

# Names of the Messiah: Everlasting Father

## by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle

### Prayer of Illumination

Lord God, just as this morning's three Advent candles shed light, we ask that you would illuminate our minds as we delve into the royal titles that bear witness to Jesus our Messiah and Lord. By your Spirit, guide us as we prepare for the coming of your Son. Amen.

### Background

"When you pray, pray in this way: Our Father, who art in heaven ..."

Jesus instructs his disciples in Matthew 23 not to crave status or titles, call no one rabbi, call no one father or instructor. On the cross, three times Jesus cried out to his Father:

"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

"Father, why hast thou forsaken me?"

"Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit."

So this is the \$64,000 question: Why does Jesus, the Messiah and Son of God, receive the royal title and throne name Everlasting Father? Isn't it a stretch to call Jesus Everlasting Father? At face value, yes. But when we look at how Jesus functions in our lives, it makes more sense.

In Psalm 68 we read about one of God the Father's most important tasks—caring for the orphan and the vulnerable:

"Father of orphans and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation." (Psalm 68:5)

From Psalm 68, keep turning pages to the NT and the Gospel according to John 14. Jesus speaks to his disciples before his death and resurrection saying,

"I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you." (John 14:18)

It was a common phrase in Jesus' day to describe a disciple without a rabbi as "orphaned."

The picture is getting a little more focused now. The Son, the newborn king born for us, will take on a fatherly role with the people entrusted to his care. The title "Everlasting Father" is starting to pop and crackle a bit.

Jesus calls his disciples in John's gospel, "my little children." "My little children, ... love one another." (John 13:33-34) Jesus also says:

"Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does." "I and the Father are one." "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." (John 5:19; 10:30; 14:9 NIV)

There's a unity of purpose, a oneness of heart. And before his ascension, in Matthew, Jesus says to his disciples,

"Lo I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20 NKJV)

*Let's hear now the Word of the Lord from Isaiah 9.*

**Scripture: Isaiah 9:6-7 (NRSV)**

For a child has been born for us,  
a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders;  
and he is named  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
His authority shall grow continually,  
and there shall be endless peace  
for the throne of David and his kingdom.  
He will establish and uphold it  
with justice and with righteousness  
from this time onward and forevermore.  
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.***

**SERMON – Names of the Messiah: Everlasting Father**

Looking back at the greatest Christmas gifts I've received in my life, I thank my Father in heaven that I've been given a loving father and loving mother on earth. My folks have given me plenty of examples on how to do it right—thanks Mom and Dad!

It's my turn now to pass this gift to my children. Sometimes it's easy, sometimes it's a little harder to be a good dad. I'm in a little harder season right now. I'm being stretched outside my comfort zone. And I'm still working through it. I definitely haven't arrived. Let me give you some context: I'm not a dog guy. I've never had a pet dog my whole life. I've gotten better over the years, but I've always felt a smidgeon awkward around dogs—even a twinge of fear. For our cat lovers out there wondering—I'd be open, but I'm allergic.

The only pet I've had is a hermit crab. Herman and I bonded when I would take him for his daily drag. He cuddled in bed with me in the mornings. You get the picture—I'm not a dog guy or pet guy.

But today's royal name for the Messiah: Everlasting Father has inspired me, challenged me, and stretched me, in not only my understanding of God, but in my understanding of fatherhood and how it's connected to dogs. Allow me to explain.

Abby, Luke, Jude, and especially Phoebe, have been hounding Sarah and I about getting a dog—incessantly. Just to give you a clue: Phoebe wrote in her Connection Card prayer request last week that she wants a dog. She's going around Mom and Dad to the Big Man upstairs! So I've wrestled, I've prayed, I've complained, I've traveled, I've pleaded, I've doubted:

Do I believe in the existence of a dog in my house? Yes, I do. I wouldn't say I'm dogmatic about this new belief, but I'm trying to be open. So we're still hashing out the logistics: like the timing of getting one, how old will it be, what's the right breed for us, costs, and responsibilities. But doggone it, I will do my best to be a dog guy—pray for me people! Why? Because it's not just about me.

