



*"All Flame
celebrates the
wonderful proximity
of God for every
single one of us."*

PETE GREIG
24-7 Prayer

ALL FLAME

Entering into the Life of the Father, Son & Holy Spirit

ANDREW ARNDT

What if the most difficult elements of our lives—our pain, our confusion, our times of spiritual darkness or aridness—actually hold the most promise? In highly readable language, Andrew Arndt combs Scripture, historical Christian witness, his own experience, and three striking contemporary examples to make a compelling case for the redemptive power of suffering. I read *All Flame* in one mesmerized sitting and finished with a sense that something had shifted within me. *All Flame* is an important book. Read, and be changed.

CAROLYN ARENDS, *recording artist; author;*
Renovaré director of education

All Flame may very well be the invitation into intimacy with God your soul has been longing to receive. So many guides to Christian spirituality unwittingly distance the one they are seeking to introduce—through inaccessible mysticism, unattainable pietism, or uninspiring intellectualism—but *All Flame* celebrates the wonderful proximity of God for every single one of us. I particularly appreciate its Trinitarian approach, its rich biographical examples, and above all—its grace.

PETE GREIG, *founder of 24-7 Prayer*

Andrew Arndt has unearthed a tremendous amount of truth and revelation in this timely book. Andrew is serious but fun and scholarly but approachable in these pages. His words are sharp, penetrating, and much needed. You will follow Jesus better after reading this.

BRADY BOYD, *senior pastor of New Life Church;*
author of Extravagant

Herein lies the passion of a contemplative—one who is devoted to the mysterious relationship of God and humanity. This book will inspire you to deepen your faith and give you courage to travel with the Holy Spirit where you've dared not venture before.

PHILEENA HEUERTZ, *founding partner of Gravity, a Center for Contemplative Activism; author of Pilgrimage of a Soul and Mindful Silence*

The ongoing project of spiritual formation requires an intentional integration with the mystery of the triune God. The very nature of God points to the ways we need to be formed. Yet this kind of integration can be difficult for many to present. Enter Andrew Arndt. Andrew is a pastor and thinker who has an uncanny ability to make complicated things accessible. This book is textured and nuanced, and it will provide you with a beautiful framework to become all flame. I highly recommend it.

RICH VILLODAS, *lead pastor of New Life Fellowship*

Andrew Arndt's pastoral heart burns through these pages, bringing to light the goodness of resting in the presence of Father, Son, and Spirit. At a time when Christians are often exhorted to find their identity "in Christ alone," Andrew reminds us to appreciate the vital ministry of each person of the triune God. And he calls us into the grace of the dying life, into the self-surrender that is a hallmark of every season lived within God's Kingdom. Wise, gentle, and incisive, Andrew navigates the spiritual terrain with an awareness that even in the darkness, even when we feel forsaken, there is still flame, nourishing a longing to be united to that holy presence.

TINA BOESCH, *author of Given*

Andrew writes from a depth of biblical and personal experience, mining the riches buried within the joys and sorrows of life, bringing forth the burning glory of a life set fire by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

GEOFF HOLSCLOW, *professor; pastor; coauthor of Does God Really Like Me?*

With *All Flame*, Andrew has written my very favorite sort of book: telling stories to explore ideas we often consider too complex and inaccessible. Andrew explores Bible stories, Kingdom stories, and real-life stories, and the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit seem close enough to touch. Read this book, find yourself in these stories, and encounter the flame of God's presence right here.

CATHERINE McNIEL, *author of Long Days of Small Things and All Shall Be Well*

How do we know God and become known by God? *All Flame* invites us into the wild mystery of the triune God with conversational charm and disarming simplicity.

GLENN PACKIAM, *author of Blessed, Broken, Given*

We may have discovered a worthy successor to the late Eugene Peterson. Without any condescension, we are invited to join Andrew on a journey into the love, holiness, and unity of the Trinity and the paradoxical power of being a devoted follower of Jesus.

CHARLIE SELF, *visiting professor of church history at Assemblies of God Theological Seminary*

The most important thing in life, said Dallas Willard, is to develop deep friendship with the Holy Trinity. This book by Andrew Arndt serves as the perfect guide into the depths. There's no doubt in my mind that *All Flame* will serve as a sort of burning-bush experience for many.

DANIEL GROTHE, *author of Chasing Wisdom*

Pastors whose lives exude the love of God are far rarer than they should be. Andrew Arndt is one such pastor, and when you read *All Flame*, you'll understand why. This book will make you think, but more importantly, it will expand your soul.

JR ROZKO, *national director of Missio Alliance*

This book is like a brand-new song we've always known. Andrew so eloquently writes us into passion. A burning for union with God so true that it lights up everything. This is the sound of something holy, and I plan to listen on repeat.

JON EGAN, *worship leader at New Life Church*

In *All Flame*, Andrew Arndt exquisitely blends the Scriptures, the Church's great thinkers, and his own personal and pastoral experience into a candid and compelling look at the Christian life.

JASON R. JACKSON, *associate lead pastor at New Life
Downtown*

This book begins with the story of a liar who stole his brother's life and ends with the story of a saint whose life was stolen from him. In those stories, and in what lies between them, Arndt

reminds us, sometimes gently, sometimes not, that God is holy and we are not—*yet*. This is a book that won't let us forget that in spite of the fact we are more like the liar than the saint, there's still a promise in the threat of the gospel: God is nearer than our pain, even if sometimes that nearness is itself painful.

