

THE FAMILY OF GOD¹

By J. C. Ryle
(1816-1900)

"His whole family in heaven and on earth." [Ephesians 3:15]

The words which form the title of this paper ought to always stir some feelings in our minds. There is not a man or woman on this earth who is not a member of some "family." The poorest as well as the richest has his relative and kin, and can tell you something of his "family."

We all know, that family gatherings at certain times of the year, such as Christmas, are very common. Thousands of homes are crowded then, if at no other time of the year. The young man in town snatches a few days away from business, and takes a run down to visit his parents at home. The young woman gets a short holiday, and comes to visit her father and mother. Brothers and sisters meet for a few hours. Parents and children look one another in the face. There is so much to talk about! So many questions to be asked! So many interesting things to be told! It is indeed a happy home which sees "the whole family" gathered in it at Christmas.

Family gatherings are natural, and right, and good. I approve of them with all my heart. It does me good to see them kept up. They are one of the very pleasant things which has survived the fall of man. Next to the grace of God, I see no principle which unites people so much in this sinful world as family sentiments. Community of blood is a most powerful tie. It was a fine saying of an American naval officer, when his men insisted on helping the English sailors in fighting the Taku forts in China, "I cannot help it: blood is thicker than water." I have often observed that people will stand up for their relatives, merely because they are their relatives, and refuse to hear a word against them, even when they have no sympathy with their tastes and ways. Anything which helps to keep up the family sentiment ought to be commended. It is a wise thing, when it can be done, to gather "the whole family" together at Christmas.

Family gatherings, nevertheless, are often sorrowful things. It would be strange indeed, in such a world as this, if they were not. Few are the family circles which do not show gaps and vacant places as years pass away. Changes and deaths make sad havoc as time goes on. Thoughts will rise up within us, as we grow older, about faces and voices no longer with us, which no Christmas merriment can entirely keep down. When the young members of the family have once begun to launch forth into the world, the old heads may long survive the scattering of the nest; but after a certain time, it seldom happens that you see "the whole family" together.

There is one great family to which I want all the readers of this paper to belong. It is a family despised by many, and not even known by some. But it is a family of far more importance than any family on earth. To belong to it entitles a man to far greater privileges than to be the son of a king. It is the family of which Paul speaks to the Ephesians, when he tells them of the "whole family in heaven and earth." It is the family of God.

I ask for the attention of every reader of this paper while I try to describe this family, and recommend it to his notice. I want to tell you of the amazing benefits which membership of this family conveys. I want you to be found as a member of this family, when it is finally gathered together in the end--a gathering without separation, or sorrow, or tears. Hear me while, as a minister of Christ, and friend to your soul, I speak to you for a few minutes about "His whole family in heaven and on earth:"

I. First of all, what is this family?

II. Secondly, what is its present position?

III. Thirdly, what are its future prospects?

I wish to unfold these three things before you, and I invite that you seriously consider them. Our family gatherings on earth must one day come to an end. Our last earthly Christmas must come. Happy indeed is that Christmas which finds us prepared to meet God!

I. What is that family which the Bible calls "His whole family in heaven and on earth"? Of whom does it consist?

The family before us consists of all real Christians--all who have the Holy Spirit living within them--all true believers in Christ--all the saints of every age, and Church, and nation, and language. It includes the blessed company of all faithful people. It is the same as the Elect of God--the household of faith--the mystical body of Christ--the bride--the living temple--the sheep that never perish--the Church of the firstborn--the holy universal Church. All these expressions are "the family of God" only using other names.

Membership in "the family of God," does not depend on any earthly connection. It does not come by natural birth, but by new birth. Ministers cannot impart it to their hearers. Parents cannot give it to their children. You may be born in the godliest family in the land, and enjoy the sweetest fellowship of grace that any Church can supply, and yet never belong to the family of God. To belong to it you must be born again. No one but the Holy Spirit can make you a living member of this family. It is His special function and prerogative to bring into the true Church all those who will be saved. Those who are born again are born, "not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God." [John 1:13]

Do you want to know the reason that the Bible gives this name to all true Christians? Would you like to know why they are called "a family"? Listen and I will tell you.