And that's the connection to this morning's royal title: On a much deeper level we see God's provision and sacrificial love for his children. Everlasting Father. Paul Auster writes in his memoir *The Invention of Solitude* that "You do not stop hungering for your father's love, even after you are grown up." Whether or not we've been blessed with a good relationship with our earthly parents, we all have a deep longing for "father connection." In his book he shares about how he hungrily would eat up any scraps of attention his father would give him—ever craning his neck to hear some faint echo of attention. His father didn't dislike him, he just always seemed distracted—never looking in his direction. He craved more than anything for his dad to take notice of him.

Paul Auster shared about a trivial, yet significant memory of his father:

"The family went to a crowded restaurant on a Sunday and we had to wait for our table, my father took me outside, produced a tennis ball (from where?), put a penny on the sidewalk, and proceeded to play a game with me: hit the penny with the tennis ball. ... In retrospect nothing could have been more trivial. And yet the fact that I had been included, that my father had casually asked me to share his boredom with him, nearly crushed me with happiness."

Paul Auster would spend the rest of his life looking for this connection again. Sons and daughters of every age have a "father hunger"—it's a human longing. Some say the oldest story is the human search to find a father.

Thomas Wolfe in *Look Homeward, Angel* says that our central search in life is to:

"... find a father, not merely the father of his flesh, not merely the lost father of his youth, but the image of strength and wisdom external to his need and superior to his hunger, to which his belief and power of his own life could be united."

And this is why this title Everlasting Father is so important for us. Everlasting in that we seek permanence, solidity, faithfulness—through the days and the years. Unconditional. A God always by our side—through the ups and downs, thick and thin.

Father—meaning all that’s good in a father, all that a father, father figure, mentor, or guide is supposed to do: Provision and protection and security. Caring towards his children. Knowing when to say no and when to say yes. Present. Engaged—not blasé. Shepherding—providing guidance, oversight, boundaries. Tough and tender. Forgiving. Affirming. Healthy leadership. Concern and commitment for the other’s best. Sacrificial. Training us to grow up into maturity. It’s a fatherhood that endures forever.

God shows us what a healthy father does—he moves beyond anger and frustration with his children and he loves them. God’s love has come near to us in Christ. Jesus shows us God’s sacrificial love—

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, ...”

Jesus tells one of the most famous father stories of all time in the parable of the prodigal son. I love how author James K.A. Smith retells it in his excellent book, *On the Road with Saint Augustine*:

“So despondent you can’t even voice it, you nonetheless wonder, timidly, desperately: ‘Would my father ever take me back?’ By some grace inexplicable, you start on your way back home. And as you’re yet again rehearsing a long speech that is three parts apology and two parts legal plea for reinstatement, you’re bowled over when that Father of yours comes running and gathers you up in his arms while your head is down, and your mother later tells you, ‘He walked to the end of the road every single day waiting for you.’”

“‘Let’s have a feast and celebrate’ the father cries. ‘For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

This is the Everlasting Father we long for. This is our Everlasting Father! This is grace. Jesus is the way God runs out to meet us, his prodigal sons and daughters. He fills our father hunger. He heals our father wounds. We are at home with God.

St. Augustine had a rough relationship with his earthly father. His father was a disappointment to both Augustine and his mother. In many ways, Augustine became like his father as he grew older. He fathered a child outside of wedlock. Thanks to the prayers of his faithful mother Monica and God’s intervention, Augustine came to faith when he heard a sing-song voice of a child in the garden saying, take and read—and so he read from the book of Romans and believed.

The time came for Augustine to present himself for baptism to bishop Anselm, but he also adds a touching detail of including his son Adeodatus in baptism. Praying to God he spoke of his son: “We included him in your gift of baptism so that being born again with us, he was the same

spiritual age, for both of us to be raised together in your training.” In the church, he found not only God the Father, but father figures. Augustine wrote of Bishop Ambrose of Milan who “took me up as a father takes a newborn baby in his arms ... and he prized me.”

This is the beauty of the Christian faith and church—fathers and mothers and children receiving healing from our Everlasting Father. When we can’t have resolution with our earthly parents, God can help us forgive and move forward. Through the church, God gives us new father figures and mother figures, new brothers and sisters, New sons and daughters, who choose without obligation, love without reservation, and are present when others are absent—who know us and still love us.

And all of us, by the grace and miracle of God, are being fashioned and formed into the image of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Everlasting Father.

**Amen.**

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