

The Nature of Sonship

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"When the Son of man cometh, shall he find the faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8).

Place that passage alongside of those read in our previous meditation (1 Tim. 6:12; 2 Tim. 4:7; Jude 3; Rev. 2:13); we will not repeat them in full just now. Just be reminded that the two passages in Paul's two letters to Timothy were amongst them; first, his exhortation to Timothy to fight the good fight of the faith, and then his own statement that he had fought the good fight and had kept the faith; and we were and are occupied with this phrase - "the faith".

I am quite sure that, in the light of what we said in our previous meditation, the passage in Luke 8:8 takes on new significance and we are better able to understand it. "When the Son of man cometh, shall he find the faith on the earth?" That certainly does not mean, shall He find a Christian system of doctrine on the earth. He will find plenty of that. And it certainly does not mean, shall He find faith in the sense of people who believe in Christianity or in general in Christ. There would be no point, I think in asking that question, if He meant that. There are multitudes of people who believe in a general way in Christ and Christianity, if that could be said to be the meaning of faith, and I do not know that we are to expect that kind of Christianity to diminish very greatly, at least to such a point where it is really a question whether He will find any of it at all when He comes.

But when we look into this phrase, "the faith" as we were doing earlier, and really understand its essence and nature, then the question has some point, and it is really concerning the point of the question that we are going to spend a little time now.

We have sought to see that the faith in its essence is the essential and the unique nature of Divine sonship. It is over that that the fight goes on, rages and intensifies, and that sonship is something into which believers are initially brought by new birth, and thereafter progressively by a life in the Spirit, and it is therefore saying that sonship, in the New Testament sense, is something more than being born into a family; it is growing up in that family, and carries with it the feature of spiritual maturity. A phrase used so frequently in our New Testament is "perfection"; "go on unto perfection" (Heb. 6:1), or as the margin expresses it, "go on to full growth". Really it means the consummation of things, coming to the full end for which you exist.

Seeing then, that that is sonship - going right on to the full end for which you exist as children of God; which, again, implies a life in the Spirit continually - then you have room for the question, shall He find the faith on the earth? In other words, shall He find on the earth a real going on in the Spirit unto full growth? I do not think the question was meant to suggest that He would not find it, that it would not exist at His coming, but I do think that the question contains this factor, namely, that it would be far from being a general thing and that you would have to look for it. In order to find it, you would have to look for it; it will not be there in such a way that everybody can see it. That, I think, is the point of the question.

Well then, we want to look a little more closely at this matter of sonship, seeing that everything is bound up with it. It is the faith, it is the occasion of the conflict, it is the cause of the question of the Lord. What is the nature of sonship? We can answer that by two or three quite simple statements.

Sonship Essentially and Exclusively of God

Firstly, it is essentially and exclusively of God. We are familiar with the statement in John 1:13: "who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God". Not this, nor that, but of God! You might very well put in there - 'but exclusively of God'. Sonship, therefore, is something exclusively of God. It lies altogether beyond the power and possibility of man to achieve, to attain, to reach unto it. It is not in man to produce it or arrive at it. The secret of sonship is not resident in man. The seed of sonship is not in man by nature, in spite of all that of which we spoke in our previous meditation that is the generally accepted doctrine concerning man today. The fact is that this sonship is something which belongs to another realm altogether.

We know that the Word of God sees man as dead, so far as God is concerned, and nothing short of a miracle can change that situation, for life is God's prerogative and gift alone, and resurrection something which is alone in the power of God. Therefore the principle, the law, of sonship is an experience of resurrection which, to those who have it, is such an experience as to settle forever in their convictions that everything they have in relation to God is a sheer miracle of God's own working.