CHRIS GREEN, *pastor at The Summit Church*

Arndt delivers at every level, calling Christians to reconsider the life-altering reality of the Triune God and his gospel. With creativity and clarity, Arndt challenges us to awaken to God, fear not the trials, and arrive at Christlike holiness.

BENJAMIN QUINN, *assistant professor of theology and history of ideas at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary*

Andrew Arndt plunges us into the mystery of the triune God and shows how the flames of heaven heal the wounds of humanity and vanquish the gates of hell.

BRETT DAVIS, *teaching pastor at New Life Church*

ALL FLAME

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A N D R E W A R N D T



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*For Mandi,
and our four kids:
Ethan, Gabe,
Bella, and Liam.*

I can't believe God gave us to one another.

Thanks be to God for this indescribable gift.

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INTRODUCTION

*Surely the LORD is in this place,
and I was not aware of it.*

GENESIS 28:16

If you will, you can become all flame.

ABBA JOSEPH TO ABBA LOT



Hi. My name is Andrew. I've been a pastor since 2006 and a follower of Jesus all my life.

I want to say some things to you about God. And about being human. And about the intersection of those two things.

What happens when God and the human life get tangled up with one another? What does it look like? What does it feel like? When we decide to yield our lives to the God whose character we see in the person of Jesus, what should we expect? What does it do to us? What are the core movements of the spiritual life?

The truth is, “God and the human life getting tangled up with one another” is as urgent a reality now as it has ever been. The apostle Paul many centuries ago wrote that “the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.”¹ In Paul’s vision of reality, the redemption of

humanity in the holy love of God and the healing of the cosmos were vitally bound up with one another.

Our time is desperate for the sons and daughters of the living God to be revealed. They are called sons and daughters because their lives have come to reflect the character of the God who is all holy love, and as such, they represent an ongoing and deliberate advance against the darkness of our world. They are peacemakers, reconcilers, sages. They are men and women of God who, having given themselves over to the ecstatic and agonizing process of spiritual transformation, are able to bring liberation, blessing, and healing to a world grown weary with sin.

I believe that Paul's dream resonates with us because it was and is God's dream *first*. The trouble is, most of us never get there. We bail out on the process of transformation—by which our lives come to represent the character of God—before he is through with us.

This is a tragedy of the first order, and it has to do—I believe—with our expectations. While creation waits in eager *expectation* for the children of God to be revealed, many of us simply *expect* to be able to pray a prayer or sign a statement of faith and have everything turn out hunky-dory. We have little concept of faith as a journey, a story, a sometimes-gut-wrenching process by which holiness is formed in us. And so, when *crises* in the journey of faith hit, we think that something is malfunctioning. Overwhelmed by disillusionment, we opt out of the long, beautiful, and often-painful process of spiritual transformation, and the children of God remain veiled to the world's eyes.

This is as ruinous as it is unnecessary. God has so much

more for all of us. Through all of life's ups and downs, triumphs and tragedies, mountaintop experiences and places of gnawing loneliness, he can and will make us sons and daughters—living, breathing, walking images-in-miniature of his own glory and goodness—if we'll let him. We will find our fullness in him, and the world will be healed.

That, in a nutshell, is what this book is about.

BECOMING AWARE

There's a fabulous story about a man named Jacob told in the Old Testament. He's fleeing from his family, having cheated his twin brother, Esau (the firstborn), out of the birthright *and* their father Isaac's blessing. And now, at his father's bidding, Jacob is headed to a place called Haran² to try to find a wife for himself. It's a big moment for the young man—a cocktail of tension and hope and heartache, spiked with terror and possibility.

I'm sure you've been there. I have too. Moments when you feel great tectonic forces beneath your feet causing the ground of your once comfortable and predictable life to buckle and quake, and you know that whatever the outcome, things will never be the same. There will be no going back to how things were. And so—because there is no other option—you put it all on the line, holding on for dear life.

That's what was going on with Jacob when we catch up with him somewhere outside Haran. He's been traveling all day and decides to stop to sleep for a while. Using a stone for a pillow, the physically and emotionally exhausted Jacob falls into a deep sleep. The writer of Genesis tells us what happened during Jacob's slumber:

He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the LORD, and he said: "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."³

God appears to Jacob. In the midst of Jacob's questions and concerns, in the midst of his stress and heartache over the rupture in his relationship with his brother, in the midst of his hopes and dreams . . . *God appears to Jacob*, both as the exalted, transcendent, sovereign God (which is what the writer is saying by situating God above the stairway) and also as the everywhere-present one,⁴ affirming to Jacob that no matter the circumstance or appearance, "I am *with you* and will watch over you *wherever you go*" and "*I will not leave you.*"

I'm a big dreamer. For me, most nights are jam-packed with dreams. I don't *often*, however, have dreams like this. Dreams of angels ascending and descending and a ladder stretching from earth to heaven and the Lord of all creation making solemn vows to me . . .

Apparently, Jacob didn't either.

