

FATHER'S DAY | HOPE CHAPEL | RUN THE RACE 2026

THE FATHER HEART OF GOD

What It Means to Be Called Children of God
Pastor Andrew Cole | Sunday 6 September 2026 | 9AM Gawler

Big Idea: *The greatest gift a father can give is not provision or protection alone - it is presence. And the greatest truth of the Christian life is that we have a Father who is fully present, whose love is not earned, and whose heart toward us never changes.*

Introduction - Father's Day

Andrew began by acknowledging that Father's Day is one of the most complex Sundays on the church calendar. For some in the room it is straightforward celebration - gratitude for a good father, joy in being one. For others it is complicated - a father who was absent, harmful, or who has died. For some it is a day of grief over the father they wished they had, or over a child they have lost connection with.

Andrew held all of that carefully before moving forward. Father's Day is not a day to pretend everyone's experience of fatherhood is the same. It is a day to look at what fatherhood was always meant to be - and to meet the Father who fulfils it completely, regardless of what our earthly experience has been.

1 John 3:1 *See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!*

That is what we are. Not what we are working toward. Not what we might become if we get good enough. What we are. The identity is given, not earned. And the love behind it is described as lavished - poured out extravagantly, without measure.

1 | The Father We Were Made For

Andrew opened by asking: what does a good father actually look like? Not a perfect father - there are none. But a good one. He drew on Scripture and on his own experience as a father to paint a picture.

A Good Father Is Present

The most important thing a father can give is not money, not success, not education - it is presence. Children spell love T-I-M-E. A father who provides everything financially but is

never actually there leaves a particular kind of wound - one that is hard to name because on paper everything was provided, but the thing most needed was missing.

Andrew shared honestly that this was one of his own areas of learning as a father. The pressure of ministry and leadership meant there were seasons where he was physically present but mentally elsewhere. The correction God brought him to was simple: be here. Actually here. Not managing the next thing in your head. Here.

A Good Father Communicates Value

A child's sense of their own worth is largely formed by what they hear from their father. Not exclusively - but powerfully. When a father says: I am proud of you, I believe in you, you are enough - those words go deep. When a father communicates the opposite, or communicates nothing at all, the silence is also formative.

Andrew spoke of the moment at Jesus' baptism when the Father's voice comes from heaven before Jesus has done a single miracle, preached a single sermon, or healed a single person:

Matthew 3:17 *And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.'*

The affirmation comes before the ministry. Before any performance. God the Father speaks identity over his Son at the very start - this is who you are, and I am pleased with you. This is what every human heart needs to hear from a father. And this is what our heavenly Father speaks over every one of his children.

A Good Father Disciplines with Love

A father who never corrects is not a kind father - he is an absent one in a different form. Discipline, done well, is an act of love. It says: I care too much about who you are becoming to let you keep going in this direction.

Hebrews 12:6 *The Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.*

The discipline of God is never punitive in the sense of revenge. It is corrective - aimed at our flourishing, not our destruction. A father who disciplines because he loves is giving a gift, even when it does not feel like one.

Reflect: *What picture of fatherhood did you grow up with - and how has it shaped your picture of God? Are there ways in which your earthly father's strengths or failures have been unconsciously mapped onto how you see your heavenly Father?*

2 | The Prodigal Father

Andrew turned to the parable most commonly known as the Prodigal Son - and made the point that it is really a story about a prodigal father. The scandalous character in the parable is not the son who runs away. It is the father who runs back.

Luke 15:20 *But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.*

In first century Middle Eastern culture, a man of dignity and status did not run. Running required lifting your robe, exposing your legs - it was undignified, beneath the social standing of a patriarch. And yet this father ran. He saw his son 'while he was still a long way off.' Which means he had been watching. He had been looking down that road. He had not given up.

The father in the parable did not wait for his son to arrive and prove he had changed. He ran before the explanation. He embraced before the apology was finished.

The son had his speech prepared. He had rehearsed it. 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.' But the father interrupts the speech with a robe, a ring, and a party. The son's unworthiness is real - and it is completely irrelevant to the father's response.

This is the father heart of God. He is not waiting for us to arrive in a sufficiently repentant condition. He is running toward us while we are still a long way off. The moment we turn - the moment we begin the journey back - he is already moving.

The Elder Brother

Andrew spent time with the elder brother - the one who stayed, who worked faithfully, and who was furious at the party. His complaint is understandable and his anger is human. But his father's response to him is just as tender as his response to the returning son:

Luke 15:31 *'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.'*

The elder brother had been living in his father's house but had never felt at home in it. He had been performing faithfulness rather than receiving love. And his father's response was not to correct his theology first - it was to say: you are always with me. You have always had everything I have. Did you not know?

