

The Family of God

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What if the family of God were like your family? Different people will have different reactions. For some, that's how it is. For others, not so much.

When I first started to research this topic, The Family of God, my mind immediately went down the parent-child-sibling-spouse route, and things were falling into place rather well, thanks to a 37-slide PowerPoint presentation on that subject I had developed a few months ago for Wednesday night class. But then, I made a big mistake. I looked in my concordance for references to family – and there were only three. One had to do with the physical family of David, one with the spiritual family of Abraham, and just one about the family of God. It is in Ephesians 3:14 – 21 and it goes like this:

“For this reason, I bow my knees to the Father from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height – to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.”

“For this reason.” For the reasons outlined in chapters 1 and 2 – and also the beginning of chapter 3 – Paul implored God to grant certain benefits, by that same grace he had described in the preceding chapters, to the Christians of Ephesus, so that they could participate in the lineage of God to all generations forever and ever.

That's the real importance of the word “family” here. It's not the word for close relatives. It's the concept of a lineage, like the Messiah was to come from the line, the family of David, or that by the seed of Abraham all the lineages, all families of the earth will be blessed. Of course, many family-style illustrations are applied to the church: children of God, brothers and sisters, the bride of Christ. But this one is different. This is the lineage, the direct descendants of God.

Many years ago, I bought a 2' x 4' poster that depicted all the physical relationships of the Bible with Adam at the top and Jesus at the bottom. Every name in the Bible is on that chart, in very small print, complete with a reference to one place where you can find that name. You can see on that chart how all the tribes and sub-tribes fit together, all the famous people and not-so-famous people. And that is just the Bible characters. Most of the branches of the lineage of God are not on that poster because no names are given of people in the Far East or the Americas or most of Africa or most of Europe.

This lineage of God has to do with all the races of people all over the globe. Paul spends a good part of Chapter 2 describing how God through Jesus relates to all people of every ethnicity. And, unique to this reference, Paul includes as part of the lineage of God the various orders of angels. The picture is not of one big happy family of all the faithful, both human and angelic – although you can go other places and paint that picture. This reference is about the family tree of the faithful, about a lineage that starts with the Father and goes by steps through all the faithful of history down to us – and beyond us “to all generations forever and ever.” Paul is beseeching God to supply the tools for the Christians of Ephesus to become living links in an

unbroken chain of faith from the Father to Judgment. That's the fundamental nature of prayer, to invoke the promises of God boldly and confidently.

An alarming proportion of church-goers are able to see no more than their own connection to God. Some are able also to visualize their connections, their fellowship, with other faithful people. And those are good concepts to understand, but that's not the point in this picture. This picture is of a highly branched, forward flowing delta. The source of the water is important, or all the tributaries in the delta would dry up. But the water only goes forward, not back or sideways. In this picture, we are essential connecting points to the future, not just one generation at a time, but ten or twenty or more – like Abraham whose faith has been impacting people for about 4000 years. Like Romans 4:16, "Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all." Those who have the faith of Abraham are those included in this lineage. Scary thought.

"From whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named." Named. We in Fulton have explored that concept, along with the idea of being called, which are closely related concepts. No brainer connection: we are called by names.

In our culture, we name our kids for many different reasons: because we like the sound of it, because of a relative, or because it was the last moniker you discussed before labor started. When you read through the Bible, you get the idea that they were much more serious about names. The name represented the essence of the person, what that person was about. Abram became Abraham, exalted father became father of a multitude. Jacob became Israel, deceiver became prince with God. In the majority of cultures around the world today, naming is a big deal. When Paul writes, "From whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named," he is bringing into focus the idea that the essence of God is being passed through these multitudes of lines of people and angels. And this is the lineage of faith. In our culture, in a spiritual sense, it would be like we all had the same last name: God's name. The chain does not include the unfaithful. I was taught faith by someone, and I teach faith to someone. And, like a family tree, the diagram branches out as it moves down; there are bushy, impenetrable, stand-up-in-hurricane sections; there are spindly long branches that tend to break off from the weight; there are dead ends. It's a complicated lineage.

God's plan of uniting all faithful spirits for eternity is going to happen whether I participate or not. Paul's prayer for the Christians in Ephesus is that they become functioning links in the lineage, each link receiving the essence of God from those who went before, and passing it on to my spiritual descendents.

"That He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory." Paul is asking God to award them something. Many church-goers have been led to believe that they achieve worthy status in the family of God by a lifetime of rigorous self-discipline. Not so. We become strong links in these disparate chains by the action of the biggest granting agency in the kingdom of God, His glory – His character.

