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**"BEHOLD, WHAT MANNER OF LOVE!":  
A DIVINE FAMILY OF HUMAN SONS AND DAUGHTERS**

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**I**t was the German pastor-theologian Helmut Thielicke who described the Bible as "the history of a great love, of a great search." I join step with him and say that the Bible is the story of a desire and a design, the desire and the design of God to have a family, a human family.

The idea is staggering. Indeed, it is perhaps the most surprising, the most amazing statement made in the entire Christian proclamation. Viewed from any perspective such an idea is astonishing. Human is, after all, *human*. As such we are a tangled skein of weaknesses, vulnerabilities, potential moral outrages and actual petty ones. We are (in a word and in every sense of the word) *mean*: we are little things and have the enormous capacity of being nasty little things.

In the face of this, the brazen face of it, the Bible speaks of God and of grace in the same breath it speaks of "the grace of God." From the very beginning of the history of this great love, this great search, this grace is evident in God's persistent intention to have a human family who will share in His own intrinsic happiness. In a word, God, the glorious, self-sufficient, self-existing God—the blessed, happy God—willed to be the Father of a human family. This is the grand idea behind all discussions of the fatherhood of God.

**IN THE BEGINNING**

The creation of the world was the formation of "a glori-

ous theater" (Calvin) of operations where the glorious God displayed His infinite excellencies, His glory. But, more than a theater, the creation was to be a well-furnished home for this apex of His creation, man—male and female. From the inception, this man and woman were marked out as children of God. The image-likeness language of Genesis 1:26-27 is the language of sonship. It is language similar to that which I regularly hear when people say to me of my twelve-year-old son, Evan, "He's the spitting image of his daddy." That this is the writer's intention in Genesis is underscored by the parallels drawn with the same language in Genesis 5:1. Luke (hearkening back to the genealogy of Genesis 5) is even more explicit: ". . . Adam, the son of God" (Luke 3:38). Adam and Eve thus formed the first human family of God. While the transgression of the first family members threatened this familial bond, and grossly disturbed it, even in sin, man still remained the son God searched for (Gen. 3:8), clothed (v. 21), and continued to disclose His saving presence to, even after the expulsion from Paradise (4:16).

But man's sin and sin's destructive threat to this idea of a human family of God continued to be evident. In Genesis 4, brother murders brother, and in a second expulsion "from the presence of the Lord" (4:16) a civilization arises that again threatens the existence of this family of grace. The Cainite civilization, marked by arrogance and violence (Gen. 4:17-24), becomes the looming menace, culminating in the marriages between "the sons of God and the daughters of men" (Gen. 6:1ff.). In the face of mushrooming violence, God purposes to destroy mankind, but not without showing grace to a family (Gen. 6:8). In giving grace to Noah, God saves the human race. After the flood, God sets sanctions over the life of man to protect him (Gen. 9:1-7). The basis of these sanctions? The image of sonship (vv. 5-6).

The early chapters of Genesis can be seen as a series of "falls" and "expulsions," and the story of Babel (like that of the flood and of Cain) is yet another. But while God in judgment scatters the nations through a confusion of language (Gen. 11:1-9), He immediately establishes through a family line the basis for a future recovery and reunion of the nations. In the lineage of Shem, who himself was marked out as the object of God's covenant grace (Gen. 9:26), God will call, first a nation, then a Messiah, then a church, which will bring to glorious fulfillment His desire and design to have a human family.

All of this is at the foundation of God's call of Abraham (Gen. 11-12). In that call, God promises Abraham that in addition to making him a great nation (12:2), He will also make him a blessing, so that "all the families of the earth shall be blessed [because of him]" (v. 3). In the election and call of Abraham and his descendants, God will reverse the scattering of the nations at Babel and will reunite them through a common speech in the fullness of the times (cf. Gen. 11:1-9 with Acts 2:1-11; see also Rom. 4:13-17 and Gal. 3:6-14). The history of the patriarchs thus becomes the prehistory of the gospel, and, as such, the ongoing history of God's love and search for a human family of obedient sons and daughters.

### "OUT OF EGYPT HAVE I CALLED MY SON"

As pivotal as the call of Abraham is to the history of Israel, even it must take a secondary place to the paramount event of the Old Testament—the Exodus from Egypt. The Exodus is unparalleled; there has never been and will never be anything quite like it, until. . . .

This is what Moses is concerned to stress to the people on the eve of their entering into the Land (Deut. 4 and 32). The Exodus is the defining event in the history of Israel; everything coming later will be seen in its light.

What is pertinent to our present discussion, however, is the fact that the Exodus is viewed from the standpoint of the same father/son theme that we have been examining. Referring probably to Exodus 4:22, the prophet Hosea calls Israel to remember the mercies of God and to repent of her apostasy with these words, "When Israel was a youth I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son" (Hos. 11:1). From the very outset, the life of the nation is described in terms of sonship, and with that, the implication of *noblisse oblige*, the obligations of privilege. Furthermore, it is of interest that the ultimate judgment upon the Egyptians is vitally related to this sonship. "So I said to you, 'Let My son go, that he may serve Me'; but you have refused to let him go. Behold, I will kill your son, your firstborn" (Ex. 4:23).

