

Does God Play Favorites?

Looking at the Character of God, and Implications for Our Lives

I. Introduction

- a. Recently, I was studying about the life and ministry of someone I admire, James A. Harding. I had mentioned Harding in the lesson taught recently on meditating on the Word of God and reading the Bible every day (including reading through the Bible in a year). Harding's life and ministry are an upward call to me, especially his devotion to studying the Bible and his impact on inspiring others to do the same.
 - i. However, it was not just empty intellectual scholarship or legalism that drove him. He had an inspiring faith and ministry, and left a great many lives impacted for the kingdom of God.
 - ii. In this lesson I want to share something else that he has taught me (or reminded me of, or opened my eyes to) in the Scriptures.
- b. James A. Harding (1848-1922), famous as preacher, teacher and founder of Bible schools in the churches of Christ in the late 1800's and early 1900's. Harding University (in Searcy, AK) named after him.
 - i. Born in KY; oldest of 14 born to his parents (7 lived to maturity).
 - ii. His father was a self-educated man, who had started preaching at the age of 15.
 - iii. Inspiring life and impact. A heroic example to me, personally.
 - iv. Had clear grasp of the kingdom of God, from which he taught great lessons about non-resistance/peace, unity vs. sectarianism, helping the poor, materialism, the indwelling and workings of the Holy Spirit, Satan's kingdom of darkness, attitude of Christians toward the governments of this world, baptism and 'rebaptism', etc.
 - v. Great personal devotion to studying the Word of God that was infectious.
 - vi. Wherever he preached, he handed out Bible pledge cards and recruited people to commit to reading the Bible daily, to read through the entire Bible in a year. (Approach Harding suggested: 3 chapters OT and 1 chapter in the NT each day.)
 - vii. At the age of 66, he estimated that he had read through the entire OT 60x and through the NT 130x. He urged reading the entire Bible story rather than topical study, and pausing to prayerfully meditate on the reading,

and “to delight in it”; to get the grand sweep of God’s character and message.

- viii. He urged those who preach to spend 4-6 hours/day studying the Word. During one 17-year stretch in his life he averaged preaching 10 sermons/week.
- ix. Harding’s prolonged exposure to all the Bible impressed him with God’s active role in the history of his world and in the lives of his saints. Indeed, he believed that Satan has been able succeed in debunking God’s providence (his active and loving involvement in the lives of his people throughout history) because “comparatively few people are in the habit of reading the Bible, from first to last, over and over again, continuously.”
- x. According to James Harding, the reason people doubted the direct, active intervention of God in their lives is because they did not read through the Bible regularly. If they did, they would clearly see the nature of God: how He has always been actively intervening in the lives of people in Scripture. Seeing that pattern throughout the Bible, they should believe God works on behalf of His people in the same way today!

II. Seeing God as Our Father

- a. In the Scriptures God portrayed as, or similar to, many things: light, love, Creator of the universe, sovereign king/ruler, and judge.
- b. However, Jesus referred to God as “our Father” or “your Father in heaven”, at least 12 in the Sermon on the Mount (**Matthew 5-7**).
- c. Seeing God as ‘father’ helps some people but presents special challenges for others. Reflect for a moment on your own father: his character, his stability, how you felt about him. (May send a few into a tailspin here!)
- d. Some of our fathers were:
 - i. Largely absent; some even abandoned their children
 - ii. Distant or aloof; felt like he didn’t care very much
 - iii. Too busy with other things; unavailable
 - iv. Abusive: verbally, physically, emotionally or even sexually
 - v. Unstable or unreliable; doesn’t keep promises; maybe an alcoholic or enslaved to drugs
 - vi. Harsh in punishment; or on the other extreme, some were permissive, enabling and even spoiling their children

- vii. Playing favorites among the children, which is unfair
- e. Many start off in their concept of God with how their earthly fathers treated them. Consequently, challenges that many face: hard to feel connected, hard to trust, feel like never can please or do enough, constantly in excessive fear; or see God as the Great Enabler who wants to indulge you!
- f. By meditating on the Word, we can see from stories and statements throughout Scripture the true character of God, and thereby develop a healthy, accurate picture of Him. This may take time, but is very important.