I think "grant" is an excellent word there. My business lives on federal grants. Various government agencies fund our research. Without that grant money, the research couldn't happen because we do not have adequate resources in our own pockets. In the science world, the ingredient that makes it all work is money. In the Family of God, the character of God dispenses five essential components for the alloy from which unbreakable links can be forged. We don't have these components in our pockets. Five ingredients to the mettle (there are two ways to spell that) are listed in Paul's prayer. I suppose you could add to the list from the rest of the New

Testament. But, also described painfully vividly in the New Testament, if we try to forge a link from our own metal, or from just some of the metals, the link will fail.

These are the five grants that make us a family, links in the lineage of God, metal through which we transmit the essence of God without impedance (I had to include not only the resistors but also the chokes), five essentials on which fellowship (connectedness) happens. This connectedness is pictured differently here than the fellowship picture painted in the rest of the New Testament. In this picture, spirits, beginning with God the Spirit, transmit that essential nature from spiritual father to spiritual child. The big families in the Old Testament are an illustration of the multiplication of spiritual descendants. As important as many children were to those Old Testament cultures, that's how we should feel about spiritual children. We don't want our names blotted out from the family tree of God, a dead-end swamp in the delta, a broken off branch.

Paul's first grant proposal submitted to the agency of glory is "to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts." I know that the next two words are "through faith," and they are very important – but I broke that out into its own grant proposal to increase the funding ceiling.

Without the Spirit and without Jesus living in us, we are at best weak links if not missing links. That is by design. The family is named, the river of life deltas out through us because the Spirit dwells in us, because Jesus dwells in our hearts. Of course, that's a figure of speech, since a spirit cannot be confined to a box or a heart. A discouraging number of church-goers make application of that figure of speech to nothing more than my own thought processes. They believe that the Spirit lives in them because they think about God. They believe Jesus dwells in their hearts when they choose to behave in a Jesus-like way. That's not the picture Paul is painting. Paul is calling in a promise, approaching the throne of grace boldly and confidently because He who promised is faithful. Paul knows the promise, so he is reminding God that the fruition of that promise is due to these Christians. Interestingly, one of the reasons given for sacrifice is to remind God that I'm still here. That's what Paul is doing – reminding God. The Christians in Ephesus are to receive power that ordinary people do not possess. They will be able to do things that ordinary people cannot do. They get that name, that essence of God, from His character.

2 Corinthians 4:7, "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us." 1 Peter 4:11, "If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ." Romans 8:13, "If you live according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live, for as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God." In the New Testament, God, the Word, the Spirit, and Jesus are said to dwell in Christians a total of 11 times.

Think about the Christians in Galatia to whom Paul wrote. They were promised the Spirit, too. But, they got distracted. Paul wrote, "Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?" The Galatian Christians were promised the power, the indwelling Spirit, but they diverted the living waters into channels cut by the Levitical Corps of Engineers that went up hill. So, Paul admonishes the Christians in Ephesus, in chapter 5, "Endeavor to be filled with the Spirit."

I made a little list of 35 promises of God that give Christians power in this life so that we could have at ready recall promises to which unbelievers can relate like overcoming myself,

maturity, growth, discernment, wisdom, understanding, contentment, peace, joy, and comfort. And those are just the tip of the iceberg of the results of having the Spirit of God take up residence in me.

But what if I divert the river into a prettier setting, or build a dam for hydroelectric power, or focus on straining out the flotsam and jetsam? Worse yet, without the Spirit, we become divisive – Paul, John, and Jude all made the same flat statement to that effect. But if we focus on that essence, that name in which we share as the descendants, the family of God, Peter writes, 2 Peter 1:4, “By which [by His divine power] has given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature.” The family of God, the lineage of God, partakes of His nature.

Grant proposal number two: “By faith.” Paul puts in a funding request for faith. Jesus dwells in our hearts by faith. We are partakers of the divine nature by faith. We become infused with the essence of God, we take on that highly descriptive family name – by faith.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of people, church-goers or not, have a very confused notion of what faith is. Here’s my brief review that has broken down the barriers for several people. That is the point, after all, to forge the next set of faithful links. If people have different definitions for the same words, there will be a failure to communicate.

First, this faith that results in power is based on evidence, the only religion that can make that claim. We deal with reality, not try to escape it. As a corollary to that, faith requires that I get intellectually comfortable with the fact that the Bible is true and has been transmitted to me accurately. Again, this is a fact-checking thing, not a park-your-brains-at-the-door thing.