Psalm 103 celebrated these wondrous events in a special manner. "Praise the Lord," we are commanded, for all His many benefits (vv. 1-5). The psalmist then reminds us that this God is a God who has in the history of His people performed righteous deeds and judgments on behalf of His people (v. 6). And what is he referring to? To the events surrounding the Exodus (vv. 6-14). It is likely that verses 15-16 refer back to Psalm 90, a psalm traditionally ascribed to Moses, while verses 17-18 refer to the high-watermark of divine revelation in the Old Testament, Exodus 34. The life of the psalmist's contemporaries is viewed from the standpoint of the Exodus and events directly related to it. It is therefore not a general statement that we find in verse 13, but, rather, a commentary on Yahweh's fatherly relationship to Israel, His son. His firstborn is in view: "Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him." The father/son theme is at the core of the life of Israel from the beginning.

There are other rich Old Testament themes that relate to this understanding of Israel. Let's briefly look at one more: the chastening or fatherly discipline of the Lord. In

Deuteronomy 8, Moses recounts the testing of Israel in the wilderness. What was God's purpose in this? Verse 5 tells us: "Thus you are to know in your heart that the Lord your God was disciplining you just as a man disciplines his son." (I will return to the relationship of this to verse 3 later.) This father/son relationship becomes the basis for all that the Bible has to say about chastening/discipline (see Job 5:17; Prov. 3:11; Heb. 12:4ff.).

It has become commonplace to say that the adoption of Israel (Rom. 9:4) is a nationalistic act, lacking the intimacy of new covenant sonship. But is this perspective not in danger of missing the vital, central point? While due allowance must be given to the epoch of the Spirit and to the gift of the Spirit as "the spirit of adoption," the Old Testament gives us a perspective on this matter that we might expect: It is thoroughly theocentric; that is, its perspective is that of the initiative, grace and faithfulness of Yahweh to His sons. The subsequent history of Israel is played out against this backdrop; the treachery of Israel is the treachery of a well-beloved son who has failed utterly to respond to a loving father. It is the poignancy of this relationship, this violated relationship that sets atremble the preaching of the prophets.

### "REBELLIOUS SONS"

"Listen, O heavens, and hear, O earth; for the Lord speaks, 'Sons I have reared and brought up, but they have revolted against Me'" (Isa. 1:2)

In speaking thus, Isaiah speaks for the whole prophetic institution within Israel. But, more importantly, and poignantly, he speaks for God. The hurt, the offense, the outrage of this and other prophetic oracles is rooted in Israel's special relationship to God: a relationship of a son to a father. Indeed, so great is Israel's apostasy, that the people can be characterized as "offspring of evildoers" (v. 4),

rather than sons of God. Jeremiah sounds the same note when he says, "Return, O faithless sons, I will heal your faithlessness" (3:22).

Israel, throughout her long history, has been the recipient of God's fatherly love, care, provision, and faithfulness. Against her Father she has sinned; against God's love, and in the face of God's care, provision, and faithfulness, she has proved heartless and faithless. No wonder, then, when the same prophets envision a new day of repentance and restoration, these are couched in the language of sons being restored to a father's love and home:

Look down from heaven, and see from Thy holy and glorious habitation; where are Thy zeal and Thy mighty deeds? The stirrings of Thy heart and Thy compassion are restrained toward me. For Thou art our Father, though Abraham does not know us, and Israel does not recognize us. Thou, O Lord, art our Father, our Redeemer from of old is Thy name (Isa. 63:15-16).

And again, "But now, O Lord, Thou art our Father, we are the clay [a reference to Adam in Gen. 2?], and Thou our potter; and all of us are the work of Thy hand" (Isa. 64:8).

We might expect the same theme to recur in the ministries of the last prophet of the old era and the great prophet like Moses (Deut. 18), namely, John the Baptist and Jesus. We are not disappointed. It is against the background of such passages as these from Isaiah that we find John addressing the faithless Israelites of his own day. In Luke 3, John addresses the multitudes with these words, redolent of Isaiah:

You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bring forth fruits in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abra-

ham for our father," for I say to you that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham (Luke 3:7-8).

The faithless Jewish leadership that refused John's baptism showed themselves to be what they really were: children of the Devil, not children of God.

Jesus addressed the same audience in John.