The magnitude of it shook him out of his slumber, and he

remarked to himself, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it.”⁵ And at that very moment of awareness, terror overtakes him. The Scripture says that “[Jacob] was afraid and said, ‘How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.’”⁶

I love that line. “Surely the LORD is in this place,” Jacob muses, “*and I was not aware of it.*” Isn’t that, more or less, the story with most of us, most of the time?

A DEEPER KIND OF “KNOWING”

To add a little depth to the picture, it is interesting to observe that the Hebrew word that the writer of Genesis puts on Jacob’s lips for “aware” is the word *yada`*. Generally speaking, *yada`* is translated “know.” As in “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not *know* it.” It wasn’t until Jacob fell into the depths of his dream-filled slumber that he finally “woke up” to the all-encompassing presence of God, making promises, willing a bright future for him.

So far, so good.

But there’s more still. When *we* today hear the word *know*, we generally think of *information*. I “know” my Social Security number. You “know” your parents’ birthdays (maybe). We “know” that Columbus sailed the ocean blue in fourteen hundred and ninety-two. That sort of thing. *Information*.

But for the ancient Hebrews, *yada`*, while including what we might call *information*, went way beyond it. Here’s a good example of the deep meaning of the word *yada`*, from earlier in Genesis: “Now Adam *yada`* Eve his wife, and she conceived.”⁷

Ahem.

Clearly, *yada`* is more than mere “information.” *Yada`* is deep, experiential knowledge of the other. Adam did not “know” in some kind of detached, academic way that Eve was five feet, six inches tall with brown hair, blue-green eyes, a nice smile, an easy laugh, and a winning personality (I might have just described my wife there). . . . This is about, well, the kind of (what theologians would call) “comingling” of personhood where the “knower” knows-and-is-known in the deepest, most intimate ways possible. It’s an up-close-and-personal, highly relational kind of knowing. It is a knowing that, to put it mildly, is *productive*. It is *fruitful*. Adam and Eve “knew” each other, and Cain came forth. We *know* the Lord, and our lives become fruitful.

That “knowing” of God’s encompassing presence is what Jacob says he *did not have* until his fast-asleep vision of God pulled the blinders back from his eyes. From that point on, wherever he went and whatever he did, Jacob would live his life with an intimate, experiential knowledge that in all things and at all times, *it was God with whom he dealt*. And he would be fruitful as a result.

WRESTLING WITH GOD

Years later, the paths of the estranged brothers Jacob and Esau would cross. Jacob was riddled with anxiety. Sending a caravan ahead of him, he remained behind, and once more, Jacob meets God, in a scene that has captivated the imaginations of skeptic and believer alike for generations:

Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him
till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not

overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."

But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

The man asked him, "What is your name?"

"Jacob," he answered.

Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."

Jacob said, "Please tell me your name."

But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there.

So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."⁸

Jacob, rife with anxiety over the meeting with Esau, wrestling internally with the imminent encounter with his now very powerful big brother, in fact wrestles with God. And in the encounter, he is changed. No longer is his name Jacob (the name means something like "deceiver"—a kind of permanent black mark on his character). Now his name is Israel, which means something like "he wrestles" or "he struggles." The man—God, as it turns out—says as much to him: "You have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."

Jacob recognizes that he has encountered the infinite God in the finite struggle and calls the place Peniel—which means "face of God"—saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared." Hear this:

*In all things,
at all times,
it is God with whom you deal.*

The sooner we come to grips with this, the sooner we “know” the face of God in, with, and under the circumstances of our lives to shape us for his glory and draw us to himself, the better. When we engage honestly and fearlessly with God in the stuff and substance of our lives, we are changed. We become who God means us to be—creatures radiant with his own life and holiness.

On the other hand, when we shrink back from that knowing, when we deliberately act as though God does not exist or that our choices one way or another do not really matter, when we fail to wake up to his presence at all and instead live in denial or (worse) spend our lives blaming our circumstances and situations, we become shadowy, opaque, unreal. We diminish.

I don't want to diminish.

I know you don't, either.

BECOMING ALL FLAME

I want to grow in what the ancient men and women of faith often called “union with God”—that state of being where God is so present to and alive in us that it is difficult to know where God ends and we begin. Where by grace we grow into “God-likeness.” Where we become like the burning bush of Exodus 3—on fire with glory, but not consumed. *Burning but not burned up . . .*

“Glory” was one of the apostle Paul's characteristic ways of

talking about this state of being. Addressing a group of believers in the ancient city of Corinth, he wrote,

We all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.⁹

I love that. Paul is saying that as we face the living God, something profound happens to us—we are transformed into his image, his likeness, with glory that always increases and never stops. Ever. We keep changing and expanding both to *look more like God* and to *contain and display more of his glory*.

There's a story told in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* that illustrates this dynamic beautifully. Abba Lot said to Abba Joseph, "Abba, as far as I can I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace and as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?"

In answer to Lot's question, Joseph "stood up and stretched his hands towards heaven." As he did so, "his fingers became like ten lamps of fire," and he said to Lot, "*If you will, you can become all flame.*"¹⁰

"All flame." Christianity insists that the destination of the human life is glory. God's glory. Surrendering to the work of the Holy Spirit, we can become aflame with the love and goodness of God. We can be holy as he is holy.