Second, faith requires that you accept that you are damaged beyond repair. That may be easy for me to see about you, but for me to see that about myself means I have to admit failure, and I don’t like that. It is much more comfortable to set an ever shifting arbitrary standard so I can deceive myself into believing I am successful. Faith is damaging to my ego, which is why selflessness is essential.

Third, faith requires that hope be real to us. Hope cannot be “maybe.” Hope must be certain. Therefore, when God presents a promise that is clearly beyond the scope of human ability, we need to be able to accept it at face value. If we do, we will start accomplishing that which ordinary humans cannot. Angels will sit back and say, “Now I get it – faith means you do what you know you can’t just because God said He has your back. Cool.” When we start doing the humanly impossible, like those 35 promises about life on earth, people are going to ask.

And that’s the fourth characteristic – telling others. But it’s not that you have a quota of doors to knock or tracts to hand out. It’s a natural result of faith. As Paul quoted Psalm 116, “I believed, therefore I spoke.” When Paul wrote to Timothy “to always be ready to give a defense for the hope that lies within you” – it was because people are going to ask when they see the humanly impossible accomplished.

To update that famous verse, “We have this treasure in earthen vessels,” people will understand that the only way a bunch of crackpots can win is if they got some help.

We are under a different economic system than the rest of the world. The coin of our realm is faith. That is the benchmark commodity, more precious and a lot more stable than gold. Everyone else lives in the right-and-wrong economy. As Paul wrote to Timothy, “Law is for the lawless.” What they fail to recognize is that their system leads only to bankruptcy, whereas ours leads to capital growth.

Both economies approve many of the same behaviors, but for different reasons. For the right-and-wrong crowd, good behavior is for me, to increase my account. But they are like members of congress, with difficulty saving thousands while hemorrhaging billions.

We, on the other hand, choose good behavior for entirely different reasons. One reason is to give God a good day; after so many bad ones, He deserves it. Grieving the one who rescued you from pointlessness is inconsistent thinking. Another reason is because if I behave badly, no one will believe that I have any good news – because I’m just as messed up as everyone else. I do what I do for others, not for me. A third reason is because I am the Temple of the Holy Spirit. Somebody needs to clean up this Temple so it will be an appropriate place for God to live.

And that is Paul’s next piece of the family name promise, the third grant proposal, “that you be rooted and grounded in love.” That’s a part of the essential nature that flows from the Father through all the lineages of the family of faithful people and angels, that by which we are named and to which we are called.

But what kind of love is this? As Jesus said to the Eleven on the night in which He was betrayed, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” “As I have loved you.” But people have trouble picturing Jesus as entirely human although He was God in the flesh. They think that, when He was on earth, He had some sort of edge over the rest of us. So, to many, loving as Jesus loved is an impossible concept. But, although an accurate understanding of Jesus on earth is good and helpful, if people have trouble with it, we can still use it. If you get the picture of the promises of God, that they are beyond the ability of humans to accomplish, just remember that God promised we could have the love that Jesus had. Not only does Paul write to several groups of Christians to possess this divine love, Paul wrote already in Romans 5:5 that the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

But how are we to comprehend a love that is beyond the reach of ordinary humans? This love is what flows down through the family of God, through the various lineages of people and angels. The Bible gives us examples of people in various family lines who displayed that love flowing through them to the next spiritual generation.

The historical sections of the Bible, if compared to some of the great texts written by historians, does not really stack up very well. Certainly, what is recorded is accurate, but the point of the history in the Bible is not to be a documentation of the history of Israel. A more apt description is a collection of anecdotes with references. Many times, just as the text seems to be switching into history-book mode, the story breaks off abruptly by referring the reader to books no longer in existence, “written in the book of Jasher,” “the book of the acts of Solomon,” “the book of the chronicles of the kings of Israel,” “the book of the chronicles of the kings of Judah,” or of Nathan the prophet or of Gad the seer or Shemaiah the prophet and several more. Some of the stories appear out of nowhere and end just as abruptly, like Enoch, and Jabez. Think about Ruth. What is historically important about Ruth? Certainly she is in the physical lineage of Jesus, but so are lots of other women, most of whom are not named. I’ll bet several of them had pretty interesting lives, like Athaliah, daughter of Jezebel, who is in the lineage of Jesus. I’ll bet that her story would have made an interesting book. But the historical stories of the Bible are not recorded as a history book. Rather God either orchestrated or selected a collection of vignettes to illustrate essential concepts, many of them illustrating the kind of love that flows from the Father, through the many families, all the way to Judgment. This brand of love is part of what comprises the name by which we are called, and by which we call the next generation.

