

# Bands of Love

*Mary Styles*

*I drew you with bands of love (Hos 11:4).<sup>1</sup>*

In a previous talk for *Press On*, we examined the breath of life which God infused into Adam to make him a living, breathing being. The descriptive language of Genesis is extraordinarily intimate in setting the stage for God's desire to have a *close relationship* with His creation. God *breathed* into Adam's nostrils. This event is one of close, physical proximity and intimacy between man and His maker.<sup>2</sup>

God intended to have a close, intimate relationship with Adam and Eve. Genesis further describes the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day and in conversation with Adam and Eve. This relationship is later mirrored in the book of Revelation when God dwells with man and wipes away every tear from the eyes of His people.<sup>3</sup>

This study is not intended to be an academic exercise, but rather a thoughtful, respectful consideration of *our relationship* with our Heavenly Father and His Son, and perhaps a prompt for further reflection. These thoughts began with a sisters' weekend in Trinidad several years ago where we engaged in an activity of looking at God and Jesus in the various categories of our saviour, father, friend, and husband. We listed the Bible passages in each of the above categories and drew our own conclusions about the nature of these relationships.

I found it helpful to read through the Bible passages which describe the relationship between God and His creation – and those which describe Jesus and the new creation – and to look at the different characteristics of the relationships. I also noticed that our hymns reflect a

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<sup>1</sup> For emphasis, some quotations have been adapted and expressed as “you” statements

<sup>2</sup> This is true whether we regard this act as the work of the angels or of the LORD God Himself

<sup>3</sup> Revelation 21:4

*closer* relationship with our Heavenly Father and with the Lord Jesus than our exposition often does.<sup>4</sup>

Our hymns tell us that since God is everywhere, we cannot be absent from Him – and that this thought can sustain us (H80). God’s presence is with us to cheer us up, guide us, and provide peace (H88, H101). God is our maker, defender, redeemer, and friend (H113, H118). God provided care and comfort before we were aware of that provision and He actively rescues us from our waywardness to bring us to maturity (H133). This is not always the focus in the talks in our ecclesias.

## God as a Parent

The imagery of God as a parent continues into the early chapters of Genesis when God questions Adam about the reasons for hiding. God emerges as a wise and concerned parent who skilfully leads Adam and Eve through a conversation, leading them to acknowledge their responsibility. And then, in response to the shame which they were experiencing, God made clothes for them and put them on his children.

Similarly, in the account of Cain and Abel, God patiently entered into conversation with Cain regarding his failure. He encouraged Cain to do better and warned him of the consequences of risky behaviour giving Cain every opportunity to change his ways.

In Deuteronomy we read about Benjamin,

*Let the beloved of the LORD rest secure in him, for he shields him all day long, and the one the LORD loves rests between his shoulders. (Dt 33:12)*

Other versions offer *rests securely against his chest* or *places him on his chest*. God is actually portrayed as a father giving little Benjamin a ride on his shoulders or holding him close to his chest!

Later, in Hosea, it’s as if we are overhearing God saying to Ephraim,

*I taught you to walk, taking you by the arms, I healed you though you did not realize it. I led you with cords of human kindness, with bands of love ... I bent down to feed you ... I will heal your waywardness, and love you freely. (Hos 11:3-4,14:4)<sup>5</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> Christadelphian Hymn Book, 2002 edition

<sup>5</sup> For emphasis, some quotations have been adapted and expressed as “you” statements

He wants us to be a special people, drawn out from the world, just as Israel was singled out among the nations to have a close, intimate relationship with Him. Yet this is the same LORD God who is depicted in Isaiah:

*I saw the LORD seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his throne filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling one to another: 'Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.' At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. 'Woe is me!' I cried. 'I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.'* (Is 6:1-7)<sup>6</sup>

It is this great and awesome LORD God who also wants to have such a personal and close relationship with us that He describes it as a child riding on his Daddy's shoulders or held close to his heart! He wants to be a Father to us. And what kind of a parent is God? He describes Himself as one who comforts His children like a mother,

*As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.*  
(Isa 66:13)

A cautionary note is appropriate here. None of us has had perfect relationships with our fathers, and some of us will have had to endure exceptionally difficult circumstances. Any difficult experiences – whether by birth, step-, adoptive or surrogate – can interfere with our concept of God as a father. And the Bible acknowledges this, saying, *our earthly fathers chastened us after their pleasure* (Heb 12:9-10, KJV), or as the NIV puts it, *disciplined us as they thought best*.

Does our relationship with our earthly father colour our relationship with God? How is it different or similar? How can we adjust our perspective to have a more biblical view of our heavenly father?

Further to this, consider the relationship which God had with Jesus, waking him every morning with a whisper of his word – morning by morning, since he was old enough to understand words – resulting in the growth of this child in favour with God and man.<sup>7</sup> At twelve years old Jesus, already had a personal relationship with God as his father!