Jesus therefore was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, "If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine, and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." They answered Him, "We are Abraham's offspring, and have never yet been enslaved to any one; how is it that You say, 'You shall become free'?" Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, every one who commits sin is the slave of sin. And the slave does not remain in the house forever; the son does remain forever. If therefore the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed. I know that you are Abraham's offspring, yet you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you. I speak the things which I have seen with My Father; therefore you also do the things which you heard from your father." They answered and said to Him, "Abraham is our father." Jesus said to them, "If you are Abraham's children, do the deeds of Abraham. But as it is, you are seeking to kill Me, a man who has told you the truth, which I heard from God; this Abraham did not do. You are doing the deeds of your father." They said to Him, "We were not born of fornication; we have one Father, even God." Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love Me; for I proceeded forth and have come from God, for I have not even come on My own initiative, but He sent Me. Why do you not understand what I am saying? It is because you cannot hear My word. You are of your father the Devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature; for he is a liar, and the

father of lies. But because I speak the truth, you do not believe Me. Which one of you convicts Me of sin? If I speak truth, why do you not believe Me? He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God" (John 8:31-47).

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All of this is in harmony with John's opening words in the prologue to his Gospel:

There was the true light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become the children of God, even to those who

believed on His name: who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:9-13).

Following the faithless hearts of their fathers, the Jewish leaders of Jesus' day fell into gross idolatry—in their case the idolatry of blood, soil, and tradition. As such they refused God's call to repentance, a call proffered to fallen sons, and in doing so remained in a state of faithlessness and sin. In terms of the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15), the Jewish leaders, like the elder brother, remained self-righteously aloof from the entreaties of the Father, while multitudes acknowledged their sin in repentance and faith, and like the younger son were received back to the hearth and heart of God, the waiting Father!

#### THE FAITHFUL SON

Failure disfigures the image of God, the sons of God in the Old Testament. This is the case, whether we look at God's original relationship of sonship with Adam, or the long history of God's firstborn, Israel. "Behold, I have found only this, that God made men upright, but they have sought out many devices" (Eccl. 7:29).

Into this setting, demonized by devices, distortions, and deviances, God comes. He comes in a manner that will heal this out-of-joint condition. He comes that He might bring many sons back to glory. He comes to establish a family—a family of men and women, who will love Him and render to Him the filial devotion of sons and daughters. God comes to do this in Jesus Christ.

This One who comes is set forth throughout the New Testament documents as "the Son of God." From Peter's confession (Matt. 16:16), to the terrified cries of demons (Matt. 8:29), from Paul's "God sent His Son into the world" (Gal. 4:4), to his assertion that Jesus was "marked

out as the Son of God with power by the resurrection of the dead" (Rom. 1:4), from John's "only begotten Son" (John 3:16), to the Voice who addresses the church at Thyatira as "the Son of God" (Rev. 3:18), Jesus is set forth with this unique terminology as a unique person.

That such terminology is meant to describe someone who is more than another Adam, another man, or more than another Israel, another Jew, is patent in these and other passages. *Jesus is the unique Son of God*, the *monogenes* of John, the "Firstborn of all creation" of Paul, the Firstborn whom the angels worship in the epistle to the Hebrews, and the One who is worshipped with the One "who is, and who was, and who is to come" in the Apocalypse. It was this understanding that led the ancient fathers to assert the *homoousian* nature of the Son, that the Son is "co-equal, co-eternal, and consubstantial with the Father." Well and good!

But, while such language regarding Jesus defines and affirms the teaching of the New Testament regarding His deity, it in no way *exhausts* the New Testament's witness regarding Jesus. This language is used in another way: It defines Jesus as *the human Head of a new human family*.

One strand of this witness may be observed in the "firstborn" (*prototokos*) terminology of the New Testament. We have already seen that this term is central to Israel's self-definition as defined by God Himself in Exodus 4:22. It is Jesus in the New Testament who is the Firstborn. "And when He again brings the Firstborn into the world, He says, 'And let all the angels of God worship Him'" (Heb. 1:6). And "that He might be the Firstborn among many brethren" (Rom. 8:29). And, further, "And He is . . . the Firstborn of all creation . . . He is the beginning, the Firstborn from the dead." All this is connected, in Paul and in the epistle to the Hebrews, with the theology of Jesus and His brothers—Jesus, the Son with the sons. Hebrews 2 speaks of this:

For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings. For both He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all from one Father; for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren, saying, "I will proclaim Thy name to My brethren . . ." and again, "Behold, I and the children whom God has given to Me." Since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise partook of the same . . . Therefore He had to be made like His brethren in all things, that He might become a merciful and faithful High Priest (vv. 10-18).

In Paul the same theology is evident in the use of "heir," "fellow heirs," and "inheritance" (see Rom. 8:14-17 with vv. 28-30).