Think of the story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac. Or, consider Paul offering to switch places with unbelieving Israel in Roman 9:3, “For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh.” Or 1 John 3:16, after reminding his audience of Cain and Abel as the counterpoint, “By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.” John follows up with an example that is not of heroic proportions like giving up life on earth so that someone else might continue breathing. Rather, he writes, “But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?” John, by his selection of examples, indicates that physical death in order to rescue someone else just might be easier than sharing our possessions.

“Rooted and grounded in love.” With the bar set so high by the examples of Jesus and Abraham and Paul, we need divine intervention. And that’s the promise. That’s why Paul prays that it be granted to his audience. And Paul’s prayer illustrates the very nature of prayer – invoking the promises of God. Boldly and confidently demanding that God accomplish what He has promised, that I be like a tree with roots reaching deep into the love of God so that I may, by capillary action and a series of valves, against gravity and pressure, transmit that live-giving love to the new parts of the tree. I receive it through the roots of those who came before in this family tree and pass it along to the new growth.

“That you may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height – to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge.” Grant proposal number four: comprehension of the magnitude and variety of the love God has for both people and angels. The image projected by that word, comprehend, is to be eminently able, to have full capacity. That we each are able to understand “with all the saints.” All the saints can do this.

Have you ever tried to convince a room full of 16-year-olds that they can comprehend Chemistry? How about Physics? One technique is to say, “Students your age have been taking this subject for more than a century, and the vast majority have lived to tell about it.” Their fear is of failure, of not comprehending, and being revealed as what they secretly believe about themselves, that they are mental misfits. Fear of failure is the major reason behind a lack of academic achievement.

The same is true of understanding, knowing, the love of God. Why is it that so many church people find the Word of God so complicated and difficult? First, teachers perpetuate the myth instead of finding simple explanations. Second, people have an abject fear of failure despite the promise of God. Some people have an advantage – they know they are misfits on the earth, and it shows. Fear of failure is not the issue, but lack of tools. For either group, the key ingredient is hope, hope that I can comprehend. But, unlike Chemistry or Physics, this understanding really is beyond the scope of human ability – that’s why it’s a promise from God.

But what is this love of Christ we are to know? First, my short definition of love, “To do what is best for the other person regardless of the effect on me.” Here’s a translation issue that illustrates what happens when people don’t get that. Philippians 2:4 in my Bible reads, “Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.” If you have one of those Bibles that in intellectually honest, some of the words are italicized, meaning that they were supplied by the translators to assist those of us who are defective to understand what thought the translator wishes to convey. If you leave out the extra words that are not actually in the original, it reads this way, “Let each of you look out not for his own interests, but for the interests of others.” The love that Jesus has for us is not a “not only,” “but also” thing. People, even really nice people, have trouble comprehending a point of view in which my interests

simply do not exist. My interests are not just on hold or at a lower priority. My interests are absent. How can I do that? Because I am absolutely confident that God has my back. Trying to satisfy my interests and the interests of others is a losing proposition. I will need to compromise somewhere. The “not only..but also” attitude is saying that I, the amateur, need to help God, the professional, to keep track of my best interests.

Have you noticed how many church-goers focus on the death of Jesus? Certainly, they acknowledge the resurrection. Many of them even try to incorporate the indwelling Spirit into their conceptual package. But the cruelty and pain of Jesus death is a focal point for them. They simply do not understand how Jesus could have gone that direction. So, they decide that it was inevitable, and that He really didn't choose it. My illustration to my teen class is high school football. I know a fellow who is about the age of our older kids. He's a little on the short side, but tremendously strong and very fast. So, when he went out for football, they made him a tailback. He tells this story about himself. “In our first game, my number was called. I took the handoff and headed into the very nice hole the line had opened for me. At full speed, I streaked into that hole only to be met head-on by a linebacker, also going full speed. After shaking out a few cobwebs, I walked to the sideline, took off my helmet, and told the coach, ‘I'm done.’ I never played again.”

For most people, the love of Christ is like that millisecond of impact in the hole. If football were defined by that millisecond, no one with any sense would line up for second down. Looking forward to victory doesn't work all that well, either. Half of all football players lose. In our town, a victory every few seasons is it. Yet, they come back next Friday night, with joy. Victory is not the motivator.

Those who doggedly hang on to their Christianity so they can go to heaven have missed the point. First, their own interests are on the front burner. Second, this life becomes a terrible trial, an experience to be endured, rather than joy – a promise to the family of God.