Now, God is going to be very true to that principle and position, and we will discover that a life in the Spirit, which is the life of sonship, cannot be a life in the flesh, cannot be a life out of nature and nature's springs. A life in the Spirit, which is the life of sonship, has continuously behind it the realisation that we cannot live save out from God, that we draw our very life from Him every day. The more we go on with God, which means the more we live in the Spirit, and the more spiritual growth and maturity takes place in us, the deeper will be our consciousness of utter dependence upon God for our life, and for everything in the realm of our relationship with Him. Self-resource, self-strength, self-confidence, self-ability, self-wisdom, self-esteem, self-reputation, will be steadily undermined and sapped and drained by the Spirit of God, and we shall come more and more to the place where we know that it is not in us to be Christians, not in us to live a life in the Spirit, not in us to go on with God. It must all come right out from Himself. Sonship is the most dependent thing of which you can have any conception. He said of Himself, in words perhaps all too familiar to us; "The Son can do nothing out from himself" (John 5:19). Again, "I can of myself do nothing... because I seek not mine own will, but the will of him that sent me". (John 5:30). The Apostle, in the spirit of a true son, will say, "I know nothing by myself..." (1 Cor. 4:4). "We have this treasure in vessels of fragile clay, that the exceeding greatness of the power may be of God, and not of ourselves" (2 Cor. 4:7). "Who is sufficient for these things? ...our sufficiency is of God" (2 Cor. 2:16, 3:5). Now, that is sonship, and that means living continually on the ground of resurrection.

Sonship Based on Resurrection

And so we come to Romans 1:4: "...declared to be the Son of God in power... by the resurrection of the dead" - sonship based upon resurrection. That is wholly of God, only of God. The Lord Jesus, in putting the truth of sonship into operation, said and did several things which are full of significance in the light of what we are saying. You remember in those early chapters in John how He said, "The hour cometh, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son... and... shall live" (John 5:25). Why? "As the Father raiseth the dead, and giveth them life, even so the Son also giveth life to whom he will" (John 5:21. A.R.V.). This relationship with God in terms of sonship means that by dependence upon God, by a life in God, a life in the Spirit, that which is God's sole and exclusive prerogative of raising the dead becomes an actual fact in the sphere of sonship, an actuality at work in the sphere of sonship. The Son becomes the sphere in which the Father's power and right of resurrection operates. But, while that is true, that resurrection life is working through the Son from the Father, the Son is still saying in the very same parts of the Word, "The Son can do nothing out from himself, but what he seeth the Father doing" (John 5:19). That is in the early part of John.

You get well on in John and you have the case of Lazarus, and Lazarus is taken up, as you know by the introduction to the incident, with one object. The Lord Jesus states the object of Lazarus' sickness and death. "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified" (John 11:4). And so Lazarus is not healed. The Lord Jesus does not come to the home in Bethany as the doctor to give a remedy, and to recover Lazarus. He stays away deliberately until Lazarus is not only beyond hope in this life, but is beyond this life itself, and then, when the Lord Jesus knows that he is dead, He says, "Our friend Lazarus sleepeth". The disciples misunderstood and thought He meant that he was having a sleep: so Jesus said plainly, "Lazarus is dead". Then, when He knew in His spirit that Lazarus was gone, He came to Bethany. He was acting out now what He had said before, and the thing which governs the action is "that the Son may be glorified". Then John sums up the whole of that Gospel in the words of chapter 20:31: "These things are written that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God". The whole of John's Gospel is written with that object in view.

Now John has written the statement which we have about the Son raising the dead by His relationship and life in the Father, and dependence upon the Father, and John too has written about Lazarus; and he says, I have written all these things and all the other things with one point in view, namely, "that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God". Sonship is all the time on this basis of resurrection.

What was true in the case of the Lord Jesus is true of the spirit of sonship, wherever that spirit is found. Turning to Galatians again, the Apostle says, "Because ye are sons, God sent forth the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, Abba, Father" (Gal. 4:6). We are sons. But how many of the Lord's people are willing to live on that basis? How many there are who want to have it in themselves; the strength, the wisdom, the ability, the efficiency; everything in themselves, not a life of utter dependence and daily resurrection. "When the Son of man cometh, shall he, find the faith..."? You see the point - something which is exclusively of God; and God takes pains to undercut every tendency and inclination to have it in ourselves, because that is the way in which at the first this very purpose of God in sonship was set aside.

