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College Baptist Church

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### **The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ**

1 Peter 1:3-9

*"We believe in God the Father, an infinite, personal spirit, perfect in holiness, wisdom, power, and love. We believe that He infallibly foreknows all that shall come to pass, that He concerns Himself mercifully in the affairs of each person, that He hears and answers prayer, and that He saves from sin and death all who come to Him through Jesus Christ."*

Two weeks ago we began to look together in our Sunday morning services at College Baptist at a series of 12 doctrinal affirmations of the Baptist General Conference. We voted as a church to affiliate with this conference of Baptist Churches, and it's important to us to understand what that vote means doctrinally. It doesn't represent any notable changes that I am aware of from the beliefs College Baptist Church has been committed to for 149 years. (We'll be celebrating our 150th anniversary this coming fall.) But it is good to deepen our understanding of these longstanding doctrinal foundations of our shared faith as a congregation.

So far we've studied the first two of the 12 affirmations. There are copies available on the back table if you'd like to see them all. And we'll publish them again in the February newsletter. We've looked at our foundation in how we know the truth, in the Word of God. And we've looked at the truth that the revelation of the Word of God tells us is our foundation, and that is the triune God, One God in three persons, from whom and through whom and to whom are all things, and to whom shall be glory for eternity (in the words of Paul's great doxology.)

For the next three weeks, we'll be focusing on each of the three persons of the Godhead individually. Today our focus is on God the Father.

How do you boil down into 20 or 30 minutes what needs to be said about an infinite God whose attributes and mighty works and plans for human history are inexhaustible? The affirmation does it in 30 seconds by being selective. We'll have to be selective, too. Remember that whatever we say today can only scratch the surface of the grandeur of our God.

That's as true of each of the persons of the trinity as it is for the one God who subsists in three persons. Because every role that each of the persons carries out as the center-stage persona that we associate with that role is actually a role that all three persons participate in. The three persons of the trinity are not parts of God as though he could be divided up and still be what he is.

One kids book we have at home describes the trinity like the seeds and the skin and the fleshy fruit of one apple. As I said about several other metaphors last week, every image like this has something useful it can help us to understand about the mystery of the trinity, but every metaphor eventually breaks down somewhere and fails to tell us everything accurately about the truth. An apple is an organic whole that isn't the same if you take away the seeds or the skin or the white interior. That's helpful. But the seeds are one part and play one role and the skin is another part and plays another role.

God the Father, and God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit aren't parts with separate roles like that. All of God is active in the roles that scripture attributes from time to time to each of the persons of the trinity.

These days, some churches like to avoid the masculine imagery that is represented by the relationship of Father and Son in the trinity. Here is another metaphor that does have its limits. God is not a man with a flowing white beard and a man's clothes and a male voice and male body parts, the way Michelangelo drew him on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel or the way cartoons draw him. God is Spirit. God is infinite. As Peter says in his letter (v.8), you can't see God at all, but you can enjoy him.

So the metaphor of Father and Son has its limits. But the metaphor is still the dominant one that the Bible chooses to use. So it means something. God is not the man of Michelangelo's painting. God is not a man. But a man named Jesus was God. When the trinity went public in 3-dimensional human history, God was pleased to choose the body of a man by which to express himself. And all of God was active in the work of the person of the Son. Something

about the maleness of Jesus, and something about the masculine imagery of Father and Son tells us something helpful about God.

Unpacking what may be helpful in that metaphor can occupy us another time. I'm more concerned in this context to point out how one of the substitutes for scripture's identification of the persons of the trinity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit illustrates this mistake I'm referring to of dividing up the trinity into roles. Some contemporary churches, in their commendable zeal to be inclusive, substitute for the names of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the names Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, as though these three roles define the work of each of the persons of the trinity.

Those are indeed roles that God plays in our human lives. He created us. He redeems us. And he sustains us. But these roles are not definitive of the three distinct persons of the trinity. All three persons are active in and have as their role as God, to create, to redeem, and to sustain.

It is true that we believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. But as John reminds us, "in the beginning was the Word (the second person of the trinity, who is in the image of the Father and who makes the Father known), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. What is the next thing John says? "All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made." The Son was the agent of Creation.

And what about the Spirit? Genesis 1:2 tells us that at the beginning of creation, when everything was still without form and void, the Spirit was hovering over the face of the waters. The Spirit is also Creator.