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<sup>6</sup> Note that in the New Testament this passage is applied to Jesus (see John 12:37-43)

<sup>7</sup> Luke 2:52

## God as a Friend

Twice we are told that Enoch *walked with God*. Likewise, Noah walked with God. God shared details of the upcoming judgments on the earth with Noah. Later, God made promises to Noah regarding the earth and the cycle of seasons – seedtime and harvest, day and night – that would continue uninterrupted by another flood. God not only acted as Enoch and Noah’s saviour, but also as their *friend* and confidante.

These conversations continued with Abram and Sarai. Even as Abram acknowledged God as the Most High, possessor of heaven and earth, God reassured Abram,

*Don’t be afraid, I am your protective shield and your reward will be very great. (Gen 15:1)*

God gives us an example of His availability as a friend, in his relationship with Abraham. Abraham is described as the *friend* of God.<sup>8</sup> This relationship was one of mutuality and was reciprocal – it went both ways. Abraham ran to get food as soon as possible for his friend. God tested his friend’s loyalty by asking for his most precious possession, his son Isaac.<sup>9</sup>

## God as a Husband

God wanted another way to express the intimacy of his relationship with Israel. He uses the language of husband. Marriage is another beautiful extended metaphor for the close relationship which God intended to have with His chosen people. He describes taking Israel by the hand to bring her out of Egypt and then ‘allured her, and spoke tenderly to her’ so that she sang in her youthfulness of her love and devotion as she followed her husband into the wilderness as a loving bride.<sup>10</sup> Isaiah uses similar language,

*Your husband is your Maker, whose name is the LORD of hosts; your redeemer is the Holy One of Israel, who is called the God of the whole earth. (Is 54:5)*

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<sup>8</sup> 2Chronicles 20:7; Isaiah 41:8; James 2:23

<sup>9</sup> We may debate whether God had any intention of requiring the actual sacrifice of Isaac because of what he says later about Baal (Jer 19:5)

<sup>10</sup> Exodus 13, Hosea 2:14,15, Jeremiah 2:2

The metaphor is further developed by Ezekiel. He says that God saw that Israel was ready for love and intimacy and He made a marriage proposal to her. Ruth similarly proposed to Boaz, *Spread your skirt over me for you are a redeemer.*<sup>11</sup>

In Hosea, the relationship between God and Israel is depicted in the everyday language of a real human relationship in which an unfaithful wife runs away from her husband. I recall a Jewish children's story depicting this event: Hosea calls out to Gomer begging her to return, saying, "Gomer, you silly goose, come back to me!" We find similar language in the Song of Solomon: *All night on my bed, I looked for the one my heart loves.*<sup>12</sup>

## Jesus as a Saviour, Brother, Friend, Husband

Our hymns also remind us that we can also have a close, intimate relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ. Hymns about Jesus describe him as our light of life, friend, and king (H84). He is the peace of our restless hearts (H185). Our heart is Christ's abode (H199). He is a true friend as well as our master (H205, H209), a loving shepherd (H218), our saviour, master, and bridegroom who is with us for evermore (H295). He is everything to us (H345), the hope of glory in our hearts (H380).

What does our relationship with Jesus look like? What does he do for us and what does he expect from us? How does this fit with our relationship with God?

I asked myself these questions several years ago when an intense discussion developed in our ecclesia around the role of Jesus in our lives. I knew all the proof texts and explanations proffered by previous generations, but I had to find a way of explaining this seemingly complicated subject to myself in words which I could hold onto and say to myself again and again. It is an exercise that I would recommend to everyone to find an explanation which resonates with your own inner values and beliefs. I found an activity from relationship counselling which helped me to do this.

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<sup>11</sup> Ez 16:8-14, Ruth 3:9 (in biblical language this proposal is expressed as 'spreading his skirt over her')

<sup>12</sup> Song of Solomon 3:1

## A Relationship Exercise

1. Write a series of short sentences that describe your personal vision of a deeply satisfying love relationship with your God and with His Son, our Lord, recognising Jesus as our closest companion who understands our weaknesses and issues. Write each sentence in the present tense, as if it were already happening. For example: “We communicate constantly.” “They are always there when I need them.” “I can depend on them to understand me.” “We are affectionate with each other.” Make all your items positive statements.
2. Rank each sentence with a number from 1 to 5 according to its importance to you, with 1 indicating “very important” and 5 indicating “not so important.”
3. Circle the two items that are most important to you.
4. Put a check mark beside those items that you think would be the most difficult for you to achieve.

## Jesus Working in Our Lives Today

Once I had found my own words to describe my relationship with God and Jesus, I wanted to see how this worked out in the life of a believer. To do this, I turned to the book of Acts. Here was one of my earliest proof-texts:

*You men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus will so come in like manner as you have seen him go into heaven. (Acts 1:11)*

Jesus had told his friends and disciples that they would receive power from him to go into all the world and be his witnesses. I wanted to know how Jesus communicated with the disciples after his ascension, so I read the book of Acts to find out how this happened in the first century.

