

Father to the Orphan

Good morning everyone. My name is Jeff and I am one of the pastors here at City Church. I primarily serve our church family in pastoral care and discipleship and other behind the scenes stuff such as overseeing our finances etc. I am married to my wife Callie and we adopted our son Luke almost 3 years ago. Here's a picture. Luke is 2 and he's turning 3 soon. He's super fun, sweet, and also this season is terrorizing me and Callie with his terrible 2's. I show you that because that feels like a typical preacher thing to do. Don't know why they do it, but they do it. But I also do it to show you that today's topic is a very personal one for me. We've been talking each week about God's heart for different groups of vulnerable people in our world. And one of the groups of people God cares for is the "orphan" or the "fatherless." And that's a part of my son's story. Luke's biological father was not ready to be a father and that led his biological mom to go through an adoption plan. So my wife and I were able to step into that gap so Luke does not need to be fatherless.

But it's also personal to me because it's a part of **my** story. Because in many ways I grew up fatherless. I grew up in a pretty broken family background. At the age of 2 I was taken away from my parents. My father was incarcerated right before I was born, and my mom, as a single parent, tried her best but she just couldn't take care of me and support herself. She faced a lot of what we talked about the challenges single mothers face on the week of this series about God being a defender of widows.

So I grew up from one foster family to another. Some foster families I remember fondly. They spoiled me with every toy I wanted and pretty much just let me do whatever I wanted. Now while from a child's perspective, that seems pretty great, as an adult now, I can tell you that was not good for me. The lack of instruction and discipline had a huge impact on me. I never had someone there to help and instruct me and help me grow up.

However, there were some foster families I was with that had a negative impact on me in other ways. I remember living in very poor environments where the house was filled with trash and bugs. I remember being hungry a lot. Because I was never taught on what it looks like to behave, some foster families resorted to using physical punishments to try and "teach" me that. I remember constantly being beaten. One particular family I remember would use those green garden hoses and use it to hit me to make me stop doing whatever I am doing. I was only 5 at the time.

As a child it was very confusing and jarring to have one family that lets you do anything you want and then another family that's strict and authoritarian. Not to mention there was

no trust between me and the foster families because of the constant moving from one family to another, any sense of stability is gone in my eyes as a child. At an early age I understood the world is not a safe place. If you grew up in a relatively stable and safe family environment, it's hard to describe to you what **not** feeling like that feels like. Some of you who have had and then lost a parent have felt a version of it, where all of a sudden the world feels like such a more dangerous place. I remember the times where I was able to visit my grandparents and my uncles, they would try to trick me and tell me one of my uncles was actually my dad and if I just called them dad they would give me a toy. All of it because it was funny and entertaining to them. What a cruel thing to do to a child. And even then, I remember knowing exactly what was going on and have accepted I don't have a father but if I play the game, I can at least get a toy out of it. At an early age I understood people are cruel and can not be trusted.

Earlier this month it occurred to me I was taken from my parents the same age Luke is now. It absolutely shatters my heart to imagine that happening to Luke right now. Luke just started to become afraid of the night and wants us to leave a night light on now every night at bedtime. I remember the first night it happened, he asked for the light to be on and we left it on for him. Later I turned it off thinking he was asleep but instead he woke up crying because he was afraid. I remember that night I had this deep sadness that Luke has learned fear and I can not protect him from it. In my sadness, I was reminded God grieves at the brokenness his children experience.

At the age of 8 I was connected back to my parents. And I thought the brokenness would end there. I thought to myself, "I am finally getting a real family, to know my dad and mom." I thought the nightmare would finally end and this would be the happily-ever-after ending. But that wasn't the case. Far from it. My father was also physically and verbally abusive to me and my mom. So the hope of having a father that I can trust was dashed very early on. It felt a lot like "more of the same" instead of "happily-ever-after." And while my mom did her best, she did not know how to care for me from everything I had seen and experienced. She resorted to the only way she thought would help: which was once again physical punishment. That only further deteriorated my trust in my mom and in fact my relationship with her was strenuous for most of my life and we were not able to be reconciled until much later in my adulthood.

And now both of my parents have passed away, in mourning them, especially of my dad, my grief was not that my dad was gone. He's always been gone even though he was back in my life at the age of 8. My grief centered on that I wasn't sad about him being gone. That I was not grieving as other people would losing their dad. That even in his passing, was a reminder of this is not how things should be. This is not how *families* should be.

And looking back at my story, one of the things that has been a constant source of comfort and hope for me has been realizing that God's heart goes out to people in situations like mine. God's heart is closely knitted to the heart of the fatherless. To realize God is also grieved at what I have gone through and experienced. To understand that His heart longs to protect his children. In the scriptures, God calls himself the defender of the fatherless. My soul deeply longs and aches for that because I know what it was like to be fatherless and had no one to defend me. I see how important it is to have someone there to protect a child, to protect their innocence. I've heard it said that a good dad acts like a shield. While no dad can protect the kid from ALL the pain or brokenness in the world, a good dad aims to protect them from some of the worst of it. My experience, by contrast, was like walking out into a battlefield without a shield. No one was there to shield me from the full brokenness and sin that existed in this world when I was a child.