Andrew noted that there are two ways to be far from the Father. You can run away like the younger son. Or you can stay close in body but stay far in heart, like the elder brother - performing, comparing, keeping score. The father's arms are open for both.

Reflect: *Which son do you relate to more right now - the one who ran and is finding their way back, or the one who stayed but has become resentful or performance-driven? What would it look like to receive the father's words for the son you are: 'You are always with me, everything I have is yours'?*

3 | Fatherhood as Calling - A Word to Dads

Andrew shifted to speak directly to the fathers in the room - and to everyone who functions in a fathering role, whether biological or not. Mentors, grandfathers, uncles, coaches, pastors, older men in the church community.

Psalm 78:4–7 *We will not hide them from their descendants; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power, and the wonders he has done. He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our ancestors to teach their children, so that the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. Then they would put their trust in God.*

The greatest inheritance a father can pass on is not financial. It is faith. The psalmist is describing a chain of transmission - father to child to grandchild to great-grandchild. Every generation telling the next what God has done. Every father making sure the next generation knows who God is and what he has promised.

This does not require perfection. It requires faithfulness. It requires being honest about your own story - including the failures. It requires showing your children what it looks like to trust God when things are hard, to repent when you get it wrong, to keep going when you would rather give up.

Andrew shared personally that one of the things he has tried to do as a father is let his children see him pray - not just in church, not just at the dinner table, but in the ordinary moments. In the car. In the morning. When something hard comes up. He wants them to see that prayer is not a performance for Sundays but a relationship with a real person who is always available.

A Word for Those Without a Good Father

Andrew returned to where he began. Not everyone in the room has had a father who modelled this. Some have had fathers who were absent, harmful, distant, or who have died. The wound of a father who did not show up is real, and it does not disappear on Father's Day.

But here is what Scripture says directly into that wound:

Psalm 68:5 *A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling.*

Isaiah 49:15–16 *Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.*

God is explicitly a father to those who have no father. He takes that role personally and specifically. And he promises that even when every human relationship fails - even the most foundational ones - he does not forget. Your name is engraved on his hands.

Whatever your earthly experience of fatherhood, you have a Father who does not forget you. Your name is on his hands.

Reflect: *If you have been carrying a wound related to your earthly father, what would it look like to bring that specifically to God today - not to dismiss the wound, but to let him speak his fatherhood directly into it?*

Conclusion - The Father Who Runs

He saw you while you were still a long way off.
He ran before you finished the sentence.
He has already prepared the party.

The father heart of God is not something we have to earn our way into. It is not contingent on our performance, our track record, or how far we have strayed. The moment we turn, he is running. The robe, the ring, the party - all of it is already prepared.

To the fathers in the room: you are being shaped by the same Father who runs. Let that inform how you run toward your own children. To everyone in the room: whatever your Father's Day looks like - you have a Father who does not forget you, who has engraved your name on his hands, and who is running toward you right now.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

Use these on your own during the week, or with your LifeGroup.

1. Father's Day can be complex. Honestly - what does this day bring up for you? Gratitude, grief, complication, or all three? Is there something you need to bring to God today that this day has surfaced?
2. God spoke over Jesus before the ministry began: 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.' Do you hear that kind of affirmation from your heavenly Father? What makes it hard to receive his words of identity over you?
3. Andrew said the prodigal father ran before the apology was finished - he embraced before the explanation was done. Is there an area of your life where you have been rehearsing a speech before coming back to God? What would it look like to start walking before the speech is ready?
4. The elder brother stayed in the house but was far from the father's heart - performing, comparing, keeping score. Is that a familiar posture? What would it look like to receive the father's words: 'You are always with me, everything I have is yours'?

5. Psalm 78 describes a chain of transmission - father telling child, child telling grandchild. What are you passing on to the next generation, whether through your own children or through others you influence? Is faith part of what you are transmitting?

6. Psalm 68:5 says God is 'a father to the fatherless.' If your earthly experience of fatherhood has been painful, how does that specific promise land for you? Is there a wound from your father that you could bring to God today and ask him to speak his fatherhood into?

Key Scriptures This Week

- 1 John 3:1 - See what great love the Father has lavished on us
- Matthew 3:17 - This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased
- Hebrews 12:6 - The Lord disciplines the one he loves
- Luke 15:20 - While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and ran
- Luke 15:31 - You are always with me; everything I have is yours
- Psalm 78:4–7 - Tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord
- Psalm 68:5 - A father to the fatherless
- Isaiah 49:15–16 - I have engraved you on the palms of my hands