Paul comes boldly and confidently to God, invoking a promise: the saints will understand real love. For the rest, this comprehension is out of reach, so life for them is a series of compromises in the vain hope of finding love, joy, peace, patience... Not only are these a gift in this life (for the family of God), we are promised that we, by faith, will be eminently able, will have full capacity, in this life, to know perfect love. This love is a part of the name by which we, the family of God, are called, and to which we call others.

“That you be filled with all the fullness of God.” Paul's fifth grant proposal, filled with the fullness of God. If you had each of Paul's prayer points on a test and had to write an essay on each one, I think most people would leave this one for last and hope they ran out of time.

Fullness. What is this fullness? The literal picture is of a basket filled to overflowing. For those who have been to Third-World countries, defined as those without a Wal-Mart, vendors often carry their wares in baskets balanced on their heads. They walk down the sidewalks, the side of the street, or down the line in the road. You know what they are selling because the basket is over-full. The figure of speech is used more than a dozen times in the New Testament to give a vivid descriptor: over-full basket.

That word is used as a descriptor of joy: “You will make me full of joy in Your presence,” “these things we write to you that your joy may be full,” “I hope to come to you and speak face to face, that our joy may be full.”

It is used as a descriptor of God's timing: “when the fullness of time had come,” “in the dispensation of the fullness of time He might gather together in one all things in Christ.”

It's a descriptor of the essence of God that trickles down from the Father through all the lineages to us, those qualities by which we are named as the family of God: "of His fullness we have received," "which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all," "to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ," "in Him all the fullness should dwell," "in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily."

The church is the fullness of Jesus; the individuals are filled to overflowing. When the church is able to edify itself, "we will all come to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." This fullness is a promise to those who have the faith of Jesus, and Paul invokes that promise on behalf of the Christians of Ephesus. This promise, although not often reinforced to Christians in our time, was particularly important to the Christians of the first century. In the next chapter of Ephesians, Paul describes their situation as being on the cusp of being "tossed to and fro on every wind of doctrine." The message was not yet complete – obviously – Paul was still writing his part, and probably several others as well. Those who focus so hard on doing everything just like the New Testament Church tend to overlook that not one of the early Christians brought a New Testament to the assembly. Paul, through the Holy Spirit, promised them fullness, filled to overflowing with the essence and character of Jesus, when they reach the stage of being "joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causing growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love."

The church today has, theoretically, reached that point. Most church-goers just don't know it. We are promised in four different places that God's plan all along has been for Christians to bear an uncanny resemblance to Jesus, a "full," even overflowing, resemblance. I like my personal mental image from the streets of West Africa. We are like those vendors with baskets on their heads. Our baskets are constantly overfull, no matter how much we sell. And what is our commodity? The essence of God, the character of Jesus, living water (yes, there are vendors who sell bags of water in the same way). What I have on my head is all I own in the world – all of my capital is tied up in that basket on my head.

Paul boldly and confidently proposed to God that these promises be granted to the Christians in Ephesus. Paul took a risk. He published his request and stated it as though it were already a done deal. As I have said before, if you ask something of God, if you invoke a promise, and, when you see it come true, you thank God, you're late. That's not faith; that's sight. Either we believe it before it happens, or we don't.

Paul summarizes his requests with, "Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever." Paul not only makes specific requests of God for the Christians in Ephesus, he reminds God that he is certain that his requests undoubtedly reveal how little he is proposing compared to what God can do. All our prayers should be centered around the promises of God, boldly and confidently reminding God that we want to see it happen – now. Paul goes a step further. He acknowledges that his little requests (did they sound little to you?) are nothing compared to how God can fulfill the same promises. Let's not limit God to responses we can picture.

Another over-the-top word choice, "According to the power that works within us." Within us. Didn't you expect, "According to the power that works within Him"? But Paul just requested "To be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, that you may be rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height, to know the

love of Christ which passes understanding, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” We are capable because of His gift.

The family of God is the ultimate in trickle-down economics. The name, the essence of God trickles down through the saints, the lineage of God, the family. Those before us in this lineage of faith experienced great gain in the Kingdom of God, which resulted in job creation for their next links in the chain.

This is not an economic stimulus package. God did not transfer spiritual funds to our account to see what we might generate for ourselves in the short term. These grants have passed down the many lineages of the family, undiluted. But it is not for my benefit. The buck does not stop here. If it does, we are in deep trouble. We are the conduits of great power. But it must pass on to the next generation of the family – correction, to all generations forever and ever – or the whole system backs up and drowns us all.

“To Him be the glory in the church by Christ Jesus.” The power to do it is in us. It’s a promise.