(a) True Christians are called "a family" because they all have one Father.

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They are all children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. They are all born of one Spirit. They are all sons and daughters of the Lord Almighty. They have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby they cry, "Abba Father." [Galatians 3:26; John 3:8; 2 Corinthians 6:18; Romans 8:15] They do not regard God with a cringing kind of fear, as they would to a harsh Being, that is always ready to punish them. They look up to Him with tender confidence, as a reconciled and loving parent--as one forgiving evil and sin, to all who believe in Jesus--and full of pity even to the least and feeblest. The words, "Our Father in heaven," are no mere form of prayer in the mouth of true Christians. No wonder they are called God's "family."

(b) True Christians are called "a family," because they all rejoice in one name.

That name is the name of their great Head and Elder Brother, even Jesus Christ the Lord. Just as a common family name is the uniting link to all the members of a clan, so does the name of Jesus tie all believers together in one vast family. As members of outward visible Churches they have various names and distinguishing classifications. As living members of Christ, they all, with one heart and mind, rejoice in one Savior. Every heart among them feels drawn to Jesus as the only object of hope. Every tongue among them would tell you that "Christ is all." Sweet to them all is the thought of Christ's death for them on the cross. Sweet is the thought of Christ's intercession for them at the right hand of God. Sweet is the thought of Christ's coming again to unite them to Himself in one glorified fellowship forever. In fact, you might as well take away the sun out of heaven, as take away the name of Christ from believers. To the world His Name may not mean much, but to believers, it is full of comfort, hope, rest, and peace. No wonder they are called "a family."

(c) True Christians, above all, are called "a family" because there is so strong a family resemblance among them.

They are all led by one Spirit, and are marked by the same general features of life, heart, taste, and character. Just as there is a general bodily resemblance among the brothers and sisters of a family, so there is a general spiritual resemblance among all the sons and daughters of the Lord Almighty. They all hate sin and love God. They all rest their hope of salvation on Christ, and have no confidence in themselves. They all endeavor to "come out and be separate" from the ways of the world, and to set their affections on things above. They all naturally turn to the same Bible, as the only food for their souls and the only sure guide in their pilgrimage toward heaven: they find it "a lamp to their feet and a light for their path." [Psalm 119:105] They all go to the same throne of grace in prayer, and find it as needful to speak to God as to breathe. They all live by the same rule, the Word of God, and strive to conform their daily life to its precepts. They all have the same inward experience. They all are, in varying degrees, acquainted with repentance, faith, hope, love, humility, and inward conflict. No wonder they are called "a family."

This family likeness among true believers is a thing that deserves special attention. To my own mind it is one of the strongest indirect evidences of the truth of Christianity. It is one of the greatest proofs of the reality of the work of the Holy Spirit. Some true Christians live in civilized countries, and some in the midst of heathen lands. Some are highly educated, and some are unable to read a single letter of the alphabet. Some are rich and some are poor. Some are old and some are young. And yet, despite all these differences, there is a marvelous oneness of heart and character among them. Their joys and their sorrows, their love and their hatred, their likes and their dislikes, their preferences and their aversions, their hopes and their fears, are all most curiously alike. Let others think what they please, I see in all this the finger of God. His handiwork is always one and the same. No wonder that true Christians are compared to "a family."

Take a converted Englishman and a converted Hindu, and let them suddenly meet for the first time. I will ensure you, if they can understand one another's language, they will soon find common ground between them, and feel at home. The one may have been brought up at Oxford, and enjoyed every privilege of English civilization. The other may have been trained in the midst of gross heathenism, and accustomed to habits, ways, and manners as unlike the Englishman's as darkness compared to light. And yet now in half an hour they feel that they are friends! The Englishman finds that he has more in common with this Hindu brother than he has with many of his old college companions. Who can account for this? How can it be explained? Nothing can account for it but the unity of the Holy Spirit's teaching. It is "one touch" of grace (not nature) "that makes the whole world family." God's people are in the brightest sense "a family."