The trinity is Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, and a whole lot of other things, too. But those do not describe the three persons of the trinity. To do that job, scripture persistently employs the metaphor of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

This helps us, I hope, to understand the opening paragraph of Peter's first epistle, which I've taken as a selective but representative look at the person and work of God the Father this morning.

There are at least 10 important things that Peter tells us about the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ as he opens up this letter. There are 100 billion, billion more things that might be said about him. But these are things that Peter singles out for the top of the list. So look quickly at each of the things he says with me.

(If you think 10 is too many points for a sermon, blame Bob L, who sometimes tells me not every sermon needs to have 3 points. I promised I'd pick some other numbers from time to time. Maybe he didn't bargain on 10. But this is God, after all. If the number seems big, let it remind you that God is, as the Affirmation says, infinite.) We'll only be able to touch on each of these things Peter tells us about God briefly, but at least they'll give us a fairly detailed view of the argument and the conclusion that Peter is building here for his churches in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. And, I think we can add, in Hillsdale.

The first thing I'll mention is the last thing Peter mentions. God the Father, unlike the incarnate God the Son, is not visible to our eyes. We began the service with that truth. "Immortal, invisible, ... hid from our eyes."

One reason for that is that he is Spirit. He lives beyond our limited 3-dimensional plane of existence. A more glorious reason why we can't see him is the one Moses relates to us: If we were ever to lay eyes on this majestic King of the Universe the sight would be more than we could even live through. If staring straight at the sun will burn your retinas, imagine what staring at the creator of the sun will do to you! He lives "in light inaccessible, hid from our eyes." Because he is "most blessed and most glorious."

That's why, (v.8) "even though we don't now see him, we love him." It's why "we believe in him and rejoice in him with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory."

So #1: God is (as the affirmation says) *infinite and majestic and beyond our experience*. We could add to Peter's list from the affirmation: "perfect in holiness, wisdom, power, and love. He infallibly foreknows all that shall come to pass."

But #2 brings us back up to the beginning of Peter's introduction of his churches to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It would be easy to move from this picture of majestic inaccessibility to a God like Plato's God who is

so philosophically one that he is absolutely abstract, so immutable (unchangeable) that he is utterly static, so removed from the possibility of incarnation as a human that he can be simply named the Mind, or the Universal Soul, So inaccessible to our experience that we never do experience him. So spiritually mental that it would be impossible to speak of emotions in him like love or wrath.

But the first thing out of Peter's mouth about the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is what occupies the rest of our Affirmation: God is not just static and abstract. God is *great in mercy*. Here is God's highest ambition: to display his glory in mercy. He is so characterized by sufficiency and surplus that he lives to overflow.

He is like those people who become so rich that they run out of things they need to spend their money on. Finally they have to create a foundation whose purpose is to give their resources away to worthy beneficiaries. And what typically makes someone a suitable recipient of the foundation's grants? Not working to supply enough of the foundation's needs that they earn it. The foundation exists because all the needs are met. Recipients who are the most suitable are those who are needy enough to receive the foundation's resources with gratitude, so dedicated to the foundation's own purposes that they'll use the foundation's resources to honor the foundation and multiply its pursuit of its aims, and humble enough to tell other people that the foundation, not the recipient is the source of all the good things. That's how mercy works in our human experience. That's how it works with God, too, only more purely.

God is great in mercy and wants us to receive the overflow of his goodness with joy inexpressible and in joyful pursuit of all his own glorious purposes.

That's why, #3, Peter says that by his great mercy, God causes us to be born again to a living hope. God the Father is the Redeemer. That office is exercised by the Son, too, as the Word, the outward expression, of the Father. But ultimately it is God the Father who redeems us. It is God the Father who causes us to be born again. He is *gloriously sovereign and supreme even over our salvation*.

The overflow of God's goodness is life and hope. God is in the business of life. He causes our natural, physical birth and he causes our spiritual rebirth. Because he loves life.

Today is Sanctity of Human Life Sunday, the 32d anniversary of the Supreme Court decision that legalized taking the life of unborn children. The laws of the Supreme Court are one thing. The reflection of the image of God in biblical morality is sometimes another thing. God calls us to protect the most vulnerable in our society, the widows, the orphans, the physically challenged. But the most vulnerable of all are our helpless children who are being sacrificed in the millions, and far too often for the mere convenience of parents who are unwilling to raise them.

