

The School of Sonship unto Adoption

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READING: Rom. 8:14,17,19,21,23,29; Gal. 4:5-7; Eph. 1:5-6; Heb. 1:1-2; 3:6-8,14-15; 5:8-14; 12:5-7,9,11.

Continuing our contemplation of the spiritual house, we are now to consider the matter of the School of sonship unto adoption. I hesitate to go over the ground of technical differences in terms because that has been done so often, but you will suffer just the briefest word in that connection, as it may be necessary for some.

The Divine Conception of "Adoption"

When we come to the things of God, we find that we have to change some of our human ideas, and amongst the many things in which that is so there is this matter of adoption. God's idea about adoption is altogether different from ours. Our idea is that of bringing someone into the family from outside, but that is not God's idea at all about adoption. The word "adoption" literally means "the placing of sons," and you will have recognized, if you were following closely, that adoption comes at the close of things in all those passages of Scripture. It is something which lies ahead. We, who have received the Spirit, wait, groaningly wait, for our adoption. We were foreordained unto adoption as sons. It is something for which we are waiting, according to the Word of God. Thus it is not just the matter of bringing into the family, but it is something which is the result of what has transpired since we came into the family, the result of God's dealings with us as being in His family, and you know quite well that different words are used.

The Revised Version is of peculiar value in this connection. The distinction is made quite clear there that, as children of God, we are such on the ground of birth, whilst we are but sons potentially by that birth. We are actually sons, according to that Divine thought as represented in the word "adoption," after we have been in the family for a time and God has dealt with us. Sonship, in the Divine sense, is something which is being developed in us. To be a child is a question of generation; "child" is a generic term, but sonship is something received, something given, something imparted. That is something more than being born.

The Scriptural Unfolding of the Subject

This word, as you have recognized, is used in different ways in the Scripture. In Romans and Galatians, for instance, we have some light upon sonship. It is seen to have its genesis in a basic relationship with God through our receiving the Spirit. We have received the Spirit, and are called sons because we have received the Spirit, but both in the case of Romans and Galatians the object of those letters was to obviate the grave peril which had come amongst believers of stopping short at a certain point in their spiritual life as born-again ones and not going on to perfection. Their peril was that of being turned aside by the work of the Judaisers, who were coming in to try to arrest the spiritual progress of these believers and bringing in the law again and the Jewish system.

We may indicate here at once that the enemy always withstands very fiercely this matter of spiritual progress unto adoption. The most perilous thing to the enemy is "the adoption of sons." That is the end for him and he knows very well the significance for himself of the Lord's people going on with the Lord unto adoption. These Judaisers were the Devil's instruments to prevent the going on of these people to that glorious end.

So the Holy Spirit, through the Apostle, in these two letters, brings in the light of sonship; that is, he gives the knowledge of sonship in its fuller meaning, and says that basically, by having received the Holy Spirit, we are sons, but that sonship is not realized now in its full meaning and value. That is something unto which we are to go on, in which we are to continue; for the whole creation is waiting, groaning and waiting, for the literal consummation of that which is potential in our having received the Spirit, namely, "the manifestation of the sons of God." When that day comes, the creation will be delivered from its bondage of corruption. But against that deliverance the powers of evil work, and they worked through Judaisers as well as through many other things and people to prevent that glorious deliverance of the creation in the manifestation of the sons of God. So that what we have in Romans and Galatians is light about sonship, the basis of sonship established, but nothing said which carries with it the definite declaration that we have reached all that sonship means. Even in this word, "As many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God," there is no saying that every Christian is a son of God; for is every Christian led by the Spirit of God? It is a spiritual position which is bound up with sonship in God's thought.

Of course, in our birth as children of God, in which sonship is implicit and adoption is prospective, the inheritance is in view, for every one born into this family is a potential heir. If we are children, we are heirs. But

it is quite well known that we can be minors while we are heirs, and that is brought out in Galatians. While we may be born heirs, we are still minors, and we cannot have the inheritance until we reach our majority. That is adoption - reaching the majority, coming to full growth, to full manhood.