I've seen it with my own eyes. I'm sure you have too. One of the great joys of growing up in the church is that, for all the ugliness I've seen, I've also been witness to the lives of people who were marked by undeniable goodness, beauty, and

others-preferring, ego-abandoning, utterly humble and hopeful holiness. People who made knowing God their highest aim in life and became radiant as a result. People whose wisdom and virtue and compassion and joy routinely left me inspired and provoked—that my own life would similarly reflect God’s glory.

In the church of my childhood we often said that “God is no respecter of persons.” I still believe that. I do not think that this is the special call of a select few. Or that God makes it easier on some than others. I think this is on the table for all of us. I believe that in my bones. We—all of us—can know God. We can, like Jacob, see him in the stuff and substance of our lives. In all the struggle of being human, we can recognize that at the depth of it all, what—no—*whom* we are really “struggling” with is God. And we can be changed by it all, to look more like the God in whose image we are made, who calls us into glory.

THE SHAPE OF THIS BOOK

I want to take you on a journey through what I think are the core movements of the spiritual life. From our first awakenings to God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—through inevitable times of spiritual desolation, confusion, and agony, and out into what the psalmist called the “spacious place”¹¹ of his love and goodness.

Because God, in the Christian imagination, is *triune*—that is, when we say “God,” we mean the ongoing, eternally happy relationship that is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a relationship that God in his goodness opens up to us, so that we might become sharers of the divine life—I believe that the structure of our spiritual experience is also “triune” in its shape. Which means that the *structure of this book* will also be triune.

In part 1 I want to talk about what it looks like to *come awake* to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit, and to have our lives shaped by that threefold divine reality.

In part 2 I want to give you language for recognizing that same triune presence in the hard places of our lives—where we feel desolate, lost, and agonized. Places where most people abandon the quest. Where the face of the Father is hard to see, where following the Son takes us to places we didn't expect, where the Spirit's presence *burns* and *unmakes* as much as it *quenches* and *soothes*. The make-or-break places.

And in part 3 I want to give you a sense of where, ultimately, God wants to take us—*who* he wants to make us—in and through it all by providing character sketches of three figures from the last one hundred years of church history who lived the journey well, leaving examples for us to follow.

A quick note: Sometimes books on spiritual formation make it seem as though the life of faith is essentially linear. That is, with God's grace and a little of our effort, we can move cleanly from "stage 1" to "stage 2" to "stage 3" and beyond. The whole thing can start to feel a little artificial, and perhaps too *easy*, like making a balsa-wood airplane (does anyone do that anymore?) or building an IKEA chair. *Just do this, then this, then this, and voilà!*

I'm suspicious of books like that. You should be too. The life of faith does not work that way. Like any relationship or organic process, it is a little herky-jerky, even at its beautiful best. So, I am not suggesting that we *first* come awake and *then* "graduate" so as to pass through fire and *then finally* arrive at the state Paul describes in Romans 8. Rather, I am suggesting that in the unpredictability, the *surprise*, of the life of faith, we

will often experience all three, together at once, each movement intersecting and coinhering with the others. You might think of it as a spiral. We move around the same axis point (the triune God) but never return to the same place twice, wheeling ever upward and outward toward glory. That, I submit, is what we're signing up for.

I think it's going to be fun. Let's get started.



For each chapter, I'll provide some questions for reflection and a prayer to pray as you digest what you've just read. You'll also find questions for discussion at the end of the book, to aid in processing what you're reading in community.

FOR REFLECTION

What resonates with you about the picture of the spiritual life presented here in the introduction?

PRAYER

Almighty God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

I enter this journey with anticipation.

You see my hope and fear alike.

Take me by my hand.

Lead me into your glory.

Help me trust you through it all.

Amen.



PART 1

COMING AWAKE

*The spiritual life begins with our awakening to God:
to the Father who loves us;
to the Son who calls us; and
to the Spirit who breathes upon and fills us.*

*As we begin to surrender to the threefold work
of the triune God,
we find:
new identity;
new purpose; and
new vitality.*

AWAKENING TO THE FATHER

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!

1 JOHN 3:1

Jesus has made it clear to me that . . . just as he has his home with the Father, so do I.

HENRI NOUWEN, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*



Let's start with the most basic idea of all: To know God at all is to know him as *Father*. One of the church's oldest confessions of faith, the Apostles' Creed, says, "I believe in God, *the Father* Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth."¹ It is, to put it one way, the church's first term describing God. Who is God? According to the creed, he is "the *Father* Almighty."

Likewise, to know him as *Father* is to know ourselves as his *children*. When God starts making a home in us, forming us into the persons he desires us to be, one of the first things he does is this: He plants the dynamic of the Father-child relationship in our hearts. He gives us a name and a place with him and secures us in his love, answering our primal need to *belong*, to know that we are not alone.

When I say that the need for this kind of relationship is

“primal,” I am saying that it is hardwired into the human frame. If you look around, you’ll see it everywhere. There’s a reason that videos of military fathers reuniting with their kids get millions of views on Facebook and YouTube. There’s a reason people smile when they see toddlers hoisted up on their dads’ shoulders, dad and toddler alike grinning ear to ear. There’s a reason folks choke up when adult sons and daughters honor their deceased fathers in well-written eulogies. Of course there are equally compelling stories on either side of the relationships between children and mothers, and of course for every such demonstration of father-love there are equally compelling stories of fathering failures. I’d like to suggest that both the resonance and righteous anger we feel at scenes of good and bad fathering are signals of something deeper, something basic to who we are.