In the scriptures, God is described as he provides for the orphan. To have memories of days being hungry, living in poor environments and contrasting that with God being a provider is incredible news. To know that he doesn't want any orphan to go hungry, to live in a house with garbage and bugs, means he is not indifferent to the brokenness of not being provided for.

And in my world, seeing what I have experienced from my childhood, I understand deeply why there are so many passages about God's heart for the orphans in scripture, from the Old Testament to the New Testament. Let me show you and a lot of these verses were mentioned by Kent a couple weeks ago because often the bible mentions widows and the fatherless/orphans together:

Ps 68:5

5 A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling.

Ps 146:9

The LORD watches over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.

Ex 22:22

Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless.

Ps 10:14

14 But you, God, see the trouble of the afflicted; you consider their grief and take it in hand. The victims commit themselves to you; you are the helper of the fatherless.

Ps 82:3

3 Defend the weak and the fatherless; uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed.

Ps 10:17-18

You, Lord, hear the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry, defending the fatherless and the oppressed, so that mere earthly mortals will never again strike terror.

James 1:27

27 Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

And you might notice that over and over again in these passages, God describes himself not just as a protector and a defender of orphans, but as a **father** to them. God longs to be what those without fathers never had. He longs to protect in the way that they were meant to be protected. He longs to defend in the way that they were meant to be defended. To protect them from harm. He longs to instruct in the way that they were meant to be instructed. He longs to hold his kids when they are scared, when they feel alone, when they are weeping. Part of us feeling confident and expressing ourselves and succeeding in life when we become adults comes from us being shielded and protected from some of the harsher realities of the real world when we're younger, when we are not ready for it yet. When you grow up without a father, you don't get to go through that period of your life like that. God desires to be the things that orphans so often lack.

And not just in the bad times, but the good times too. Last week I took my son Luke to Target just because. Not because it was his birthday or a special occasion. I wanted to take him to Target just because it brings me joy to give Luke good things. Parents in the room, you understand where I am coming from. For reference I am not a Target guy. In fact, I don't ever just go to a store and browse. I am the "if I need something I hop on Amazon Prime 2 day delivery while sitting in gym shorts on my couch" type of a guy. But with Luke, I wanted to take him to Target, I wanted to take him to Starbucks and load him up with caffeine and see how he does. *Kidding*. He's really into lemonades right now and Starbucks can make a mediocre lemonade just like their coffee. Luke and I just walked and browsed around Target. I took him to the toy section for the purpose of letting him pick out a toy. He picked this obnoxiously loud fire truck and now I realized why most parents avoid toys that have those buttons that play ridiculous sounds. All of this just because I wanted to, because I love him and I wanted to give him a fun toy. And this is

giving me a glimpse into our Heavenly Father's heart. That He desires to just spend time with each of us. And He desires to give us good gifts just because he loves us. No agenda or ulterior motives. He does all of this because He is a good, good father.

In the gospels, Jesus describes God as **that type** of Father: that when we pray, God gets **joy** from giving us things. Not everything we ask for, sure. But the same joy that I got from giving my kid something he really wanted, that is the same joy, the same pride, the same warmth that God feels towards you, right now. Despite all the ways you don't think you deserve it, despite all the ways you don't know what it feels like to receive it. That is how God feels about **you**. Right now.

And his desire to give us good gifts ultimately comes out to him sending his son Jesus to enter into our brokenness. To experience our grief and sadness. He sent his son on a mission to redeem us, to bring us back into right relationship with him, to bring us back into his family.

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him

Romans 8:14-17

During Christmas, it's incredibly easy to focus on what we are going to get. But this season should be a reminder of our Heavenly Father giving us his best, his son Jesus. And in doing so, our Heavenly Father saw his son experience pain, betrayal, suffering, mistreatments, and ultimately death. Our Heavenly Father did all those so none of us will have to be fatherless anymore. That we will always have him as our dad. A dad that will defend us, a dad that will always be there for us, a dad that cares for us deeply that he will teach us, instruct us, and even discipline us. A dad that's beaming with pride and desires to give us good things just because he is good.

But the good news does not stop there. As we gain a new dad, we have also gained new brothers and sisters. We now have a new spiritual family that's not built on biological connections but on the blood of Jesus. And this new family is part of God's way to redeem those experiences fatherless and or being orphaned. And I think the Church should see this as the monumental task that it is. Because you probably know this, but my story isn't actually all that unique.