This is the family to which I wish to direct the attention of my readers in this paper. This is the family to which I want you to belong. I ask you this day to consider it carefully, if you never considered it before. I have shown you the Father of the family--the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. I have shown you the Head and Elder Brother of the family--the Lord Jesus Himself. I have shown you the features and characteristics of the family. All its members have great marks of resemblance. Once more I say, consider it well.

Outside this family, remember, there is no salvation. No one but those who belong to it, according to the Bible, are on the road that leads to heaven. The salvation of our souls does not depend on union with one Church or separation from another. They are miserably deceived who think that it does, and will find it out to their loss one day, unless they wake up. No! the life of our souls depends on something far more important. This is eternal life, to be a member of "the whole family in heaven and earth."

II. I will now pass on to the second thing which I promised to consider. What is the present position of the whole family in heaven and earth?

The family to which I am directing the attention of my readers this day is divided into two great parts. Each part has its own residence or dwelling place. Part of the family is in heaven, and part is on earth. For the present the two parts are entirely separated from one another. But they form one body in the sight of God, though resident in two places; and their union is sure to take place one day.

Remember, two places, and only two, contain the family of God. The Bible tells us of no third habitation. There is no such thing as Purgatory, despite what some may falsely teach! There is no house of purifying, training, or probation for those who are not true Christians when they die. Oh no! There are only two parts of the family--the part that is seen and the part that is

unseen, the part that is in "heaven" and the part that is on "earth." The members of the family that are not in heaven are on earth, and those that are not on the earth are in heaven. Two parts, and only two! Two places, and only two! Let this never be forgotten.

Some of God's family are safe in heaven. They are at rest in that place which the Lord Jesus expressly calls "Paradise." [Luke 23:43] They have finished their course. They have fought their battle. They have finished their appointed work. They have learned their lessons. They have carried their cross. They have passed through the waves of this troublesome world and have reached the harbor. As little as we know about them, we know that they are happy. They are no longer troubled by sin and temptation. They have said goodbye forever to poverty and anxiety, to pain and sickness, to sorrow and tears. They are with Christ Himself, who loved them and gave Himself up for them, and in His company they are indeed very happy. [Philippians 1:23] They have nothing to fear in looking back to the past. They have nothing to dread in looking forward to things to come. There are only three things lacking that would make their happiness complete. These three are the Second Coming of Christ in glory, the resurrection of their own bodies, and the gathering together of all believers.

Some of God's family are still on the earth. They are scattered everywhere in the midst of a wicked world, a few in one place and a few in another. All are more or less occupied in the same way, according to the measure of their grace given them. All are running a race, doing a work, fighting a warfare, carrying a cross, striving against sin, resisting the devil, crucifying the flesh, struggling against the world, witnessing for Christ, mourning over their own hearts, hearing, reading, and praying, however feebly, for the life of their souls. Each is often disposed to think no cross is so heavy as his own, no work so difficult, no heart so hard. But each and everyone is steadfast in their way--a wonder to the ignorant world around them, and often a wonder to themselves.

But, however divided God's family may be at the present time, on the earth, it is still one family. Both parts of it are still one in character, one in possessions, and one in relation to God. The part in heaven does not have as much superiority over the part on earth as at first sight may appear. The difference between the two is only one of degree.

(a) Both parts of the family love the same Savior, and delight in the same perfect will of God. But the part on earth loves with much imperfection and weakness, and lives by faith, not by sight. The part in heaven loves without weakness, or doubt, or distraction. It walks by sight and not by faith, and sees what it once believed.