In biblical language, the firstborn is the heir (see Matt. 21:37-38): "'They will respect my son,'" with "'This is the heir.'" Jesus, the Firstborn, becomes the Head of a new family of human sons and daughters and they, in turn, become "heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8:17)! The result of this is that the new people of God, the church, are defined in Hebrews 12:23 as "the general assembly and church of the firstborn." Whether "firstborn" in the text refers to Jesus or to the church is immaterial; their union with Him is to complete that Elder-brother, and brothers are indistinguishable (see John 17:11ff.). Furthermore, this conception of the purpose of God may give us insight into the mystery of that notoriously difficult passage, 1 Corinthians 15:20-28.

Finally, all of this may be of help as well in understanding the terminology of "image of God" used of Jesus in the New Testament. Harkening back to Genesis 1 and 5, the language is the language of sonship and may well reflect the apostolic understanding of Christ as the Head of the new family of God (see 2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3).

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But, all of this comes with a price. The price of bringing many sons to glory is that the Son Himself should be "perfected" (Heb. 2:10). He must "be made like His brethren in all things" (v. 17), and it is implied throughout that this "perfecting" and "making" should involve incarnation (v. 14), temptation (v.18), and death (v. 14)—in a word, it should involve suffering (v. 18). The writer is even more explicit in chapter 5: "Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation" (vv. 8-9).

Obedience (and disobedience), suffering, temptation, death—these are things that are all too familiar to us from even a vague grasp of Old Testament history. It is upon that canvas that the New Testament writers paint their portrait of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. And they do so by, among other things, presenting Him as the New Adam and the New Israel, the New Son. This is made clear from the outset in the Gospels themselves.

In Matthew, Jesus is the heir of Israel's hopes (Matt. 1:1-16, 22-23), and *the replay of Israel's history*. This becomes strangely apparent in the early chapters of the Gospel. In chapter 2, the Child is threatened with death in the land and is divinely protected by His escape to Egypt, in order "that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, 'Out of Egypt did I call My Son.'" Then He is publicly recognized as God's Son in the culmination of this Exodus, a baptism (see 1 Cor. 10:1ff.; Matt. 3:13-17). It is as God's Son that He is "tested" in the wilderness for forty days and nights (Matt. 4:1ff.). Like Israel, who was tested for forty years in the wilderness, Jesus is put to the test, is "disciplined" by His Father-God in these temptations, but unlike Israel, this Son has a faithful heart and responds to the temptations from the very Scriptures which testified to ancient Israel's *disobedience*. This Son, this First-born, this Israel learns obedience through the sufferings of temptation in the wilderness and as such becomes the Inheritor of all God's hopes, yearnings, and (failed) expectations for the faithless nation (see Deut. 5:29).

Luke does a similar thing with his presentation of the temptation narrative (Luke 4). However, Luke's concern is to present Jesus as the New Adam, the New Adamic (human) Son. This is clear from the relationship of the baptismal announcement, "This is My Son . . ." (3:22) with its juxtaposition with a rehearsal of the genealogy going back through Genesis 5 to "Adam, the son of God" (vv. 23-38). In the next scene, Jesus is addressed as "the Son of God" (4:3), and is tempted to betray His trust-obedience to His heavenly Father. This time the temptations are presented with a different order from that of Matthew. I believe that it is possible to see Luke's order as reflecting an extended commentary on Genesis 3:6. If this is so, then, in the face of the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the vainglory/presumption of life, Jesus, the New Adam, proves Himself

faithful to His God and Father. In this way, He becomes the author of salvation to a new people of God, a new family of sons and daughters who are obedient (Heb. 5:9).

But as essential as this obedience is, more than this is required. By man, the faithless son, has come death (in the case of Adam) and exile (in the case of Israel). Jesus, who embodies Adam and Israel—Jesus, who is the Son of God—must Himself suffer death—death in exile “for the nation, and not for the nation only, but that He might gather together into one the children of God who are scattered abroad” (John 11:51-52; 10:16)! Jesus must go into death, must go into exile. He must taste death; He must suffer death “that He might destroy him who has the power of death, the Devil” (Heb. 2:14). He must become “obedient unto death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:7).

Thus, Jesus’ obedience as God’s Son becomes the heart of the gospel. Paul can develop this into a theology of the disobedient and obedient Adam in Romans 5:12-21 (see also 1 Cor. 15:20-28). He can present it as the obedient, dying Son in Romans 8:3-4 and Galatians 3-4, where Jesus bears the full curse of exile from God under the broken covenant, the curse poured out on the disobedient *son* in Deuteronomy 21:18-23. (Note the allusion to “a gluttonous man and a drunkard” in Matt. 11:19.) The cross, with its agony, with its curse, is the full price of Jesus’ obedience.