A WINDOW INTO DEEP REALITY

“One day,” the Gospel of Luke tells us, “Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.’”²

Luke’s commentary gives us an insight into the disciples’ fascination with Jesus. By this time, they had logged enough miles with him to have closely observed at least two things. First, they’d seen the peculiar power and authority with which he conducted his ministry. Teachings and healings and miracles and the marginalized and outcast drawn near and blessed and given a place among the new community forming around him . . . it’s no wonder that multitudes flocked to Jesus wherever he went. And the disciples had a front-row seat to the action.

That front-row seat gave them a window into the second

thing: They'd seen the unusual intimacy with which he carried out his relationship with God. Jesus was not simply a solitary, charismatic, supernaturally gifted wonder-worker—and the disciples knew it. No, Jesus was a man who conducted his ministry out of what one of his friends would later call a “closest relationship” with God.³ The disciples had repeatedly seen the dynamics of this “closest relationship” in action—a public ministry marked by frequent and regular times of withdrawal from the crowds in order to reestablish his communion with God. This was the pattern of the ministry of Jesus. Unusual power grounded in profoundest intimacy. An identity rooted *somewhere*, in *someone* else. And the disciples witnessed it.

I sometimes think about what that must have been like for them. After a busy day of preaching and teaching and healing and driving out demons . . . to be able to retire *with the rabbi himself to a place of prayer*. The access that Jesus gives them to his prayer life is astounding. Luke tells us, in what has to strike our modern ears as at least *odd*, of a time where “Jesus was praying in private *and his disciples were with him*.”⁴

This seems to have been his habit. We get the sense that whatever was happening in Jesus' prayer life, he wanted his disciples to see it. He wanted them to peer through the window of his relationship with God, and there to gaze on the heart of reality. Which is why he gives them full and unconditioned access; he is trying to whet their spiritual appetites as they smell the complex, exquisite savor of his own communion with God.

And they do. Something about it clearly delighted and attracted them, and so on this particular day, they finally just blurt out, “Lord, teach us to pray.”

And, as he does so often in the Gospels, Jesus gladly obliges.

WHEN YOU PRAY, SAY . . .

What fascinates me so about this interaction between Jesus and his disciples is the *way in which* Jesus responds to the request. He doesn't give them a long lecture on the theology of prayer. He doesn't lay out for them helpful advice, "tricks of the trade," or four easy steps to getting their prayers answered. He doesn't take them into deep, metaphysical speculations on the return of the soul to its Source in prayer. None of that. With Jesus there is no flight into abstraction.

What he gives them instead are *words*. Bald, bare, unvarnished *words*. "When you pray," he said to them, "say:"

Father,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins,
for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.
And lead us not into temptation.⁵

"Do it like this," Jesus says to them. Like a parent teaching a child to ride a bicycle, or a piano teacher instructing a new student in the rudiments of playing properly, Jesus gives concrete, practical instructions. *If you want to know what I know, if you want to see what I see, if you want to experience God the way I experience God, start here: Say these words.*

And the first word of prayer, according to Jesus, is this: *Father*. Everything else he teaches his disciples to pray flows from it and back to it.

I do not think most of us sufficiently appreciate that Jesus poises *Father* as the first word of prayer. Just recently I was leading a worship service where we recited the familiar words of the Lord's Prayer together.⁶

Our Father, we said, *who art in heaven . . .*

We then proceeded to blaze through the list of requests:

Hallowed be . . .

Thy Kingdom . . .

Thy will . . .

Give us this day . . .

Forgive us our trespasses . . .

Lead us not into temptation . . .

We're a charismatic congregation, so—as you might imagine—you could feel the emotion building as we moved through the prayer. By the time we got to the closing affirmation—*Thine is the Kingdom and the power and the glory. For ever and ever. Amen*—praise erupted. It was soul stirring and beautiful.

Now I get it, not every recitation of the Lord's Prayer is as emotional and climactic as what I've just described. (I am also aware that in English, the Lord's Prayer doesn't start with the word *Father* but with *Our*; in Greek, it begins with *Father*.) My point is that it is all too easy to miss the significance of what Jesus is doing in ordering the prayer as he has. We need to learn to stop in order to relish the wonder and gift of the name that Jesus gives us to call the God he knows so well: "Father."

THE GOD JESUS KNEW

It's worth considering that Jesus, being God, could have given his disciples any term of address for God. And surely this is the

moment to do it. If you want to help your disciples see God the way you see God, *then every word counts—and the first word most of all*. Don't waste this moment, Jesus. A lot depends on it.

That being the case, he could have told them to call God literally anything. Let's be playful for a minute. If Jesus were a modern spiritual guru, he might have said,

O Great Mystery, who everywhere surrounds us . . .

O Wholly Other, above and beyond us . . .

O Formless Absolute, Ground of Being . . .

O Unknowable One, who is and yet is not . . .

He *could have*. He *didn't*. Instead, he told them to call God "Father."

It turns out that this was one of the things that were new and surprising about Jesus. When you read the Gospels, you cannot escape the conclusion that his *preferred way of talking about God* was "Father."