The Law of Faith and Dependence

Adam was created with sonship in view, sonship after this kind, but he was placed upon the basis of dependence upon God, faith and dependence. That was the law of his life, and that was to be the law by which he would come to the realisation of sonship in its full sense. Satan came and suggested to Adam that he could have it in himself if he liked. He need not have it of God and have to look to God all the time. If Adam did but follow his advice, there need be none of this servitude to God, but he could be as God and have it in himself, and be delivered from the bondage of this life of dependence and faith, and obedience. Adam accepted that suggestion and sought to take it, to have it in himself without reference or deference to God. Sonship was lost for Adam and his race. The last Adam comes and accepts a life of absolute dependence upon the Father, and obedience to the Father in an utter self-emptying. "He emptied himself... and became obedient"; He took "the form of a bond-servant" (Phil. 2:6-8). He had it not in Himself, by His own choice: He had it in the Father; and sonship was established, realised and expressed in fulness in Him.

We, beloved, are called on to that basis. Oh, there is nothing which will work against the spirit of sonship, God's purpose of fulness in us, like pride, the pride which wants to have it in ourselves. Pride hates a life of dependence. Pride cannot bear to have to look outside of itself for everything. Pride must have the root of things in itself. "Be not wise in your own conceits" is a phrase the Apostle used (Rom. 12:16). What is conceit? The very word itself means "having the seat of things in yourself"; wise by having the seat of things in yourself. The Lord Jesus, Who had the highest place in heavenly glory, the highest and greatest title and name - all rights were in His power - accepted the position of girding Himself with a towel and putting water into a basin and kneeling down to wash the feet of His disciples. That is the mind which was in Christ Jesus. That is sonship. It is not nice for the flesh, nor for our reputation, it is not pleasant to our education; we look for something better than that. But that is sonship. That is a life in the Spirit. That spirit will be the mark, the hall-mark, of spiritual growth, of spiritual maturity. The person who is really growing spiritually is not the person who is becoming something important spiritually. The one who is growing is the one who is growing in the servant dependent spirit more and more. The one who can get down lowest is the one who is really getting up highest.

That is the nature of sonship. It is something which is wholly of God, exclusively of God, not of ourselves. We cannot produce it.

Sonship a Spiritual Thing

It is, therefore, in the next place, a spiritual thing. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6). Sonship, therefore, is essentially a spiritual thing and is always connected, in the Word, with the Spirit. The new birth is connected with the Spirit - "born of the Spirit". "As many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God" (Rom. 8:14). Born; led. You come to Galatians: Galatians is just full of these things, full of sonship and the Spirit. "Because ye are sons, God sent forth the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, Abba, Father." Then you know Paul's argument about Hagar and Ishmael, and Sarah and Isaac; the one born after the flesh, the other born after the Spirit; and the one born after the flesh is to be cast out, that the one born after the Spirit may be established (Gal. 4:21-31). It is sonship and the Spirit again. Sonship, therefore, is a spiritual thing. It is obvious that this kind of sonship is not a natural thing.

Sonship Indestructible in Itself - The Work of Satan to Nullify its Power

But the point that I want to get at and emphasise is this, that because it is a spiritual thing, it is something which interests Satan in a particular way. Being exclusively of God and being wholly spiritual, it is something which, shall I say, tantalises Satan; it is a cause of tremendous annoyance and grievance to him. He cannot get at this thing directly, it is beyond him. You notice that in the Word of God there is no denial from any realm that there is such a being as the Son of God or as the Christ. There is no denial; that is recognised, acknowledged and accepted everywhere. There is a denial that Jesus is the Son of God, but the fact of sonship as a reality in God's universe is never questioned. Antichrist is not the denial of the existence of Christ, but the counterfeiting of Christ: and that is a tremendous admission, a tremendous acknowledgment. If you counterfeit something, it is your way of admitting that there is something real. You do not counterfeit if there is not the genuine thing. You see my point. There is something in God's universe which is never questioned or denied, but which is an established thing, which cannot be touched as a reality, and that is sonship. To get at that - well, anything can be done to nullify it in its effect - but the fact is there, and it is that fact which is Satan's aggravation and annoyance, the fact of the existence of this sonship, in God's universe, and that that sonship has invaded and come into his domain. There is sonship right in the very domain of Satan, in the kingdom of this world, this world which "lieth in the wicked one". Sonship has invaded and come into it; and there is a fact which cannot be destroyed, it is inviolate in itself.

