

# Word Study ABBA

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*Abba* is an Aramaic word. Aramaic is, like Hebrew, a member of the Semitic family of languages. It was the language commonly spoken in Palestine in New Testament times. Therefore, it was the customary language of Jesus and the apostles.

## ABBA, FATHER

The word *abba* is found but three times in the whole of the New Testament – Mark 14:36; Romans 8:15 and Galatians 4:6. W.E.Vine writes: "In the Gemara (a Rabbinical commentary on the Mishna, the traditional teaching of the Jews) it is stated that slaves were forbidden to address the head of the family by this title. It approximates to a personal name, in contrast to 'Father', with which it always joined in the N.T.. 'Abba' is the word framed by the lips of infants, and betokens unreasoning trust; 'father' expresses an intelligent apprehension of the relationship. The two together express the love and intelligent confidence of the child." William Barclay has written: "*Abba* is the name by which a little child addressed his father in the home circle in the time of Jesus, as *jaba* still is in Arabic today. In any secular context it would be translated simply as Daddy. Nothing shows so well the intimate fellowship of the Christian with God. Here is no God transcendent in infinite might and majesty, unapproachable, different and separate; here is no God who is an abstraction or a philosophic idea, or a grudging or a passionless deity. Here is a God who is as near to us as a father is to a little child." Adam Clarke has commented: "It has been remarked that slaves were not permitted to use the term *Abba*, father, or *Imma*, mother, in accosting their masters and mistresses.. And from this some suppose that the apostle intimates that being now brought from under the spirit of bondage, in which they durst not call God their Father, they are not only brought into a new state, but have got that language which is peculiar to that state."

## ADOPTION

Paul knew all about Roman slavery and the process of adoption in the Roman world. After all, he was a Roman citizen. The Roman Empire was built on slavery and I have read of a figure of sixty-five million slaves in the Empire when the Gospel was first proclaimed. The thing is that a Roman slave could be adopted into a family and have his circumstances changed forever. The ceremony of adoption was very exacting, but suffice to say that the one adopted was virtually born again. He became a full member of the family; was given a new name; was permitted to eat at the father's table; became an heir of the father's estate; and had his past life blotted out, which included the cancellation of all debts and the deletion of all obligations. Moreover, adoption led to the ex-slave, now a son, being able to call his master, "Abba, Father." Another commentator has written: "Paul well knew that the Jews had a strict law forbidding a slave to use the word 'abba' in addressing a master or the head of a

household. So when he wants to show that we are sons, not slaves, he makes it clear that the indwelling Spirit identifies us as children of God and makes it possible for us to speak to the Father in a fashion that slaves were not allowed to use."

The ceremony of adoption normally required at least five witnesses. Any of these witnesses could be called to confirm the adoption, if others challenged the status of the new son following, for example, the death of the father and the winding up of the estate. The ex-slave and new son had a rightful claim to his inheritance. He had legal rights in law. The witness would say: "I was present at the ceremony. I confirm that the transaction was not a sale into slavery, but was one of adoption. The person was claimed by the deceased not as a slave, but as a son." What does Paul say of the Holy Spirit in the Roman letter? "The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together." (Romans 8; 16, 17) So the Holy Spirit is our witness that we belong to Christ. He will always stand by us no matter what comes our way. But, of course, we must remain faithful.

## THE FATHERHOOD OF GOD

The Fatherhood of God is worth meditating upon. It is staggering to think that Almighty God, Creator of the heavens and the earth, is also my Father. Is there a higher privilege on earth than to be in God's wonderful family, brothers and sisters together in Christ Jesus? The fellowship we enjoy now is a foretaste of the everlasting communion in heaven.

Jesus said at the beginning of the so-called Lord's Prayer: "**Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name...**" (Matthew 6:9b; Luke 11:2a) Here, the Fatherhood of God is declared by the Messiah. The belief in God as Father assures me of His nearness; His watchfulness; His care; His forgiveness; His love; etc. I think of my own relationship with my father and all that he did for me. He kept me, as we say, "on the straight and narrow." If I am true to God, then He too will keep me on the straight and narrow way that leads to heaven's glory.

Fathers have responsibilities, but so do children. The Bible says: "**The proverbs of Solomon. A wise son makes a glad father: but a foolish son is the heaviness of his mother.**" (Proverbs 10:1) "**Hearken unto your father who begat you, and despise not your mother when she is old.**" (Proverbs 23:22). "**For Moses said, Honour your father and your mother; and, Whoso curses father or mother, let him die the death...**" (Mark 7:10) "**Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. Honour your father and mother; which is the first commandment with promise; that it may be well with you, and you may live long on the earth.**" (Ephesians 6:1-3) Each of us should strive to be a good son or daughter to our parents, and, above all, to be a good and faithful child to our heavenly Father. A warm and loving relationship with all our brothers and sisters in the Lord will inevitably follow.