God is a God of mercy and God is a God of life. Let's reflect that image by letting the Supreme God and not the Supreme Court be our highest authority and inspiration. Human life is a sacred gift, and more sacred yet is the life we enjoy in the hope of God's imperishable inheritance when we are born safely not just physically but born again in the security of God's unfading promises.

That's the 4th thing Peter tells us about God. When he causes us to be born again, he *gives us a living hope*. Nothing really is more precious to our experience than hope. Lose hope, and we lose purpose. Regain hope, and even the most difficult trials of life become bearable. Life is sustained by promises.

We spend our money during the month because of the promise of a paycheck at the end of the month. Lose that promise, and we move into careful, penny-counting, savings mode.

We're sustained in the happiness of our marriages because our spouses promised to be faithful to us till death do us part. Lose that promise, and the joy of marriage can run out the bottom in a near-instant.

We literally live and are sustained by the hope we have in trusting reliable promises. God gives us a living hope because he gives us unshakably reliable promises. The inexpressible joy to be found in God the Father derives, as Peter tells us, from believing that the promises God makes to us are trustworthy. That's the condition for receiving his great mercy.

The greatest promise of all is backed up by the 5th thing Peter tells us about God the Father: *He raised his Son, Jesus Christ from the dead*. Jesus Christ is the firstfruits, the evidence, the guarantee that the greatest promise of all

that God makes to us, that we will survive the grave, that we will live forever in the glorious presence of God himself, that this enormous and indispensable promise is one that God can and will keep.

Paul gets right to the nub of the importance of this work and power of God when he writes to the Corinthians (1Cor 15). "if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, and your faith is in vain.... If Christ has not been raised then your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. If Christ has not been raised then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ (because there is no resurrection from dead), we are of all people most to be pitied.

Everything rests on God the Father's raising of Jesus Christ from the dead. In Adam, we all died. in Christ we who trust his promises will all be made alive. Who made Christ alive? God the Father. Who will cause us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead? God the Father.

#6: God *promises us an inheritance* that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading.

The hope to which we are born again is an enduring promise. The life he promises will never be subject to death again: it is imperishable.

The eternal weight of glory that Paul says our afflictions on earth are preparing us for, refining away our trust in these transitory, outward natures, is pure like gold, undefiled, Peter says, by alloys and impurities of this mortal, death-infested, transient material world.

And the glory of this eternal inheritance, unlike everything we experience in this material world of ours, won't ever lose its value, it won't ever grow old, it won't ever wear out. This is an unfading inheritance, worth all the investment of our trust.

7th: God the Father is *keeping this inheritance for us*. It is laid up in heaven in utter safety, where we can never lose it, where it will never lose its purity, where it will never depreciate in value.

A friend I spoke to last year told me that the person with whom he had invested all his retirement savings had defrauded him and spent it all. There's nothing left of that investment and all those hopes of a comfortable nest egg. God the Father is exactly the opposite. One of the things he is doing right this moment is taking care of your inheritance in heaven if you've entrusted it to him, so that it will never perish, never spoil, never diminish.

# 8: How does he go about that? Is it just an automatic rule of his bank, so that we can snub our nose at his great mercy and his power of resurrection and live as if those things don't make any difference to us? No. God the Father protects our inheritance by *using his power to guard us in our faith* so that we also remain suitable beneficiaries of the great mercy of this inheritance.

Peter himself had an experience that had taught him this lesson unforgettably. On that night when Peter betrayed Jesus, Jesus said to him (Lk 22:31f), "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail." Jesus prayed for Peter that his faith would be guarded. This is why Peter wept bitterly and turned back from his sin.

But who was Jesus praying to, to do this? To God, his Father. So who guarded Peter's faith and sustained the one condition that kept Peter in right relation to God and kept his inheritance secure in heaven? God the Father did that. Who brought Peter back from the brink of unbelief and gave him tears of remorse. The one who answered Jesus' prayer for Peter. God the Father. We are being guarded by God's power through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

So is life a downhill coast once God the Father has caused us to be born again to a living hope in an imperishable inheritance? Listen to the 9th thing Peter says about God the Father: Now for a little while *in God's providence you have to be grieved and distressed by various trials*, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Paul had said the same thing in the passage from 2 Cor 4 we quoted earlier: In this life our treasure is in jars of clay, earthen vessels. We are afflicted in every way, perplexed, persecuted, struck down, always carrying in our body the death of Jesus. Why? To show that the surpassing power belongs to God the Father, not to us.