Oh, lay hold of this! Sonship is something which Satan cannot destroy in itself. Sonship, is something inviolate, lying outside of Satan's realm and Satan's power. What then is the nature of the battle? Oh, Satan is not so foolish as to think that he can destroy sonship as a fact, but all his efforts and methods are employed to nullify the effect of it as he can, as he will, in his domain. After this manner, therefore, he started with the last Adam - "If thou be the Son...". The sting is in that "if". If only the Lord Jesus would admit an "if", Satan has scored, and while the sonship is not destroyed, the effect of it in his kingdom is.

That can be put in another way. Admit a doubt, admit a question, and you are undone, and the thing which in itself is inviolate is put under arrest with regard to its effect against Satan. Doubt, unbelief, a question, an uncertainty, suspends the tremendous potency of sonship as against the enemy, even though the sonship position cannot be destroyed. If Satan can find a people here who believe on the basis of sonship, and persist in believing, and refuse to doubt and question, he has found sonship there which corresponds to what he found in Christ, Who said, "The prince of this world cometh and hath nothing in me" (John 14:30). Hath nothing! What is he looking for? The ground of a question or a doubt, is what he is after; and he found nothing.

So the faith you see, is faith which is reposed in God's Son and which makes that sonship a mighty power in the one who believes.

Now, what we are saying is that the existence of this thing called sonship is the occasion of all the conflict because it is something which in itself is beyond Satan's power, and unless in some way its effect in his kingdom is neutralised, it is going to be his ultimate expulsion and undoing. Let us say again that, lying right there at the heart of sonship, is no less a thing than the ridding of this universe of Satan and his kingdom.. That is the issue of sonship. Therefore let us look at the nature of sonship. What is it? It is a life in the Spirit. Satan will constantly try to provoke unto a life in the flesh. A life of dependence: then Satan will try to make us independent. A life of humility, meekness, drawing wholly upon the Lord for everything: then Satan will try to provoke us to pride, to have it in ourselves, to be something ourselves, to care for our reputation, to fight for our own vindication. Remember that every tendency, inclination or attempt to secure our vindication - we may be right, but that is not the question - anything in the direction of securing our vindication is against sonship. "He made himself of no reputation" (Phil. 2:7). He did not seek to vindicate Himself or to be vindicated. He left the matter of vindication altogether with God, and became obedient unto death, yea, the death of the Cross. "Their righteousness is of me, saith the Lord" (Isa. 54:17). Oh, for this grace of self-emptying, seeking no title, no name, no reputation, no vindication, no justification for ourselves. It cuts the ground from under the feet of the enemy, robs him of that which he needs to save his own position and to nullify the effect of Christ's presence. Let us ask the Lord for that grace of selflessness, and of joyful acceptance of a life of dependence upon the Lord in terms of daily resurrection. That is the way of sonship. It makes room for the Lord and for the fulness of Christ.

I think perhaps we could very well close there just now. Do not forget that Satan is out to bring the effect of sonship under arrest in his kingdom. He cannot destroy it, that is something beyond his power, but he can nullify its power so far as his interests are concerned, and he does that by trying to get us to violate the very laws of sonship. Those laws of sonship we have mentioned. They are shown in the life of the Son Himself so clearly - nothing in Himself, but dependence upon the Father, altogether dependent upon the Father. A life in which the law of resurrection is a daily and hourly operation and experience, a life without personal name, reputation, standing or vindication, a life wholly handed over to God, these and many other things comprise sonship, and are the marks of a life in the Spirit.

The Lord make us good sons for His own glory and satisfaction.