Full Sonship a Corporate Matter and Greatly Withstood

So that we are brought face to face with this matter of reaching adoption by the development of sonship in us in the School of God, I think I ought to say here that, while this does become an individual and personal matter and must be that in its application, the matter of adoption is one with that of election, and that it is the Church which is in view, not the individual. It is the Church which is the elect body, and it is the Church which is the elect "son," in the sense in which we are speaking of sonship now; and it is the Church which is fore-ordained unto adoption of sons, not individuals as such, although it has its individual application, and it will be with the manifestation of the sons in the corporate sense, the Church, that God reaches His full end. I say that, because I feel that this matter of sonship involves the truth of the Body of Christ in a very real way. In reality, it depends upon that truth. Now, you may not grasp what I mean. I mean that sonship requires the Body of Christ, is involved in that truth of the Body of Christ, and it is in our relatedness in Christ as fellow-heirs that we shall be developed, that we shall come to fullness, to God's full end. You and I cannot inherit singly, individually: we can only inherit in a related way.

I think that truth goes further than I am now intending to indicate; but let us recognize that the enemy has something very much in view in keeping the light of the Body of Christ from the Lord's people. The reason for that, you see, is on account of our being foreordained unto adoption as sons by Jesus Christ unto Himself, and all that it means to the enemy; for to him it means everything. He loses his place, he loses his kingdom, he loses his title, he loses everything, when this "Corporate Son" is manifested in glory, when this work is completed in the Church and it is found in the throne. It is therefore up to him to keep the light of the Body of Christ from believers: and it is for this reason that, when the Apostle has been led to make the declaration of the truth, "fore-ordained unto adoption as sons," he gets on his knees, so to speak, and prays:

"That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him; having the eyes of your heart enlightened, that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints..." (Eph. 1:17-18).

It is fervent prayer against this blinding, darkening, withholding work of the adversary as to the light concerning the Church's nature, calling and destiny. You will agree with me that there are comparatively few Christians, when you go over the whole range of Christians today in all the world, comparatively few who have light, the revelation of the Body of Christ, and that represents a most disastrous result of Satanic activity, the blinding of the saints. Oh no, this is not some truth which is an optional thing. This is something which is bound up with the very purpose of God and the undoing of all Satanic work.

Well, Romans 8 is a tremendous chapter along many lines, but that great summing up is immense. The creation, subjected to vanity, is seen groaning and travailing unto the manifestation of the sons of God, when it will be delivered from the bondage of corruption: and then, unto that, the elect instrument is shown - "Whom he foreknew, he also fore-ordained to be conformed to the image of his Son." It is the Church being brought in and it is a thing of immense importance, and it is necessary to see that, before we can appreciate this training of sons unto adoption.

We are in a school for a tremendous destiny. We are in the school which has as its end something of such significance and importance that we can scarce imagine; and so we have not to regard lightly the child-training of the Lord. Oh, again our human ideas must not be brought into the Divine realm when we use the word "chastening." What a poor translation! Even the Revisers have not helped us very much. It is simply "child-training." I think that, as a youngster, that chapter in Hebrews was my pet aversion in the Bible when I heard it read! My whole being rose up against that. I suppose that is quite natural; but if only we had been given the two words instead of that deplorable word "chastening." It might at least have taken the edge off things. "My son, despise not thou the child-training of the Lord." There is something better about that. "Whom the Lord loveth. He trains." He child-trains.

Well, we come to the business of child-training right away. Here, in this fifth chapter of the Hebrew letter, we have these school features mentioned in various words, as you notice.

"Though he was a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered."

That is a school verse.

"When by reason of the time ye ought to be teachers..."

It is another school verse.

"Every one that partaketh of milk is without experience..."

That is a school verse.

"...by reason of use have their senses exercised..."

That is what happens at school. Here we are found right in the School of sonship.