- Children in father-absent homes **are almost four times more likely to be poor**. In 2011, 12 percent of children in married-couple families were living in poverty, compared to 44 percent of children in mother-only families.
- The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services states, “Fatherless children **are at a dramatically greater risk of drug and alcohol abuse.**”
- A study of 1,977 children age 3 and older living with a residential father or father figure found that children living with married biological parents had significantly fewer externalizing and internalizing behavioral problems than children living with at least one non-biological parent.
- Children of single-parent homes **are more than twice as likely to commit suicide.**
- **71% of high school dropouts are fatherless**; fatherless children have more trouble academically, scoring poorly on tests of reading, mathematics, and thinking skills; children from father-absent homes are more likely to be absent from school, more likely to be excluded from school, more likely to leave school at age 16, and less likely to attain academic and professional qualifications in adulthood.
- Children age 10 to 17 living with two biological or adoptive parents were significantly less likely to experience sexual assault, child maltreatment, other types of major violence, and non-victimization type of adversity, and were less likely to witness violence in their families compared to peers living in single-parent families and stepfamilies.¹

Fatherlessness is everywhere in our world. There are likely millions of boys and girls growing up in situations like mine, perhaps worse, that need to know God is their provider, protector, instructor and Father. So maybe we look at stats like those and go 'okay but didn't you say God is a protector? That he's a provider to children in these situations? Why does it look like he's not protecting and not providing for them?' Because the way God so often does that now is through his people. His family. There's a poem from the early church that goes like this:

Christ has no body but yours,
 No hands, no feet on earth but yours.
 Yours are the eyes with which He looks
 Compassion on this world.
 Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good.
 Yours are the hands, with which He blesses all the world.
 Yours are the hands, yours are the feet.
 Yours are the eyes, you are His body.
 Christ has no body now but yours.

¹ Source: <https://fathers.com/statistics-and-research/the-consequences-of-fatherlessness/>

— St. Teresa of Ávila

When we read about God's heart for people like the orphan, we are reading his desire for how we should live as his people. Made aware of the fact that we were all orphans in some sense before Jesus rescued us into his family, we are now given the responsibility to be the means by which God cares, protects and provides for the orphan.

My prayer is that many of us in this room will get involved in foster care and adoption, as many of you already have, so that you can be on the front lines of communicating this aspect of who God is to our world. There are dozens of ways to get involved in communicating this message to those without fathers in our society.

But also, one specific thing we're doing this Christmas to communicate this message is by partnering with Compassion Closet and collecting jackets for them.

In my childhood, going from one foster family to another was incredibly jarring and in the world of fostering, it is normal and an unfortunate reality. And sometimes the kids don't even get to gather their stuff before they get transferred to a new place and the only clothes they have are the ones on their back as they arrive to their new foster family. While providing a jacket for them might seem like a relatively small thing, it's actually a way of providing and protecting. It's a small meaningful way for our church family to step in and help with this transition, by providing for the orphan and resource the foster family.

As you can imagine, my upbringing did not give me much hope of ever experiencing being in a healthy family or even knowing what it looks like. And yet God used his people to redeem that. I was adopted by my youth pastor and his wife when I was in 8th grade. It was the first time I got to see what it looks like to have a fatherly figure in my life. And it was NOT easy for them, they were dealing with a teenager that was utterly broken and hurting and a lot of times took that anger and hurt out on them. And through their steadfastness, their unwillingness to leave and abandon me, God used them to show me that is his heart as well. God literally used his people to adopt me into his family. This is how I came to know who He is. This is how I came to follow after him.

Not only that, it is through his people, I can have hope that Luke will not have to experience what I have experienced. This level and type of generational brokenness can end with me because I have God's people to show me what it looks like to be a father. And it makes so much sense to me now that He calls his people to do the same. To take care of the orphan, to be there for the fatherless. That with all the statistics I mentioned, God wants to use us to bring about change and reverse the effects of fatherlessness.

Church family, maybe some of us here today need to be reminded that you have a Heavenly Father that deeply loves you, that he adores you, that he's looking at you right now beaming with joy and pride. And this father is there to defend you, to hold you close, to instruct you and help you grow. You are his beloved child. And this is good news to all of us and this is the good news that will enable us to go forth and love the orphans and fatherless. When you understand deeply in your soul just how good your Heavenly Father is, it will move to break your heart for those that do not have a good father, it will move you to care for the fatherless, it will give you the strength to do so when it is difficult, and ultimately, it will be a joy for you because you understand your Heavenly Father's heart deeper and reflecting his heart to those around you.

If the gospel was not good news to the orphans, I wouldn't stand before you today. I would not be following Jesus let alone have the privilege to shepherd and serve God's people. If the gospel was not good news to the orphans, I would have never got to experience the warmth of a family through God's family, I would have never understood what it looks like to be cared for, to be loved, to not be alone. The Gospel is indeed good news to all people, and orphans being part of it. And we get to carry that good news forward to those in our city.

Let's pray.