(b) Both parts of the family are saints. But the saints on earth are often poor weary pilgrims, who find that the "sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that they do not do what they want." [Galatians 5:17] They live in the midst of an evil world, and are often sick of themselves and of the sin they see around them. The saints in heaven, on the contrary, are delivered from the world, the flesh, and the devil, and enjoy glorious liberty. They are called "the spirits of righteous men made perfect." [Hebrews 12:23]

(c) Both parts of the family are equally God's children. But the children in heaven have learned all their lessons, have finished their appointed tasks, have begun an eternal holiday. The children on earth are still in school. They are daily learning wisdom, though slowly and with much trouble, and often needing to be reminded of their past lessons by chastisement and the rod. Their graduation day is yet to come.

(d) Both parts of the family are equally God's soldiers. But the soldiers on earth are still engaged in the battle. Their fight is not over. Every day they need to put on the whole armor of God. The soldiers in heaven are all triumphant. No enemy can hurt them now. No fiery dart of Satan can reach them. They have laid aside both helmet and shield. They can at last say to the sword of the Spirit, "Rest and be still." They can finally sit down, and not have to watch and stand on their guard.

(e) Last, but not least, both parts of the family are equally safe and secure. As wonderful as this may sound, it is true. Christ cares as much for His family members on earth as His family members in heaven. You might as well think to pluck the stars out of heaven, as to pluck one saint, however feeble, out of Christ's hand. Both parts of the family are equally secure by "an everlasting covenant, arranged and secured in every part?" [2 Samuel 23:5] The members on earth, through the weakness of their flesh and the smallness of their faith, may neither see, nor know, nor feel their own safety. But they are safe, though they may not see it. The whole family is "shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation." [1 Peter 1:5] The family members still on the road to the Father's house are as secure as the members who have already made it home. On the last day no one will be found missing. The words of the Christian poet will be proved true:

"More happy, but not more secure,
The glorified saints in heaven."

Now before I leave this part of my subject, I ask every reader of this paper to thoroughly understand the present situation of God's family, and to form an accurate estimate of it. Do not measure its numbers nor its privileges by what you see with your eyes. You see only a small body of believers at the present time. But you must not forget that a great number has already made it safely to heaven, and that when all are assembled at the last day, there will be a great multitude that no one could count." [Revelation 7:9]

You only see that part of the family which is struggling on earth. You must never forget that the greater part of the family has already made it home and is resting in heaven. You see the militant part, but not the triumphant. You see the part that is carrying the cross, but not the part that is safe in Paradise. The family of God is far more rich and glorious than you suppose. Believe me, it is no small thing to belong to the "whole family in heaven and on earth."

III. I will now move on to the last thing which I promised to consider—What are the future prospects of the whole family in heaven and on earth?

The future prospects of a family! What a vast amount of uncertainty these words open up when we look at any family we now see in the world! How little we can tell of the things coming on any of us! What a mercy it is that we do not know the sorrows and trials and separations which our beloved children may have to experience, after we have left the world! It is a mercy that we

do not know "what a day may bring forth," and a far greater mercy that we do not know what may happen in the next twenty years. [Proverbs 27:1] Surely, foreknowledge of the future prospects of our household would spoil many a family gathering, and fill the whole party with gloom!

Think how many a fine boy, who is now the delight of his parents, will in time follow the path of a reckless son, and never return home! Think how many a fair daughter, the joy of a mother's heart, will in a few years follow her own stubborn will, and insist on some miserably mistaken marriage! Think how disease and pain will often lay low the loveliest of a family circle, and make her life a burden and wearisome to herself, if not to others! Think of the endless disagreements and divisions that will arise out of money matters! Yes, there is many a life-long quarrel over a small sum of money, between those who once played joyfully together in the same nursery! Think of these things. The "future prospects" of many a family which meets together every Christmas are a solemn and serious subject. Hundreds, to say the least, are gathering together for the last time: when they part they will never meet again.

But, thank God, there is one great family whose "prospects" are very different. It is a family of which I am speaking in this paper, and commending your attention. The future prospects of the family of God are not uncertain. They are good, and only good; happy and only happy. Listen to me, and I will try to set them in order before you.