The Practical Difference Between "Children" and "Sons"

Now, in the practical way, let us note the difference between infants, spiritually, called children in the New Testament, and sons. The difference is simply this, that infants or children have everything done for them and they live in the good of that for which they themselves have had no exercise. That is the difference. An infant is one who lives on the good of other people's exercise and has never had any exercise for itself. Everything has been done and prepared for it. Everything is coming to it as from the outside, and nothing has been done by the child itself. I think that is the main mark of an infant. But a son, in the spiritual and Scriptural sense, is one who is in the way of having the root of the matter in himself, who is progressively coming out of the realm where everything is done for him and where he has no exercise at all about things, to the place where it is going on in him and he is becoming one who is competent in himself, and no longer dependent upon what others do and say. Everything is not being brought ready made to him. There is a sense in which it is being made in him and he is making it in his own experience by the exercise of his own senses. That is the main difference, spiritually, between an infant or child, and a son.

These two words here are very helpful words - "senses exercised." As children of God, we are regarded as having spiritual senses, and the object of God's dealings with us in His child-training is to bring those senses into exercise, so that by that exercise we may have experience: and what a tremendous thing is experience, and of what value. They are the people who count, these who have experience, and experience comes through the exercise of the senses.

But there are a great many people who never graduate from spiritual childhood and infancy to sonship; and why is it? You see, God does not sovereignly and by determination make sons of us. Oh no, God is not going to make sons of everybody on His own initiative, by His own power. We have a place in this. The responsibility, as you notice, in every one of these Scriptures, is thrown back upon believers themselves, and it is made very clear in very strong words, that the responsibility does rest upon them. The bringing up so frequently of those words relating to Israel's downfall in the wilderness shows what responsibility rests upon the children of God in this matter.

"Today if ye shall hear his voice, harden not your hearts, as in the provocation" (Heb. 3:15).

That has usually been used as a text for a Gospel address to unbelievers; but in the New Testament, it was never used in that way. It may be legitimate, but it was never used in that way in the New Testament. It was always used for Christians, for believers, as a warning, and to bring home to believers this matter of responsibility, of something resting with us.

Purposefulness a Requirement in Would-be Sons

Now, that means there is something basic to sonship unto adoption, and that is a purposefulness to go on with God. There must be about us this sense of purpose, this factor and feature of purpose, purposefulness to go on with God, and the Lord calls for that. Oh, the New Testament might be said to be one continuous urge to that, an urge to be characterized by a spiritual purpose, of meaning to go on, and it is upon that the Lord operates. Now I say that to lead to this. It is just that very purposefulness of heart which brings us into all the trouble. Perhaps if we recognized what that means, it would be as helpful a thing as could be said to us. The people who are not characterized by that spirit of purpose and are just content to be little babes all their lives and to have everything done for them and dished up to them and who never have any exercise for themselves, usually have a fairly comfortable time. They are fairly satisfied and pleased with life and they do not want anything else. But

let a man become marked by this sense of earnest purpose, and it will not be long before he is in trouble! If you mean to go on, then you have come out of the nursery into the school, and the nature of this school is a very difficult one.

The Discipline that Makes All Inward and Living

It just means this, that God is going to put and precipitate us into the most difficult situations. A situation is only difficult if you cannot cope with it. If you find the thing altogether beyond your measure; your measure of strength, your measure of wisdom, your measure of knowledge, then you are in difficulty: and that is the sort of thing the Lord does with people who mean business with Him. He puts them into difficult situations, and His whole object is to get their spiritual senses exercised, so that they may gain experience, may have the root of the matter in themselves. Thus all our nice, comfortable line of things falls away at once and we find ourselves in a realm with which we cannot cope, for which we are not sufficient. We have been in the habit of asking questions and getting them answered: now, no one can answer our questions, no answer comes from the outside. Of course, people can say things to us and we may get a measure of help from those who have experience; but God is going to shut us up to the fact that it has to become ours by experience and in truth. It does not matter what anyone else says, we know quite well that we have to prove that for ourselves: they cannot lift us out of our difficulty. We constantly revert to the old childish way of running around asking somebody to solve our problems, but we have to come out of that. That is not going to work any longer. Really, deep down in us, we know that it does not work. We are not getting what we are after. We know now we have not to have something said to us, but something done in us. We have to be brought ourselves to a position, not to a mental solution; and if you are all the time trying to get intellectual solutions to your spiritual problems, you are still in the nursery. If you are going really to come through to God's full and intended end, you have to know the Lord for yourself in an inward way, and unto that it may be necessary for the Lord to suspend all external helps and render all others incapable of coming to your rescue, flinging you wholly back upon Himself; to prove Him, to know Him, to be deeply, deeply exercised in your own spirit. That exercise enlarges capacity, and enlarged capacity means enlarged impartation from the Lord. That is the School of sonship unto adoption.