Add the resurrection. The resurrection becomes the return of the Son from death and exile. What the father in the parable of the two sons says of the younger son may be said of Jesus, “This son of mine was dead, but has come to life again” (Luke 15:24)! This is precisely how Paul understands the resurrection in Romans 4. “Who was marked out to be the Son of God by the resurrection from the dead.” All of this has a wonderful background in the prophetic witness of the Old Testament. The return of the exiles is viewed as a resurrection from the dead in Ezekiel:

The hand of the Lord was upon me, and He brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of the valley; and it was full of bones. And He caused me to pass among them round about, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley; and lo, they were very dry. And He said to me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” And I answered, “O Lord God, Thou knowest.” Again He said to me, “Prophecy over these bones, and say to them, ‘O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.’ Thus says the Lord God to these bones, ‘Behold I will cause breath to enter you that you may come to life. And I will put sinews on you, make flesh grow back on you, cover you with skin, and put breath in you that you may come alive; and you will know that I am the Lord.’” So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold, a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And I looked, and behold, sinews were on them, and flesh grew, and skin covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then He said to me, “Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, son of man, and say to the breath, ‘Thus says the Lord God, Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they come to life.’” So I prophesied as He commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they came to life, and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army. Then He said to me, “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel; behold, they say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope has perished. We are completely cut off.’ Therefore prophesy, and say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God, ‘Behold, I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves, My people; and I will bring you into the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the Lord, when I have opened your graves and caused you to come up out of your graves, My people. And I will put My Spirit within you, and you will come to life, and I will place you on your own land. Then you will know that I, the Lord, have spoken and done it,’ declares the Lord” (Ezek. 37:1-14).

A similar hope is to be seen in Micah:

But as for me, I will watch expectantly for the Lord; I will wait for the God of my salvation. My God will hear me. Do not rejoice over me, O my enemy. Though I fall I will rise; though I dwell in darkness, the Lord is a light for me. I will bear the indignation of the Lord because I have sinned against Him, until He pleads my case and executes justice for me. He will bring me out to the light, and I will see His righteousness (Micah 7:7-9).

The same theme is evident in Isaiah: "Your dead will live; their corpses will rise. You who lie in the dust, awake and shout for joy, for your dew is as the dew of the dawn, and the earth will give birth to the departed spirits" (26:19).

The final passage is from Isaiah 52:13-53:12. This passage is important to our present understanding in that the vindication of Yahweh's Servant-Son is seen as producing a glorious outcome. This outcome will include the "sprinkling of nations" (52:15), and "the justification of many" (53:11). There is a connection here with Psalm 22, especially with verses 22-31, and this in turn has a connection with Hebrews 2 (compare vv. 22-25 with Heb. 2:12). Thus, a firm linkage is made between the suffering and vindication of the true Israel, Yahweh's Servant-Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the New Humanity, the New Israel, the New Family of God.

### THE ADOPTION OF SONS

While all the many blessings of the gospel are wonderful and each plays its vital role in God's saving purpose, the grace of adoption has been singled out by more than one Christian thinker as the blessing *par excellence* of the gospel. There is a reason for this. In adoption, God restores in the

fullest possible way the lost estate from which Adam fell and to which Israel did not attain. This is Paul's concern in Galatians 3-4.

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Paul does this by a reconstruction of the history of the nation, Israel, to whom belonged "the adoption of sons" (Rom 9:4). Israel, the nation under the Law, according to Paul existed in a state of tutelage similar to that of a Roman child in a well-ordered household to his tutors, guardians, and managers before his coming of age (Gal. 3:23-4:7). As such he differed little from his father's household slaves (4:1). In this state, the nation was "held in bondage under the elemental things of the world" (4:3), including the Law itself (4:9-10). This understanding of the nation under the Law goes a long way in explaining many of the not-so-attractive elements of the life of that nation which we see in the Old Testament Scriptures, e.g., the food laws and sacrificial system. The result of this arrangement, was, among other things, that Israel did not and could not serve their God in true freedom. Because of sin, the Law itself became

an instrument working wrath and inciting more sin (3:19 with Rom. 3:19-20; 4:15; 5:20; 7:1-13). In this sorry state of bondage, the remnant of true believers within the nation waited in hope for "the date set by the father" (4:2), when the tutor would be dismissed and the child would enter his majority with all its inheritance. This is the redemption that God in the fullness of the times has effected in Jesus Christ (4:4-7)! The justified believer within the nation of Israel has received his adoption, his "placement as an adult son" (4:5). And because the promise made to Abraham was a promise to "bless the nations" (3:7-9), then Gentiles who have believed the gospel preached by Paul have also entered into this exalted state of privilege (4:6-7). They have themselves become children of Abraham, and more, children of God with all the blessings of inheritance shared in by believing Jews (3:29 with 4:6-7).