I had previously assumed that references to “the Lord” in Acts referred to God, however, as I read the context, I realised that “the Lord” is *usually* referring to *Jesus*.<sup>13</sup> From this new reading of Acts, I drew my own conclusions for how Jesus works in our lives *today*.

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<sup>13</sup> There are a few exceptions, namely Acts 4:29 (compare v24), 7:31-33,49; and 10:4, which do refer to God

Firstly, the disciples prayed to Jesus to show them which of two men could fill the empty place in the group of apostles.<sup>14</sup> My conclusion from this event is that we can also pray to Jesus for guidance with important decisions.

The Holy Spirit and the Spirit of Jesus gave explicit instructions to the apostles.<sup>15</sup> My conclusion is that Jesus gives us explicit instructions today.

Peter, in his address to those who were gathered on the day of Pentecost, quoted David in the Psalms saying: *I saw the Lord [Jesus] always before me, for he is at my right hand that I may not be shaken.*<sup>16</sup> My conclusion is that we can envision Jesus as always present with us for our support.

Jesus poured out the Holy Spirit on the believers in fulfilment of a prophecy given by the prophet Joel.<sup>17</sup> My conclusion is that Jesus has the authority to pour out the Holy Spirit on us. Peter says this,

*Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.*  
(Acts 2:38-39, ESV)

Jesus offers forgiveness as promised to Abraham. The only way to salvation is through Jesus. He gives repentance and forgiveness of sins, even to those who persecute and kill his followers.<sup>18</sup> I concluded that Jesus holds out an offer of forgiveness to us. He is the only way of salvation.

Believers are described as *added* to the Lord. Paul and Barnabas converted many believers then *committed them* to Jesus. Jesus appeared to Paul in a vision to encourage him to go on preaching in Corinth for there were many in the city who were *Jesus' people*.<sup>19</sup> My conclusion is that all believers are to be committed *to Jesus* to continue *his work* in their lives. We must avoid any sense of being in charge when *it is Jesus who has used us* to bring others to him.

I also conclude that *we all belong to the Lord Jesus now*. He is our Leader and Saviour.

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<sup>14</sup> Acts 1:24

<sup>15</sup> Acts 16:6-7

<sup>16</sup> Acts 2:25

<sup>17</sup> Acts 2:33, 2:17, Joel 2:28

<sup>18</sup> Acts 3:25-26, 4:12, 5:31, 7:60

<sup>19</sup> Acts 5:14, 14:23, 15:40, 18:9, 18:10

Jesus appeared to and spoke directly to chosen individuals – such as Saul and Ananias – so that his name might be carried to the world. Jesus gave Paul a specific assignment to witness to others of the good news of God’s grace.<sup>20</sup> I concluded that Jesus is able to prompt repentance and give forgiveness of sins even to the persecutors of his people with whom he directly intervened.

An angel of the Lord helped Peter out of prison. He also smote Herod for his presumptuous pride and Ananias for his deceit.<sup>21</sup> My conclusion is that Jesus can rescue us from present danger, but will not tolerate blasphemy and deliberate deceit.

Belief is a result of the work of Jesus and salvation is through ‘the grace of the Lord Jesus’. Jesus *opened Lydia’s heart* to pay attention to instruction. She described herself as faithful to the Lord Jesus.<sup>22</sup> I concluded that our salvation is through his grace. Our belief is a result of *his work* in us.

The name of the Lord Jesus was extolled.<sup>23</sup> My conclusion is that we should extol the name of Jesus.

## A Compassionate Friend Exercise

I want to close with a helpful exercise called a Compassionate Friend meditation.

Consider God. A God of awesome power, yet He wants an intimate relationship with us. And consider Jesus. A mighty Lord, yet who also wants to have this close relationship with us. These relationships provide benefits to us every moment, every day, every month, every year in present time – and, in the future, the prospect of eternal life in His kingdom.

For this exercise, bring Jesus to your mind...

Just sitting quietly, focusing on breathing for a few minutes and then imagining this most compassionate person. Using all of our senses and trying to imagine what they look like, what facial expression they have, what clothes they are wearing, what their voice sounds like, if there is

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<sup>20</sup> Acts 9:5,27,10,15, 20:24, 22:10,15

<sup>21</sup> Acts 12:8-11, 12:20-23, 5:3-5

<sup>22</sup> Acts 11:21, 15:11, 16:14,15

<sup>23</sup> Acts 19:17



any sensation of smell or of taste, and what they might feel like if we touched them. This sensory focus can help with recalling this image whenever we need to do so.

This person does not struggle with human weakness any longer. However, they understand the human condition perfectly having experienced it themselves. They are there to comfort and encourage us. Perhaps we can generate a feeling or sensation of warmth coming from our compassionate friend towards ourself as we feel accepted and connected. This person wants what is best for us and is ready to guide us.

We can perhaps imagine what words our compassionate friend might say to us:

*Come to me, you are weary and burdened. I will give you rest.*

*I want to draw you in with bands of love.*