(a) The members of God's family will all be brought safely home one day.

Here on earth they may be scattered, tried, tossed with storms of life, and bowed down with afflictions. But not one of them will perish. [John 10:28] The weakest lamb will not be left to perish in the wilderness: the feeblest child will not be missing when the roll call is called out at the last day. In spite of the world, the flesh, and the devil, the whole family will get home. "For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of His Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through His life!" [Romans 5:10]

(b) The members of God's family will one day all have glorious bodies.

When the Lord Jesus Christ comes the second time, the dead saints will all be raised and the living will all be changed. They will no longer have a vile mortal body, full of weaknesses and infirmities: they will have a body like that of their risen Lord, without the slightest vulnerability to sickness and pain. They will no longer be clogged and hindered by an aching frame, when they want to serve God: they will be able to serve Him night and day without any weariness, and to attend to Him without any distraction. The former things will have passed away. That word will be fulfilled, "I am making everything new!" [Revelation 21:5]

(c) One day, the members of God's family will all be gathered into one company.

It does not matter where they have lived or where they have died. They may have been separated from one another both by time and space. One may have lived in tents, with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and another traveled by the modern transportation of our day. One may have his bones laid to rest in an Australian desert, and another may have been buried in an English churchyard. It makes no difference. All will be gathered together from north and south, and east and west, and meet in one happy assembly, never to part again. The earthly partings of God's family are only for a few days. Their meeting is for eternity. Little does it matter where we live. It is a time of scattering now, not of gathering. Little does it matter where we die. All grave are equally near to Paradise. But it does matter whether we belong to God's family. If we do we are sure to meet again in the end.

(d) One day the members of God's family will all be united in mind and judgment.

They are so divided now about many little things. About the things needful to salvation there is a marvelous unity among them. About many speculative points in religion, about forms of worship and church government, they often sadly disagree. But one day there will be no disagreement among them at all. Ephraim will no longer disturb Judah, nor Judah Ephraim. Partial knowledge and dim vision will be ended forever. Divisions and separations, misunderstandings and misinterpretations, will all be buried and forgotten. Since there will only be one language, so there also will be only one opinion. At last, after thousands of years of strife and clashing, perfect unity and harmony will be found. A family will finally be shown to angels and men in which all are of one mind.

(e) One day the members of God's family will all be perfected in holiness.

They are not now literally perfect, although they "have been given fullness in Christ." [Colossians 2:10] Though they are born again, and renewed after the image of Christ, they stumble and fall short in many things. [James 3:2] No one knows it better than they do themselves. It is their grief and sorrow that they do not love God more heartily and serve Him more faithfully. But one day they will be completely freed from all corruption. They will rise again at Christ's Second Coming without any of the disorders and sicknesses which now cleave to them in their lives. Not a single evil temper or corrupt inclination will be found in them. They will be presented by their Lord and Husband to the Father, without spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing—perfectly holy and without blemish—fair as the moon, and clear as the sun. [Ephesians 5:27, Song of Solomon 5:10]

Grace, even now, is a beautiful thing, when it lives, and shines, and flourishes in the midst of imperfection. But how much more beautiful will grace appear when it is seen pure, unmixed, unmingled, and alone! And it will be seen so when Christ comes to be glorified in His saints at the last day.

(f) Last, but not least, one day, the members of God's family will be eternally provided for.

When the affairs of this sinful world are finally wound up and settled, there will be an everlasting reward for all the sons and daughters of the Lord Almighty. Not even the weakest of them will be overlooked and forgotten. There will be something for everyone, according to their faithfulness. The smallest vessel of grace, as well as the greatest, will be filled to the brim with glory. It would be pure folly to pretend to describe the precise nature of that glory and reward. It is a thing which "no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has conceived." [1 Corinthians 2:9] It is enough for us to know that each member of God's family, when

he awakes from the grave to his Master's likeness, will be "satisfied." [Psalm 17:15] Above all, it will be enough to know that their joy, and glory, and reward will be forever. They will never lose what they will receive in the day of the Lord. The inheritance reserved for them, when they come of age, is "an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade." [1 Peter 1:4]

These prospects of God's family are great realities. They are not vague shadowy talk of man's invention. They are real true things, and will be seen as such before long. They deserve your serious consideration. Examine them well.