The immediate result of this for the Galatians, who had been led astray by false teachers of the Judaizing sect, was that they were free from all bondage to "elemental things," whether from their Gentile past or from Judaizing tradition (4:8-9). As adopted sons of God, they were set free by Christ (5:1), and called to live in a responsible freedom by God their Father (5:13-14). Freed from the law, they were free to walk in the Spirit (5:16ff.), the Spirit of adoption (4:6 with Rom. 8:6). They stood completely free from the Law in its threats and enslaving power over sinners (5:23 with Rom. 7:1-6). They could now serve their God and Father, "not in the oldness of the letter, but in the newness of the Spirit" (Rom. 7:6). They had become the true Israel, the true Jews, the adopted sons of the Most High, with all the privileges that entailed. Why go back to the sorry state of affairs that formerly had characterized the nation of Israel under the Law and themselves as slaves to those who were not gods at all (4:8-9)? To do so was to call their whole Christian profession into question, to threaten their

perseverance in faith, to fall from grace and to be severed from Christ (4:10-11 with 5:4).

In the state of grace to which they were called, the Galatians had come into the realm of Spirit-life (3:1-5), they had experienced the blessing of calling God, "Abba! Father!" (4:6), and the unspeakable joy which results from these things (4:15). In light of such experienced blessing, it is astonishing to Paul that they should "desert Him who called them by the gospel" (1:6). This astonishment is rooted in their failure to appreciate the highest good of the gospel, the adoption of sons. There was no need for them to return to the "weak and beggarly elements" of Judaism; they had received the full placement of sons of God and with that the inheritance of God, their Father (4:7 with Rom. 8:14-17)! Gentiles though they were, they were nonetheless heirs of God, sons in full standing in the divine family.

#### A NEW FAMILY: JEW AND GENTILE IN ONE NEW MAN

It belongs to Paul, one of the most amazing men in the history of the Christian church, to develop this aspect of the theology of divine fatherhood to its fullest expression. This former Pharisee and persecutor of all things Christian himself encountered the risen Jesus and began to proclaim Him as the Messiah. After a long period of deconstructing and reconstructing his system of thought, Paul came to radically redefine the hope of his fathers. This reconstruction /redefinition had at its heart a new understanding of the fatherhood of Israel's God and its relationship to Jesus and to the world. The foundational document presenting this redefinition is Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

Paul's overarching purpose in the Ephesian letter is to show how the Gentiles (and therefore his own Gentile mission) are included in the eternal purpose of God. Ephesians is replete with the language of divine purpose (see Eph. 1:4-

5, 9-11; 2:10; 3:8-12). That the Gentiles are now included in this eternal purpose, revealed in a new and dramatic manner, is Paul's primary message to the church at Ephesus.

He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things upon the earth. In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ should be to the praise of His glory. In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory (Eph. 1:9-14).

The same theme is dramatically developed in chapter 2. Ephesians 2 may be one of the most dramatic examples of Paul's redefinition of Israel's God and His relationship to the whole world. The resurrection motif of verses 1-10 (with 1:20-23) takes the thoughtful reader back to the resurrection-return-of-the-exiles passages from the Old Testament referred to before (e.g., Isa. 26:19; 52:13-53:12; Ezek. 37:1-14). It is likely that the Ezekiel passage is the background of Paul's theology of spiritual resurrection in verses 1-10 (but see also John 5:25). But when we examine both chapters more closely a definite pattern of correspondence becomes apparent. Joined with the "resurrection" theme of Ezekiel 37:1-14 and Ephesians 2:1-10, is "a reunion-unity" theme of Ezekiel 37:15-23 with Ephesians 2:11-15, a "covenant of peace" theme in Ezekiel 37:24-26 with Ephesians 2:11-19, and a "restored sanctuary" theme in Ezekiel 37:26-28 with Ephesians 2:19-22! Gentile believers

become the inheritors of promises made to Israel by the prophets long ages ago. What can this mean?

Paul tells us in Ephesians:

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you; that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. And by referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel, of which I was made a minister, according to the gift of God's grace which was given to me according to the working of His power (3:1-7).

The Gentiles are now "fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (v. 6). The mention of "fellow heirs" brings us back to this issue of the father-son relationship developed earlier in this article. We are back to the language of "family." We are not surprised, moreover, when in just a few short verses later Paul describes this God, the God of Israel who has become the God and Father of Gentiles also, as "the Father, from whom the whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name . . ." (vv. 14-15). Indeed, following the dominical lead of Jesus (for example, Matt. 5-7), Paul (and the other apostles) regularly names this God as "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" and therefore as the "Abba-Father" of Christians (Rom. 8:14-16; Gal. 4:4-7; Eph. 4:6 with 5:1; 1 John 3:1-3; et al.).

Ephesians with its macrocosmic vision of the history of

God's saving acts culminating in Jesus Christ and extending even to the end of the age in the ingathering of sons from all parts of the earth, reveals as no other New Testament document the fulfillment of God's purpose and promise to have a family of human sons and daughters.