Sadly, ironically, there is nothing like distress and trial and crisis to turn the attention of us humans to God, even if it's only the attention at first of asking difficult questions of God. I'm virtually certain that if you did a Lexus-Nexus search for the word God in the news, you would find a huge spike in its appearance in the past month since the tsunami hit the Indian Ocean. Everywhere I look, the secular media is trying its hand at theodicy -- that's the question why God allows evil in the world, like holocausts, and tsunamis, and suicides on campus.

Now I am far from being able to offer the clear and particular reasons why God has permitted these events that have us most recently preoccupied. Sometimes it takes decades and centuries to see how providence might be at work in these things to which we're so close we can only see the evil. But I can say to you on Peter's authority in 1Pet 1 and on Paul's authority in concert in 2 Cor 4, that God the Father is designing these distresses and trials for our refining and for our ultimate good.

Even the horrors Paul experienced in his life, and they were deep and they were many, he looks at from the vantage point of eternity and calls by comparison "slight, momentary afflictions." They're preparing us, he says. They're there to show that the surpassing power belongs to God.

I keep a quotation from Jonathan Edwards on my refrigerator that has made sense over and over again of difficult experiences, because its truth so consistently demonstrates itself in those experiences: "God's manner is in almost everything to suffer 'em first to be undone and then to build 'em up again in a more glorious state than before. When he has anything very glorious to accomplish, he builds it up out of ruins, hereby manifesting the glory of his sufficient power."

This is a very serious and sobering affirmation that Peter and Paul are making about God the Father. It faces up to some of the most troubling questions of our lives. The massive loss of life in the rim of the Indian Ocean and the acute loss of a student right on our own campus remind us that we're talking about real life and painful tragedy when we hear Peter say God is designing these trials to serve some good end. God designed the December tsunami? God willed the death of a college student? Does God will that we suffer cancer? Or that our children rebel? Or that our marriages break up? Or that our loved ones are taken from us?

The answer Peter gives, when we look at our passage here in ch. 1 and at verses later in the letter, like 3:17 and 4:19, where he refers again to suffering according to God's will, is not a simple, pat answer, yes or no.

No, God does not will pain and evil and death for their own sake; he does not command sin; he does not approve of evil. But, Yes, he does will that these things be, in the sense that he could prevent any of these things but sometimes does not, but rather guides them, because of higher designs than the destructiveness of sin or the deceitfulness of Satan or the painfulness of suffering. He doesn't approve of evil, but he can and does will that evil acts come about for his own holy designs. The murder of Christ on the cross was arguably the world's greatest evil, but Isa 53:10 says that it was the will of the Lord to bruise him." God designs distresses in the world and in our lives because he aims to do some greater good in and through us, for the benefit of those who love him.

Can I tell you what that greater good is? Not with any certainty in the case of events that are so close to us. I did read that the city of Aceh, where the losses from the tsunami have been the greatest is also the Muslim area of Indonesia that has been the most hostile to a Christian witness. Could the painful and difficult questions that this tragedy has stirred up be the crowbar that pries open a door of opportunity for Gospel answers to those questions? I don't know. But God knows. And God has taught Peter to teach us to trust his promises that God, as Rick Warren likes to say, never wastes a hurt. Or in the words of William Cowper, "behind a frowning providence there hides a smiling face." (v.6f):

"You have been grieved now for a little while by various trials. It was necessary so that the tested genuineness of your faith (refined in the fire like gold) may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

And so the last thing that Peter tells us about God the Father is actually the first thing, with which he begins. #10: the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ *deserves blessing and praise and glory and honor*. Doctrine should

always lead to doxology. God's ways are mysterious but his ways are merciful and hopeful and profound and trustworthy and glorious and majestic. God the Father is supreme. He won the praise of Jesus Christ the Son. He won blessing from Peter. He deserves all our praise and gratitude as we close our service adoring God and remembering that he is here in this place.