Look around the families of earth with which you are acquainted, the richest, the greatest, the noblest, and the happiest. Where will you find one among them all which can show prospects to compare with those of which you have just heard? The earthly riches, in many a case, will be gone in a hundred years or so. The noble blood, in many a case, will not prevent some disgraceful deed from staining the family name. The happiness, in many a case, will be found hollow and illusive. Few, indeed, are the homes that do not have a secret sorrow, or a "skeleton in the closet." Whether for present possessions or future prospects, there is no family so well off as "the whole family of God in heaven and earth." Whether you look at what they now have, or what they will have in heaven, there is no family like the family of God.

My task is done. My paper is drawing to a close. It only remains to close it with a few words of practical application. Give me your attention for the last time. May God bless what I am going to say for the good of your soul!

(1) I ask you a simple question. Take it with you to every family gathering which you join at any season of the year. Take it with you, and amidst all your happiness make time for thinking about it. It is a simple question, but a solemn one, Do you really belong to the family of God?

To the family of God, remember! This is the point of my question. It is no answer to say that you are a Protestant, or belong to so-and-so denomination, or are an Evangelical. I want to hear of something more and better than that. I want you to have some soul-satisfying and soul-saving religion. A religion that will give you peace while you live, and hope when you die. To have such peace and hope you must be something more than a Protestant, or a member of so-and-so denomination, or an Evangelical. You must belong to "the family of God." I firmly believe that thousands around you do not belong to the family. But that is no reason why you should not.

If you do not yet belong to God's family, I invite you this day to join it without delay. Open your eyes to see the value of your soul, the sinfulness of sin, the holiness of God, and the present danger of your present condition, the absolute necessity of a mighty change. Open your eyes to see these things, and repent this very day. Open your eyes to see the great head of God's family, even Christ Jesus, waiting to save your soul. See how he has loved you, lived for you, died for you, risen again for you, and obtained complete redemption for you. See how he offers you free, full, immediate pardon, if you will only believe in Him. Open your eyes to see these things. Seek Christ at once. Come and believe in Him, and commit your soul to His keeping this very day.

I know nothing of your family or past history. I do not know where you go to spend your holidays, or what company you are going to be in. But I am bold to say, that if you join the family of God you will find it the best and happiest family in the world.

(2) If you really belong to the whole family in heaven and earth, count up your privileges, and learn to be more thankful. Remember what a mercy it is to have something which the world can neither give nor take away—something which makes you independent of sickness and poverty--something which is your own forevermore. The old family home will soon be empty and up for sale. The old family gatherings will soon be past and gone forever. The loving faces we now delight to gaze on are rapidly leaving us. The cheerful voices which now welcome us will be silent in the grave. But, thank God, if we belong to Christ's family there is a better gathering yet to come. Let us often think of it, and be thankful!

The family gathering of all God's people will make up for all that their religion now costs them. A meeting where none are missing—a meeting where there are no gaps and empty places—a meeting where there are no tears—a meeting where there is no parting—such a meeting as this is worth a fight and a struggle. And such a meeting is yet to come to "the whole family in heaven and earth."

In the meantime let us strive to live worthy of the family to which we belong. Let us labor to do nothing that may cause our Father's house to be spoken against. Let us endeavor to make our Master's name beautiful by our disposition, conduct, and conversation. Let us love as brethren, and abhor all quarrels. Let us behave as if the honor of "the family" depended on our behavior.

So living, by the grace of God, we will make our calling and election sure, both to ourselves and others. So living, "we will have the sure hope of receiving a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." [2 Peter 1:11] So living, we will recommend our Father's family to others, and perhaps by God's blessing induce them to say, "We will go with you."

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