

Our Father

Ángel Manuel Rodríguez

Is it true that the word *abba* in the New Testament means “Daddy”?

The term *abba*, used in the New Testament three times (Mark 14:36; Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6), does not mean Daddy. *Abba* is a transliteration of the Aramaic term *abba*, meaning “the father.” It was used by infants and adults to designate the father of the family, connoting deep, filial attachment. The Aramaic term is usually taken to be a vocative, “O Father,” but it could also be emphatic (“Father!”). In Mark the Greek translation is provided—*ho pater*, “the Father,”—suggesting that the Aramaic expression, even in Greek-speaking settings, was considered important enough to be used in prayers. We will examine the three passages and the theological value of the term.

1. *In Mark 14:36.* In the Old Testament “Father” was used to refer to God, and Israel is identified as the son of God. But the term itself was not normally applied to God. Apparently, the Aramaic term *abba* was not a common designation for God among the Jews.

In the case of Jesus, we find a human being appropriating the title “Son” to Himself, calling God “*Abba, Father,*” and teaching the disciples to call God “[*Abba,*] Father” (Matt. 6:9). The Aramaic term is preserved in Jesus’ agonizing prayer in Gethsemane: “‘*Abba, Father,*’ he said, ‘everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will’ ” (Mark 14:36, NIV). The term emphasizes intimacy and shows Jesus’ vision of God; He is His Father. This was publicly declared by God at Jesus’ baptism (Mark 1:11).

The text conveys at least two main ideas. First, God is a loving, caring Father powerful enough to deliver the Son from what He is facing. Second, the Father is wise and understands what is best for the Son and for those He represents; His will is to be respected. The agony of the cross and the cross itself will not break up Jesus’ filial relationship with His Father, because through it the Father’s love is revealed.

The use of the Aramaic term *abba* by Jesus suggests that it was common for Him to employ it to emphasize His filial relationship with a loving God to whom one should be willing to submit. He, as God’s Son, could testify and reveal that His heavenly Father is indeed a God who cares and loves sinners to the point of suffering with the Son on the cross.

2. *In Galatians 4:6 and Romans 8:15.* These two passages show that Jesus’ practice of calling God “*Abba, Father,*” was significant enough for Paul to use, even when writing to Greek-speaking congregations. It was important because it revealed the picture of a loving God, seeking to adopt sinners into His family. In both passages it is through the Spirit, which they received at baptism, that believers are empowered to call God “*Abba, Father,*”; to be part of the loving family of a God who deeply loves humans. Galatians

grounds believers' sonship on Jesus' redemptive work, while Romans emphasizes the adoption that enables us to be led by the Spirit. The term speaks about a God who cares for us, who sustains us in our hour of need, and who is trustworthy. As children we have a heavenly inheritance.