

# Father's Day, 2009

Pastor Joe Fuiten, June 21, 2009

My father is giving a talk at his retirement home for father's day. At age 91 he is still thinking great thoughts and having an impact on people, including me. Last week he shared with me the thoughts he was having in preparation for his message. His thoughts are reflected in my message today.

The role of the father in having children is well known and appreciated. Father's Day is not so much for fathers to celebrate being fathers, but it is more for others who want to appreciate the role of father.

Consider what it means to be a father. First, in the biological sense, there is no such thing as a father without a child. The term is defined in relation to what follows and not in itself. We use the term with different adjectives attached and in different environments. But in every case, the reality of fatherhood is related to what follows.

In America we have **founding fathers**. George Washington, our first president and revolutionary general, is often referred to as the father of our country.

When Abraham gave his famous Gettysburg address he said, "...our forefathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty..." He spoke of this nation in the physical terms of conception and fathers. In that speech he continued speaking about the tearing of the nation and the threat to its existence. In the conclusion of his speech aimed at the unity of the nation he said "we here highly resolve...that this nation shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth." If George Washington was the father of the nation, then Abraham Lincoln was the father of the new birth. His was a born again America, an America which remains the United States of America. The consequence of his life and work was to be a father to America, a father to the new birth of freedom.

In the church, we speak of the **church fathers**. These were the men, particularly of the first three centuries whose writings shaped our faith. Recently we quoted Tertullian who is known as the father of Latin Christianity. That is, his ideas and values gave great shape to the style of faith that we in the West practice to this day. What makes these men fathers is the legacy of their lives. I have made it a point to read everything they said. It took me two years of constant reading, but I can say that I have read all they had to say and it has had an impact on my life and practice.

**We see this fathering spirit in the Bible. Elijah** was one of the great prophets of God whose life had a tremendous effect on Israel. He didn't necessarily have a long ministry but he left a legacy to such an extent that he is the most referenced prophet by New Testament Writers. Elijah somehow knew it was his time to go. Elisha wanted to have that same kind of influence from his life so he was determined to see Elijah go. (2 Kings 2:11-15) *"As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. 12 Elisha saw this and cried out, "My father ! My father ! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!" And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them apart. 13 He picked up the cloak that had fallen from*

*Elijah and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. 14 Then he took the cloak that had fallen from him and struck the water with it. "Where now is the LORD, the God of Elijah?" he asked. When he struck the water, it divided to the right and to the left, and he crossed over. 15 The company of the prophets from Jericho, who were watching, said, "The spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha."*

**That great fathering spirit that was upon Elijah came upon Elisha.** For our purposes here, we note that he continued the ministry of having an impact on those that followed him. Elisha lived his life with that same spirit that was upon Elijah. They had different ministries but the impact was similar upon Israel. The ministry was sufficiently similar in its impact that when Elisha was sick and nearing the end of his life after 60 years of ministry, the King of Israel visited him and uttered the same words that had been spoken by Elisha when Elijah was carried away. (2 Kings 13:14) *"Now Elisha was suffering from the illness from which he died. Jehoash king of Israel went down to see him and wept over him. "My father ! My father !" he cried. "The chariots and horsemen of Israel!"*

These are curious words with which to greet a dying man. We recognize them immediately as the same words with which Elisha noted the passing of Elijah. To some extent, we understand the expression "my father." There was an impact of Elisha upon the nation that was as a father. He provided a blessing to Israel comparable to chariots and horsemen. For Israel at the time, that was important because, according to 2 Kings 13:7, they had only ten chariots, fifty horsemen, and 10,000 foot soldiers.<sup>1</sup> Their army was tiny but they had a father in Israel whose name was Elisha. Indeed, Elisha's last recorded act was to give God's favor to the king in the form of three victories over Aram.

It is worth noting that **the King of Israel was not necessarily one of the good guys.**<sup>2</sup> The Scriptures say he did evil during the 16 years of his reign. Yet, when Elisha was dying, the evil king came to see him and called him a father of the nation. I wonder how many times Elisha had tried to call that king to repentance but without success. As both a natural father and a spiritual father, you cannot always measure your success by the situation of the moment. Some fathers get discouraged when they don't see their children going the right way or when they see what should be their sphere of influence going the way of evil. In the end, even a rebellious king could appreciate Elisha as the father of Israel and more of a blessing to his nation than an army of chariots and horsemen.

Fathering is not for now, or for myself. **Fathering is for the future.** When all is said and done, what will it take for them to say of you, "My father, my father, the chariots and horsemen of Israel."

**The most obvious area is your own wife and children.** One way or another we leave a legacy with our children. Part of why we are regularly in church is for the benefit

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Kings 13:7-11 Nothing had been left of the army of Jehoahaz except fifty horsemen, ten chariots and ten thousand foot soldiers, for the king of Aram had destroyed the rest and made them like the dust at threshing time. 8 As for the other events of the reign of Jehoahaz, all he did and his achievements, are they not written in the book of the annals of the kings of Israel? 9 Jehoahaz rested with his fathers and was buried in Samaria. And Jehoash his son succeeded him as king. 10 In the thirty-seventh year of Joash king of Judah, Jehoash son of Jehoahaz became king of Israel in Samaria, and he reigned sixteen years. 11 He did evil in the eyes of the LORD and did not turn away from any of the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit; he continued in them.

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of our children. Getting them to worship services and into the children's and youth program fills in the blanks of their lives. You want your children in a Christian environment but with sufficient challenges to help them grow in their relationship with the Lord and in their commitment to the Lord. Physical work in behalf of God's work helps a child. Pulling weeds, helping or promoting a program not only make things work but they help establish a person as connected to the church.

**Getting involved in politics, business, or education** can be a mechanism of legacy. In those cases, the emphasis should be upon what you can contribute not what you can get. It is not about you, it is about being a father to others. Maybe your son or daughter won't follow you in the particular vocation that you have chosen but they can have the same attitude of service. In that way, your children become a legacy of who you are.

When we think of Jesus, we think of him as exactly like the Heavenly Father. (Hebrews 1:1-3) *"In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. 3 The Son is the radiance of God's glory and **the exact representation of his being**, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven."*

Jesus himself said, (John 14:9) *"Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father."*