When exactly he started doing this no one knows, but according to Luke, it began early. In one of the few glimpses of the pre-adult Messiah we have in the Gospels, Luke has a twelve-year-old Jesus sitting in the Temple courts asking the teachers of the Jewish law questions. He and his parents, Luke tells us, had been visiting Jerusalem for the high holy Feast of the Passover, and upon its conclusion, his parents began the journey home to Nazareth, not realizing that the precocious Jesus had stayed behind in Jerusalem.

They traveled, according to Luke, *for an entire day* before realizing their blunder, and then in abject panic hightailed it back to the Holy City—another day's journey—to search for their adolescent son. The next day they found him, engaged in lively theological discussion with Jerusalem's brightest and best.

Luke reports that “everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers.”⁷ Even from a young age, his insight into the character and ways of God was profound. “When his parents saw him,” Luke tells us, “they were *astonished*.”⁸ Obviously, Jesus, separated from his parents for three whole days, seems perfectly confident and comfortable in his surroundings. That is telling. Jesus’ relationship with God grounded him, existentially securing him in a way that baffled his parents.

Mother Mary wastes no words in admonishing him: “Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.” And Jesus replies in words that will define the rest of his life: “Why were you searching for me? *Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?*” Jesus, even from this young age, lives in an experience of God’s fatherhood greater than, encompassing and eclipsing of, his human experience of father- (and mother-) hood. As was so often the case with Jesus, his hearers, Mary and Joseph, “did not understand what he was saying to them.”⁹

My Father’s house . . . Jesus knew God in a way that others did not. Likewise, Jesus was apparently *anchored in that reality* in a way that no one else was—hence his experience of fearlessness when separated from his human parents. “I had to be in *my Father’s house*,” he says to Mary and Joseph, adding to their astonishment.



We need to feel the impact of this. None of the Jewish people of Jesus’ day knew God like Jesus did. The Old Testament,

of course, has its moments of using the imagery of “fatherhood” to describe God. Moses said that the Lord carried his people through the wilderness “as a father carries his son.”¹⁰ The prophet Isaiah said to God, “You, LORD, are our Father.”¹¹ The Lord himself, speaking from the lips of Jeremiah, says, “I am Israel’s father, and Ephraim is my firstborn son.”¹² But mostly those references take a back seat to terms of address like *Lord, God Almighty, Lord of Hosts, Rock, Shield, Deliverer*, and of course, the utterly sacred name *Yahweh*—a name so definitive as an identity marker that when God gives it to Moses on Mount Horeb, he states matter-of-factly, “This is my name forever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation.”¹³

My name forever . . . It’s the Old Testament’s version of “Do it like this.” So sacred was that name that many Jews of the later Old Testament period, out of reverence, refused to utter it at all, preferring the more generic “Adonai” (Lord) or, simply, “The Name.” The message could hardly have been clearer: *This is who God is.*

And then Jesus comes along, and he takes a little-used Old Testament image and makes it the central lens by which we are to know the God he came to reveal. Some 150 times in the canonical Gospels, Jesus refers to God as “Father”—far and away, statistically speaking, his favorite term for God. And when we see him *personally addressing God*, he *only* uses the term “Father.”¹⁴ The conclusion is inescapable: God, for Jesus, is “Dad.”

But it is the *experience* of “God as Dad” for Jesus that is so unusual. The Gospels make it clear that Jesus experienced God as unambiguously delighted in him, and that he likewise experienced himself as God’s happy and adoring child. At the beginning

of Jesus' ministry—his baptism in the river Jordan—the divine voice of Yahweh thunders from the clouds in public affirmation, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”¹⁵ The Father is head over heels for his Son. And the Son returns the love and delight in a ceaseless flow of obedient love. As Jesus says in the Gospel of John, “I always do what pleases him.”¹⁶

The Father in heaven and the beloved Son, Jesus: Here is a relationship that is greater and purer than anything we have ever seen. It is marked by total delight; it is completely free of contempt; it is devoid of envy; it is a perfect and unbroken confluence of wills. Which is why in Christianity we often describe the relationship between the Father and the Son as a “communion”—it is a perfect coming together, an adoring rapport, one with the other, in which there is no hidden agenda, no attempt to wrest the self from the other, no shadow of turning.

Try imagining the spirit of the joyful reunion of the military dad with his kids, written across the entirety of each of their lives, totally unbroken, unstained by ego, selfishness, and fear. *That would be a pale reflection of what the Father shares with his Son, Jesus.* The Father and the Son know themselves in each other. The Father is *the Father of the Son*—knowing himself in the face of his Son. And the Son is *the Son of the Father*—knowing himself in the delight of his Father.

And it is all, always, forever joy.

THE HEART OF REALITY

It is good for us to turn our imaginations as often as we can to the dynamic of the relationship between God the Father and his Son, Jesus—because when we do, we are seeing nothing less

than the texture and heart of all reality. God, after all, is the one in whom “we live and move and have our being,” according to the apostle Paul.¹⁷ Everything that exists by and through and unto the relationship between God the Father and Jesus, his Son.