### THE REVELATION OF GOD'S SONS

Like every other aspect of the salvation Jesus has secured for His brothers and sisters, their sonship (adoption) is characterized by an "already-not-yet" tension. That is to say, while our *status* is a New Testament blessing given to all who believe (Gal. 4:4-7), there remains a full *realization* and experience of this paramount blessing that can only be known in the glory of the age to come. Only Jesus, "the firstborn among many brothers," has experienced this full realization of the sons of God, and this because He has passed through death into resurrection and glory. In light of this John reminds us:

See how great a love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called children of God; and such we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is (1 John 3:1-2).

We are recipients of the Father's great love, we are the children of God, *now*. But we are unknown as such, even as the Lord Jesus was. It has not yet appeared what we, the sons and daughters of God, shall be; that must come when He appears. In the meantime, we must be purifying ourselves, even as the One who is to appear is pure (v. 3).

Paul develops these themes along similar lines in Roman 8:

So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him (8:12-17).

We who through faith in Jesus have the Spirit, are the sons of God, *now*. The presence of the Spirit who causes us to cry out in prayer, "Father!" is the present proof of our sonship and the pledge (Eph. 1:13-14) of our future inheritance. But Paul lets us know that while all this is true, the present time is marked by "sufferings" (v. 18). Like the Elder Brother, the family shares in the sufferings of this present evil age, indeed, in the sufferings of the creation itself as it groans under God's curse (v. 18). Far from being immune to such sufferings, we are marked out as God's sons as we endure them in hope (vv. 17-27). Lest we miss this, Paul is emphatic in verse 23: "And not only this, but also we ourselves, *who have the first fruits of the Spirit*, even we groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body." Notice the tensions again: Present sonship witnessed by the Spirit; present conflict; future full realization; present ethical responsibility.

I want also to remark on how Paul joins the idea of future adoption with the restoration of the physical bodies of Christians. Christianity is concerned with the physicality of this creation, because it is God's creation, made by Him as a home for His human sons and daughters. The hope of the Christian is not death, where the curse of Genesis 3 is

carried out against us to the uttermost from God's original intention. No! The Christian hope is in resurrection, because only then do we fully return from the exile to God brought upon us, body and soul, because of our sin. In the resurrection God's sons and daughters will be restored to their rightful home, the earth, in new bodies that will perfectly enable them to realize the lost potential of the dominion aspect of their sonship (Gen. 1:26-27; Ps. 8; Heb. 2). To state this in terms of the Beatitudes, we could say that in the kingdom of Jesus, those who are the beneficiaries of this new covenant are those who in that Day "shall inherit the earth, see God, and be called the sons of God" (Matt. 5:1-11). "Blessed" indeed! The aspirations expressed by Samuel Stennet two hundred years ago express all of these things.

When shall I reach that happy place  
And be forever blest?  
When shall I see my Father's face  
And in His bosom rest?

This longing for our final home is the longing of those who have come from our Father, God, and from the earth. Man, "Adam" in the Hebrew, is "red, ruddy, earthy" because "from it [the ground] you were taken" (Gen. 3:19 with 2:7; see also Ps. 103:13-14). Note how our origins are linked to the fatherhood of God and the earth itself. Job commented on this when in his grief he said: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return there" (Job 1:21).

We belong to the earth, just as much as she belongs to us. And the earnest expectation of the children of God is connected with this world, only this world will be renewed. Our hope is for the coming of our mother-city ("metropolis"), the New Jerusalem, "the mother of us all" (Gal. 4:26). Our hope is fixed upon the coming of the true fatherland,

the "new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells" (see Heb. 11:8-10, 13-16 with 2 Peter 3:10-13). This is also the anticipated end (and beginning!) of all things which we find in the Revelation (21:1-8). And set like a perfect gem in a perfect setting within these verses is the final promise of the Apocalypse to the man or woman of overcoming faith: "He who overcomes shall inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son" (v. 7).

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Here is the same language we have seen through the Bible and have come to expect. Inheritance, sonship, the fatherhood of God. God shall at last have His family, His

human family. He who said, "All the Father gives Me shall come to Me," and "This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up at the Last Day" (John 6:37, 39), will one day sing, "Behold, I and the children whom God has given to Me" (Heb. 2: 13).

It is just here that I wish to return to 1 Corinthians 15:20-28. This difficult passage begins to make sense to us in light of what we have seen so far. God's purpose from the beginning was to have a family, a human family of sons and daughters. This purpose was thwarted by Adam's sin and by Israel's apostasy: Adam dies, Israel goes into exile. But, in the sending of His unique Son into the world, God overturned the sin of Adam and recovered the exiles of a new and true Israel. This He did through the faithfulness and death of this Son, Jesus Christ. In the power of the Spirit of Jesus God had been in the intervening centuries calling out and forming a New Man (Adam) and a new covenant people (Israel) through the preaching of the good news of Jesus. This new man and new people, this new family will eventually live in a new creation, a new heavens and earth, a new mother-city, Jerusalem. But, what about the Son, Jesus? He who is the firstborn of creation (Col. 1:15), and the firstborn from the dead (Col. 1:18), will then be manifested as the firstborn among many brothers (Rom. 8:29). And He who is "co-equal, co-eternal, and consubstantial" with the Father will display a humility that will vie with the humility He displayed on the cross: *He will take His place among His brothers and sisters as the True Man and Elder-Brother, one with them and they with Him forever through all the ages of eternity.* Amazing love, how can it be?