III. Does God Play Favorites?

- a. Did your parents play favorites, if there was more than one child in the family?
- b. My parents: tried hard not to play favorites. Nevertheless sometimes things they did led to feelings among the children that not all were being treated alike; some considered favored over others.
 - i. Challenging for them to treat 4 very different children, with different life situations, all the same. College, children, tragedies, financial challenges faced: each one unique among the four.
 - ii. My wife Alison and I have two children. Although we strive to treat them the same and not be open to any charge of favoritism, this is not always easy; especially since their life challenges and circumstances differ.
- c. **Question:** Does God, our heavenly father “play favorites”, or does he strive to treat everyone the same?
 - i. Many years ago, James A. Harding answered this question in a way that I found disturbing; but after I thought about it, it struck me that it was right, and that there are important lessons for us in it.
 - ii. Harding’s response: Does Jehovah play favorites? Yes, he does. Was not Abraham a divine favorite, or Joseph? Did not God favor David over Goliath? (From an article Harding wrote, ‘Jehovah’s Favorites’, in *The Way*, vol. 4, 23 October 1902, pp. 234-6)
 - iii. Let’s consider what the Bible says about this, starting with examples we are familiar with from our recent series of expository lessons going through the Book of **Genesis**.
 - 1. (From the story of Cain and Abel) “Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat. And the LORD respected Abel and his offering, but He did not respect Cain and his

offering. And Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell.”
(**Genesis 4:4–5**, NKJV)

2. (From the story of Noah, before the Flood) “So the LORD said, ‘I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, creeping thing and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.’ But Noah found *grace* in the eyes of the LORD.” (**Genesis 6:7–8**, NKJV)
 - a. Note that in the Septuagint (LXX) the Greek word translated ‘grace’ here, is a word that means ‘favor’.
3. (When Abraham was called by God) “Now the LORD had said to Abram: ‘Get out of your country, from your family and from your father’s house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’” (**Genesis 12:1–3**, NKJV)
4. (When the Lord spoke to Jacob, in the story involving the ladder to heaven) “And behold, the LORD stood above it and said: ‘I am the LORD God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants. Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you.’” (**Genesis 28:13–15**, NKJV)
5. (When Joseph was sent to prison in Egypt) “But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him mercy, and He gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. And the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph’s hand all the prisoners who were in the prison; whatever they did there, it was his doing. The keeper of the prison did not look into anything that was under Joseph’s authority, because the LORD was with him; and whatever he did, the LORD made it prosper.” (**Genesis 39:21–23**, NKJV)
6. (When God spoke to Moses at Mount Sinai regarding the Jewish nation, before the 10 Commandments were given) “And Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, ‘Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel: ‘You have seen what I did to the Egyptians,

and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel." (**Exodus 19:3-6**, NKJV)

7. (When the Lord addressed Joshua in **Joshua chapter 1**) "No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life; as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you nor forsake you." (**Joshua 1:5**, NKJV)
 8. (When Satan and the Lord discuss Job, in **Job chapter 1**) "Then the LORD said to Satan, 'Have you considered My servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil?' So Satan answered the LORD and said, 'Does Job fear God for nothing? Have You not made a hedge around him, around his household, and around all that he has on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land.'" (**Job 1:8-10**, NKJV)
 9. (Before David goes into battle against Goliath) "Moreover David said, 'The LORD, who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, He will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.' And Saul said to David, 'Go, and the LORD be with you!'" (**1 Samuel 17:37**, NKJV; corresponds to **1 Kingdoms 17:17** in the LXX)
- iv. Harding saw clearly from Scripture that God indeed had his favorites, and He treated them unlike he treated the rest of mankind. It was always that way.
 - v. HOWEVER, their favored status was not based on arbitrary selection by God. It was based on their character, how they lived. We can see that in all the examples provided. In many cases, that position could be forfeited if they became corrupted.

IV. Do You Want to Be One of God's Favorites? Are You Sure?

- a. God does indeed have his favorites, and he treats them differently. The door is open for *anyone* to become one of God's favorites. The invitation is open, the place is available. You get to decide if you will be one of God's favorites, His favored ones; depending on how much you want to love, fear and obey God.
- b. However, in many cases that position comes at a high cost. Consider:

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- i. Jacob had to endure 20 years of suffering under his deceitful uncle, Laban.
 - ii. Joseph sold into slavery by his brothers, and later spent years in prison in Egypt.
 - iii. Job lost everything (children, possessions, respected reputation and even his health).
 - iv. Read **Hebrews 11:24-26** (Moses suffered).
 - v. Read **Hebrews 11:35b-40** (Examples of past heroes of faith who suffered.)
 - vi. Anyone who desires to be one of God's favorites should anticipate: God's protection and blessing, *as well as suffering in this life!*
 - vii. Read **Hebrews 12:1-11** (Ultimate example for us: the suffering of Jesus, God's beloved and highly favored Son).
 1. Jesus shows us the way, providing the example for us to follow (willingness to suffer).
 2. "For whom the LORD loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives." (**Hebrews 12:6**, NKJV)
 - viii. This is why it is so important to be reading through all the Scriptures, continually: to see the character of God. Doing that, we see how He treated His favored ones throughout the Old and New Testaments, including Jesus.
- c. How do you think *Satan* treats those who are striving to be God's favored ones? If you want to be one of God's favorites, brace yourself for a rough and challenging life. Satan will be especially intent on your destruction!

V. James Harding Put This into Practice in His Own Life

- a. The examples of some of the suffering James A. Harding faced early in his own life; at the age of 25, as a young married man:
 - i. Had contracted malaria.
 - ii. Two of his three children died before reaching the age of one.
 - iii. His beloved wife Carrie, sickly, dies after 5 years of marriage.
- b. Yet Harding's attitude was that God loved him and only brought into his life what was for his own good. "God denies a Christian nothing but with a design to give him something better." "Of course," Harding comments, "in the very nature of love, it could not be otherwise. God intends the best for his

children, so he will give them what best suits their needs. We should pray to God to give us whatever is best for us, wealth or poverty, honor or humiliation, health or sickness, life or death; being sure that whatever he gives to his dutiful child will be a blessing. God gives a person whatever best enables him to 'glorify God' so as to fulfill God's purposes in the world whether it is affluence or poverty, whether death or life."

- c. Harding's friend L.C. Sears, based on records no longer available to the historian, commented "Carrie's death, painful as it was to bear, Harding felt later was a blessing for both her and for him. With her feeble health he could never have accomplished the great work he was destined to do." Harding understood that God's purposes are driven by his love for his people and his goal that they reign with him forever and ever. "He loves us and he allows no pain, no sorrow, no disappointment to come to us except it be for our own good."
- d. In 1884, after Harding had lost two children and a wife to death before he was 25 years old, his faith could still advise one to pray "as God wills" because "God knows best."

VI. How Can We have that Attitude when Facing Adversity, Suffering and Disappointment in Our Own Lives?

- a. Three passages in Scripture that were especially significant to James Harding in seeing God in this light (trusting that God is directly involved in the lives of his favored ones, and always doing what is best for them):
 - i. **Psalms 34**
 - ii. **Psalms 37**
 - iii. **Romans 8:28** (One of the verses most quoted by Harding)
 - 1. "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose." (**Romans 8:28**, NKJV)

VII. Summary and Conclusion

- a. God is a loving Father. However, he does indeed have favorites among his children, as shown throughout the Biblical record.
- b. However, God is not being arbitrary. God has always chosen his favorites based on their spiritual character. So anyone who chooses can become one of God's favorites, who will enjoy God's loving personal protection and presence.

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- c. Being one of God's favorites usually comes at a cost. We see that throughout Scripture in those who were great heroes of faith in the past, and ultimately in the suffering of Jesus, who is God's own beloved Son.
- d. God disciplines, chastens and even scourges those He loves, his favored ones, as is says in **Hebrews 12**.
- e. God is a loving father who allows hardship, suffering, poverty and even illness and death into our lives for our own good. He loves us and knows what is best for us in the long term; what will serve us the best for eternity.
- f. James A. Harding is an example of someone who grasped this practically in his own life, in the face of great personal suffering and tragedy. He believed this understanding came through constantly reading through the entire Bible and seeing the character of God revealed again and again through history.

VIII. (Epilogue: Resources)

- a. For any who are interested in more information on the life and ministry of James A. Harding, the following resources are available:
 - i. Hicks, Joh Mark, *James A. Harding, Evangelist and Teacher* (address at 2nd Annual Carroll B. Ellis Symposium on Restoration Preaching)
 - 1. Notes from that presentation available at <http://icotb.org/resources/hardingasevangelistandteacher.pdf>
 - 2. Note that quotes and references to James A. Harding's life and teachings not otherwise attributed in this lesson are generally taken from this source.
 - ii. J.M. Hicks and B. Valentine, *Kingdom Come: Embracing the Spiritual Legacy of David Lipscomb and James Harding* (Leafwood Publishers, 2006)