One of the great teachers of the ancient church, St. Augustine, had a very helpful way of talking about this. In a massive treatise on the Trinity, he introduced the term *vestigium trinitatis*—“vestiges of the Trinity.” Augustine thought that God—being the God he is—left traces, “vestiges” of his nature in the created order. We might think of them as “signatures” of his character and being. Since the nature of God is Father and Son (in the Holy Spirit), one of the central vestiges discernible in creation is the dynamic between the Father and the Son that I just described.¹⁸

The created order taken as a whole is perhaps the most obvious example of this. The Father begets the Son from all eternity, and the Son yields his life obediently to the Father from all eternity. The life of the Trinity consists of that movement and flow. *In an analogous way*, creation comes into being by an act of the Father’s will and is sustained *as long as he wills it and as long as it remains in proper relationship to him*. If the relationship is severed, the creation spins, withers, and dies.

On the *human level*, the stakes are much higher. We also bear the “trace” of the relationship between the Father and the Son, *but so much more than the creation does*—for we have a *choice*. Will we yield our lives to the Father as the Son does? The Scripture teaches us that our first parents, Adam and Eve, did not. And neither do we, their children. The result of this

is that we are alienated from the Father and are desperately homesick—though we may not recognize it as such.

HEALING FATHERHOOD

On the human level, the most tragic part of this is the way this sense of alienation touches our relationships with one another. As I drew attention to earlier, many fathers are simply awful to their children—which means that Jesus’ words about God’s “fatherhood” (or *any* invocation of “parenthood” applied to God) are not easy pills to swallow. Maybe that’s you. Maybe your parents were abusive, or distant, or aloof, and your relationship, if you have one at all, is unhealthy, conflicted, or worse—severed completely. Maybe there’s a part of you that recoils from the idea of relating to God as “father” because the parent figures in your life were such a disaster.

I cannot tell you how many times as a pastor I have sat with men and women of all ages who chart the beginning of their lives’ issues with “Well, my dad . . .” or “Well, my mom . . .” The relationship, for better or for worse, *is a vestigium trinitatis*. There’s no getting around it. When it breaks down, we spin.

And yet, for as many of those stories as I’ve heard, for as much anger and bitterness as I’ve seen, I’ve also observed that the deepest parts of us ache for the blessing of father and mother. Maybe that’s you, too. When you gaze into the relationship between Jesus and his Father, there is a powerful and ineffaceable part of you that longs to find your place in that perfection. You are desperate to know what Jesus knows.

Now—full disclosure here—let me just say that I’ve been blessed in my own life to come from a long line of great dads.

On the Arndt side of the family, I am the fifth in an unbroken series of firstborn sons. My own oldest son, Ethan, is the sixth. Herman Arndt, Martin Arndt, James Arndt, William Arndt, Andrew Arndt, and Ethan Arndt. A great deal of my own sense of identity comes from the fact that I have a place in that line of those good, decent, godly men. In fact, on my desk I have a picture of myself with my grandpa Jim—me a toothy, beaming six-year-old, leaning back against his chest, with his massive arm around me. It reminds me that I come from somewhere, that I have a name, a place, an identity. I am an *Arndt*.

But here's the thing—being an Arndt who comes from this line of good men is not enough. I'm not saying that *theoretically*, either. I'm saying it *experientially*. Part of the process of spiritual maturity is coming to grips with all of the places in which our family heritage is not and could never be enough. It is learning to recognize where character flaws have been passed on from generation to generation, where sin-stained perceptions of the world have been encoded in our understanding of reality, where things we took for granted as “normal” are—on further review—out of sync with the Kingdom of God. As it turns out, we cannot live by *vestiges* alone.

AWAKENING TO THE FATHER

This is an enormous part of what Christianity means when it talks about “original sin.” It is a way of saying that, in my case, none of those Arndt men I've told you about, none of their wives, none of their children, and none of the myriad relationships in the Arndt family stand outside of the need for grace, for redemption. All of those dads—as good as they were—wronged

their kids. And so did the moms. And all of the kids in various ways dishonored their dads. And their moms. We are all, the Scriptures teach us, born in sin. Which means that *at our best* we are partial and incomplete in our goodness. *At our worst* we are fatally flawed, even deliberately wicked. Tragically, sin is embedded in our relationships with each other, throwing them off-kilter. The legacy of brokenness given to us by our first parents, Adam and Eve, is passed down from generation to generation. Every human family is sin sick.

One of the beautiful things, therefore, about coming to know *God* as Father is the way in which the experience of *God's* fatherhood gently overwhelms and begins to heal the broken experiences of human family that have marred each and every one of us.

I said earlier that the human father-child relationship is a picture of what the Gospel writers wanted us to see when we think of the inner life of God—the Father and the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit. But we can't stop there. If we do, we'll wind up with a wrong picture of who God is. The Gospel writers wanted us to see that *the divine life—the Father in the Son and the Son in the Father—is so much better than any human parent-child relationship could ever be*. At one point, Jesus described the relationship between dads and their kids and then concluded his teaching by saying, “If you, then, though you are evil” behave in a kind and gracious way toward your kids, “how much more will your Father in heaven.”¹⁹

The “how much more” is what sets the fatherhood of God on an entirely different level from anything we have seen or experienced in our relationships with one another. Jesus is saying that the human father-child relationship is *at best* a pale

reflection of that everlasting union of delight that is the Father and the Son. Which is why right next to the picture on my desk of little Andrew and Grandpa Jim, I have another picture leaning in front of a small wooden cross—the Dutch painter Rembrandt’s *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. In it, the bedraggled prodigal—head shaved and draped in threadbare clothing like a slave—buries his head in his elderly father’s chest, embraced by the one whose love he had once scorned.