You see, spirituality, which is the nature of sonship, is not mental at all. That is to say, it is not a matter of having all our mental problems answered for us by somebody who has an answer to give us. You can never reach spirituality philosophically, logically, academically. You may go all over the world and get many questions answered, but that does not mean that you have come into spiritual enlargement. No, that is a very small realm, after all. Most of us have been there. We know quite well it never got us anywhere at all: and what a time we had and how disappointed we were!

In my own experience in that realm, where it was all a matter of getting answers to spiritual problems, or trying to get them, along intellectual lines, with a very wide search for satisfaction of mind and heart along that line, I reached a point that Robert Browning (a very much bigger man than I am) reached, as the goal of all his enquiry along that line, namely, that it is as difficult not to believe in God as to believe in Him. Well, how far does that get you? But that is the boundary of all inquiry philosophically! You may have decided not to believe anything about God: then there is a sunset and all your decisions are tested at once. You have to say, Man never made that; where did it come from? and you are back to your old questions.

The Lord Jesus Christ says, "If any man willeth to do his will, he shall know of the teaching" (John 7:17). That is only the Gospel way of putting in germ form this great truth of sonship, namely, that you know by experience and not by intellectual inquiry and by people telling you from the outside. You do not come into anything by that way, for what logic can build up, logic can pull down. No, God dealeth with us as with - what? Students in the academic sense? No, as with sons. And where do we locate sonship? God is the Father of our spirits; therefore our spirits are the seat of sonship and all His dealings are with our spirits. Thus it is a matter of spiritual growth, spiritual enlargement: that is growth in sonship unto adoption. Oh yes, it is experience.

A Final Emphasis and Exhortation

Now, I wonder if you have grasped what I have been saying and are going to be helped by it, that, so soon as you mean business with God, you have put yourself in the way of numerous difficulties and all that has been so wonderful to you is going to fall away: all that has been your satisfaction is probably going for a time to cease to be that, and you are coming into a realm where you have to find God in a new way, in a manner in which you have never hitherto known Him, and where you can no longer really get help from the outside; I mean final help. You may just be helped, but the Lord does not allow those ready-made things to come and put you into the position to which He is leading you. You have to get there for yourself. You may be helped as to how to get there, and as to what is God's goal for you, and as to how other people came through to that end; but no one

now from the outside can do it for you and you know that God has shut you up to have this thing done in you and it is solely a matter between you and the Lord in your spiritual history. You may be right in the midst of the most mature Christians who have gone that way and who know and you may be as one alone. You know you do not know as they know; but do not despair. If you are marked by this spirit of purposefulness with God, that means He has you in His school, and it is a good indication when you begin to get real deep spiritual exercise. We have all met those people who have lived on the basis of spiritual infancy all their lives, and they can never help us at all in our deepest need. Indeed, everything was so cut and dried with them they would not investigate anything deeper. They regarded anything deeper as quite superfluous and were quite satisfied and had a kind of answer to everything. But in our heart need they could not touch us at all. We have all been that way.

