one of his disciples said unto him,

Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples."—Luke 11:1

Jesus had provided an example of acceptable prayer to his followers, and waited for them to inquire about it themselves. They had prayed to God previously, but they knew the teachings of Jesus were different from the Law, and sought after the proper form of prayer to be in harmony with his teachings. In Matthew 6:1-7, he answered their question with examples of the hypocrites, who prayed amiss by doing so with an outward display to gain attention for themselves. Jesus' lesson was that we should avoid any show of piety or to impress those around us. Rather, we should go into a secret place and speak humbly to our Heavenly Father.

He teaches them how to pray with the beautiful words that have become known as the Lord's Prayer. "After this manner therefore pray ye. Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."—Matt. 6:9-13

Here again is the perfect love of God that we must develop in ourselves. We must love perfectly by forgiving others, and if we do not we will not be forgiven by him. This is what Jesus meant when he told us we must be perfect, as our Father, which is in heaven, is perfect.

The Bible is full of examples of different kinds of fathers: Adam was a sinful father who had taken all of mankind into the slavery of sin and death. Enoch was a godly father, because the Scriptures

say he walked with God. (Gen. 5:22-24) Noah was a faithful father who worked for God. (Gen. 6-9) Moses was a noble father because he served God. Joshua was a wise father because he chose God. (Josh. 24:15) Joseph was a fruitful father because he honored God.

The model 'father figure' recorded in the Scriptures was Abraham because he represented perfect obedience. He was promised that through his seed all the families of earth were to be blessed, but as he grew to an old age along with his wife, he bore no son and no heir. After mistakenly trying to help God's plan along by giving birth to Ishmael through his concubine Hagar, Sarah finally provided the promised seed—Isaac—when Abraham was one hundred years old. When his son had grown to manhood, God put Abraham to the ultimate test of obedience, telling him to take Isaac to a place he would show him and there offer him as a sacrifice to God.

The account of this event is recorded in Genesis 22:1-14. Abraham displayed complete trust in God by following the instructions. Isaac displayed complete trust in his father by obeying the instructions to carry the wood to the place of sacrifice, even after he realized they had no animal to offer. He submitted himself to being bound and laid on the altar when he easily could have escaped and lived. This represents Jesus who voluntarily laid down his life as the ransom price for Adam because of his love for the Father. Similarly, as Abraham was willing to sacrifice his only begotten son in obedience to the instructions of God, God himself was willing to offer his Son in sacrifice for us.

Jesus once described to his disciples what is considered the greatest love. "This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:12,13) That is what Jesus did for us, for he said, "I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep." (chap. 10:11) That is what Jesus did during his earthly ministry, and we are expected to do the same. But, we have to strive diligently toward that ultimate goal in our consecrated lives because it is not a natural thing to be willing to lay down your life for a stranger, or even for a friend. This is a true manifestation of love.

Our Heavenly Father gave his Son Jesus' life for us. That act of God giving his Son as the ransom price for Adam, was the greatest act of love that has ever been displayed, or that ever will be. Is it reasonable to think that if it were possible God would have preferred to die himself for us instead of allowing his only begotten Son to die? Consider Abraham on his journey to sacrifice the son he had waited so long to have. No doubt he would have gladly offered himself rather than to slay his only begotten son. But God cannot die, so he gave his own Son to be the ransom price for Adam. 'God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.' Personal experiences as parents continue to deepen our understanding and thankfulness for the love of God.

A young man had died at the age of forty, and at the funeral his father was overheard telling a friend that he could not believe his son had died, and that it was not the natural order of life. "A son should outlive his father," the man said. "That should have been me that died, and not my son. I would give anything to make it so." Many parents may have expressed similar sentiments when a child has preceded them in death. The lesson con-cerning our Heavenly Father and his Son is clear. If we are capable of such love for our children, how much greater is the love of our Heavenly Fa-ther towards his children. God loves us more than we know, enough even to give his only begotten Son in sacrifice on our behalf.

'If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?' Shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits?

Let us always keep in mind the great love God has for us, and the little we can do to show our love and appreciation to him. May we then continue to worship and praise our loving Heavenly Father for his great blessings to us for as long as we have the opportunity and privilege to do so. ■