It is a picture not just of *grace* but of a very specific *kind* of grace—the grace of coming home to the Father’s house, returning once again to name and place and identity. Henri Nouwen remarks that while the Prodigal Son was in the far country, he “hit the bedrock of his sonship.” He notes,

When he found himself desiring to be treated as one of the pigs, he realized that he was not a pig but a human being, a son of his father. . . . Once he had come again in touch with the truth of his sonship, he could hear—although faintly—the voice calling him the Beloved and feel—although distantly—the touch of blessing.²⁰

One of the most profound awakenings I’ve ever had to the love of the Father came when I was sixteen or so. It was the kind of singular experience of God that leaves a permanent mark on you, changing your whole life. To me, though I’d never really wandered, it felt like a homecoming—like *Knowing you this way, God, is what I was made for*. I have Rembrandt’s picture on my desk to remind me that whatever else I learn or experience of God, *I will never graduate beyond the need to “come home” to the Father’s love*. It is the original experience of faith—learning

to call God “Dad”—and I need to return to it as often as I can. I’ll never move beyond it.

And what I find is that when I step into the experience of God’s fatherhood, it overwhelms and heals all the places in which being an Arndt was never and could never be enough. I am a better son to my dad, William, and my mom, Nancy, because of my growing experience of God’s fathering love. Likewise, I am a better husband to my wife, Mandi, and a better dad to my kids, Ethan, Gabe, Bella, and Liam, because of my growing experience of God’s fathering love.

GOD RETURNING US TO GOD

It can do this for you, too. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve seen it. I said earlier that as a pastor, every week I talk to men and women who did not just walk through *deficient* or *defective* experiences with their own fathers (or mothers) but *who suffered in unimaginable ways* at the hands of their human parents. As often as not, the hurt and pain inflicted on these precious people caused their lives to spin wildly out of control as they wandered into the “far country” in search of anything to soothe the pain. *And then*, as the story so often goes, *the fathering love of God found them*, awakened in them a sense of dignity, place, and belonging, led them home, and began to make right all that their biological fathers and mothers had made wrong.

That is what the fathering love of God does to us. It does in us what we cannot do for ourselves—healing and elevating our relationships with one another to the level of his love. It takes the *vestiges* and reconstitutes them inside the reality. As Paul writes in Colossians,

So spacious is he, so expansive, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding. Not only that, but all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe—people and things, animals and atoms—get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies, all because of his death, his blood that poured down from the cross.²¹

And that is the *other* reason I have the Rembrandt picture on my desk. I told you that the picture is positioned in front of a small wooden cross. The symbolism is deliberate. When I look at the picture of the prodigal and his father, I know that I am not just seeing *myself* returning home of my own volition. By myself, I can't return home. Neither can you. Only God can do that for us. Only God can return us to God.

The twentieth-century theologian Karl Barth grasped this with astounding clarity. In his discussion of the doctrine of reconciliation, Barth took the parable of the Prodigal Son and gave it a depth of meaning that most of us don't see. For Barth, the entry of Christ Jesus into the world was nothing less than "the way of the Son of God into the far country."²² Jesus, the eternally obedient Son of the Father, emptied himself of his majesty, taking, as Paul said so beautifully, the form of a servant²³ in order to go into the far country, to find us in our fearful, bedraggled, confused prodigality, and to bring us home to the God he knows, to his Father's house. Barth writes,

In being gracious to man in Jesus Christ, He [God] also goes into the far country, into the evil society of this being which is not God and against God. He does

not shrink from him. He does not pass him by. . . .
 He does not leave him to his own devices. He makes
 his situation His own. . . . God is not proud. In His
 high majesty He is humble. It is in this high humility
 that He speaks and acts as the God who reconciles the
 world to Himself.²⁴

The journey of Jesus the Son to the Cross, for Barth, was God's lowering himself to the extreme limits of where our rebellion takes us in order to return us to God. *God brings us home to God.* And so, when I look at Rembrandt's picture on my desk, leaning against the cross, I am seeing *at one and the same time* my own sonship restored *and the Son who has restored it*—and continues to restore it, with consequences that ramify not only into my own biological family, but out into the world as well.

That, friend, is a central part of the mystery of "Christ in us"—which the New Testament talks so often about. Jesus does not just *show* us the God he knows as "Father." He invites us *to participate in* the relationship that he has with his Father, and in so doing, he heals us.

Listen to how Jesus himself put it in his final prayer for his disciples in John 17:

Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.²⁵

It turns out that in making the Father known to us, the love that the Father has for the Son himself is implanted (in ever-increasing measure) in us, *which, for Jesus, seems to be a way of saying that he himself is implanted in us.* We are, beyond all comprehension, *included in that perfect union of love, delight, and harmony that is the relationship between the Father and the Son.*

This is what it means to come awake to God the Father.

FOR REFLECTION

Where do you need to experience God's fatherhood more in your daily life?

PRAYER

*Almighty God, heavenly Father,
Thank you for how you have revealed yourself in Jesus.
Teach me to know you like he does,
to experience you like he does,
to trust you like he does.
May your Spirit plant the "Abba" cry in me afresh,
and let the experience of that cry heal my life.
Through Christ the Son,
Amen.*