There was an hour in my own experience when I was there, after years of seeking that answer to a deep sense of need; and, not getting it, I began to go the round to try to see if someone could help me, and I went some hundreds of miles to visit a man who was outstanding as a religious teacher, as a Bible teacher, and as a name in Christianity. I went to see him to get spiritual help: I was in desperate need, and it was a spiritual situation; and when I put my case before him and told him of my sense of need of a new knowledge of the Lord, he said, "Oh, Sparks, the trouble with you is that you are a bit overtired. You had better go and play golf." He could not understand, could not enter into the situation. I know now why he could not help me and why I got help from no one during that terrible period. I know that God was shutting me up to Himself. I had to come to the place where I could really be a help to others in their hour of need, at least point the way because I had come the way, explaining what God was doing because I had had an experience of His dealings. In order to be of any use at all to those who are going to be sons, to have a ministry for the sons of God, a ministry which, though so imperfectly, so inadequately, touches that great end of adoption; in order to have the smallest part in such a ministry, God has had to shut us up to Himself so that no one could help us.

Do not take that wrongly. Do not take that to mean that you are to cut yourself off from fellowship and from all help that may be available. That would be a misapprehension of what I am saying and might make things infinitely more difficult and put you in a false position. But I am saying that in your heart of hearts you will find, while there may be help given to you by ministries, fellowship, advice, counsel, by explanation, the real thing has to be born and developed in your own self. You have to have the root of the matter in you and no one can bring that about but the Lord Himself by His own dealings with you. So you will be plunged into darkness. I do not mean the darkness of being out of union with God, the darkness of lost assurance of salvation; but you will be plunged into darkness in experience in order to make new discoveries, in order that the Lord may give you light through exercise. God dealeth with you as with - not bricks, but living stones, sons. That is an honour, that is a great thing, that ought to inspire us. If we have boys, they always feel tremendously encouraged if we put our hand on their shoulder and say, "Now, old boy..." and begin to talk to them as responsible persons, not just dealing with them all the time as babes. My son, I want you to do this for me; I want you to take this bit of responsibility; I want you to look after things for me while I am away. Then something rises up and there is a reach out to be what father wants.

Now, in a sense, that is what God is doing. He is saying, I do not want you to be babes always, I want to put responsibility upon you; I have some big things for you to do. Now, come along! He may put us into some very difficult situation, but the very sense of being called to the responsibility will make us seek to know how to meet this situation. A man flung into the sea to learn to swim learns far better than the man who has the doctrine about swimming. The Lord does that in love: but He does it. Whom the Lord loveth He child-trains.

I wonder how many of us would be very pleased if our parents had always done things for us, always sheltered us from having the trouble, the bother, the worry, the necessity of doing things or finding out how to do them for ourselves. I am quite sure none of us would think that was love in our parents. I think we would come to a time when we would say, I have nothing good to say of my parents; they have landed me into very very great difficulty by their false idea of love. Here I am: everybody knows I am no good, and I know it myself! But "whom the Lord loveth, he child-trains."

Look ahead to see all that is going to be. You see, there is a throne in view, there is government in view. I do not know how men manage in the governments of this world. It seems to me that they are able to pass from one department to another in the State. I do not know how that is done, but I do not believe that it is because it is in them. So much is a matter of routine, of form. It can be taken up as something already highly organized and arranged. Of course, I would not say of all statesmen that it was not in them, but I am speaking generally. Now, the Lord is having no official appointments in the great administration of His Kingdom. He is going to have people who have had quality wrought in them. It is unto that the Church, the Body of Christ, is called, and it has to be in us. That is no child's play. That is a thing for full-grown men. If that is not true, then I do not understand the teaching of the New Testament about going on to full growth, nor do I understand the Lord's dealings with

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His Church. If all that matters is just that we should be born again, have forgiveness of sins, and go to heaven, why all this in the Bible and in our experience? It is certainly not for something here. There may be values here, but they are not commensurate with what we have to go through. It is just at the time when we are beginning to get mature and are a little use to the Lord that He takes us away. We cannot pass it on. There may be some fruit, some value of it here, but not at all commensurate with all this training. No, it is for some other purpose. We say, "Higher Service." Well, yes, that is what it is.

The Lord give us grace then to endure chastening as sons, so that He may have that company upon which He can place the great responsibility which it is His will to give.