#### CHILDREN OF GOD ABOVE REPROACH

Because Jesus is the obedient Son, He becomes the pattern of obedience for all the many sons He leads to glory. Notice how the writer of Hebrews joins the obedience of

Jesus to that of His people: "Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation" (Heb. 5:8-9).

Let me repeat: God willed from the beginning to have a human family. But let us be clear. God's design and desire was to have a family of *obedient* sons and daughters. This is written on the face of God's dealings with Adam, with Israel, and with Jesus Himself.

The obedience of Christ, culminating in His obedience unto death on the cross, has as its goal the formation of a human family of God marked by obedience. This clarion call to obedience is heard throughout the New Testament. This is seen first, in the teaching of Jesus, and then in the teaching of the apostles (see Matt. 5:17-20; 7:12-23 with 24-27; 28:18-20; John 14:15, 21-24; Rom. 1:5; 2:5-16; 6:17-23; 8:1-17; Gal. 5:7; Phil. 2:12-13; 1 Thess. 4:2ff. and others). In addition to this rich vein of teaching, we are regularly reminded that without true obedience, there is no final salvation (see Matt. 7:21-23; 25:41-46; Gal. 5:19-21; 1 Cor. 6:9-11; Eph. 5:5-6; James 2:14-26; Rev. 2:26; 21:7).

Some of you reading this may find yourselves disturbed. "What about justification by faith? What about *sola fide*?" There can be no doubt, no equivocation. *We are justified by faith, apart from the works of the law* (Rom. 3:21-31). We, the disobedient sons and daughters of the first parents, are utterly incapable of achieving or maintaining a righteousness which God will accept. Christ Jesus, in His perfect obedience, culminating in His atoning death on the cross, has achieved such a righteousness for us. Through faith in Him as presented in the gospel, we who are sinners are forgiven, accepted, and received as sons on the basis of His work of righteousness. The faith which receives this gift of grace is itself the gift of God and is in no way meritorious. In this faith we are vitally joined to the living Christ by the

Spirit. This union is the fountain of newness of life in which we walk as Christians. Without this union, there is no justifying faith, no obedience proceeding from faith, and no final salvation. To put it another way: Works without faith are dead (Heb. 6:1; 9:14), and faith without works is dead (Eph. 2:8-10 with James 2:14-26).

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But because faith is the response of men to the Word, the command of God to believe (1 John 3:23), faith itself is the first act of acceptable obedience in God's renewed sons and daughters. Thus Paul can describe His whole mission (and the gospel of grace it is based upon) in these words: "to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles, for His name's sake" (Rom. 1:5), and "has been made known to all the nations, leading to the obedience of faith." It is in this faith, true faith, justifying faith, that the family of

God lives, moves, and has its very life. In the obedience of faith this family is marked by an essential ethical integrity.

And at the heart of this integrity of ethics is love for God and for one another. Jesus Himself, on more than one occasion, summed up our whole duty of obedience to God in these terms (Matt. 7:12; 22:34-40; John 13:34-35; 15:12-17). And His apostles did likewise (Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:13-14; 6:2; James 2:8-12; 1 John 3:10-24). This love in the environment of the new covenant is the power of faith (Gal. 6:15; 5:6 and 1 Cor. 7:19). Love becomes the criterion by which everything else is judged as true or false, including faith (1 Cor. 13, see especially v. 2). And this love is what charges the obedience of God's sons and daughters and makes their obedience (sincere, though imperfect) acceptable to God in Jesus Christ.

The obedience given freely and lovingly to God, our Father, is thus *filial* and not *legal*. It is the loving and grateful response of children to their heavenly Father.

Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matt. 5:48).

Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful (Luke 6:36).

"And I will be a Father to you. And you shall be sons and daughters to Me," says the Lord Almighty. Therefore, having these promises beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God (2 Cor. 6:18-7:1).

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love (Eph. 5:1-2).

Do all things without grumbling or disputing; that you may prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world (Phil. 2:14-15).

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance . . . And if you address as Father the One who impartially judges . . . (1 Peter 1:14-17).

### "LIKE A CHILD AT HOME"

What the new Christian discovers, little by little, upon entering the new life in Jesus Christ is that he is in a new and wonderful environment, a new setting with new standards, perspectives, relationships, and rules of conduct. He has come home.

It is a well-ordered and comfortable home the believer has entered. God, his Father, is in control of his life and all of life. He can trust his heavenly Father to provide and protect. Not that anxieties over both our needs and our vulnerabilities do not intrude into and sometime dominate our lives; they do. But faith, the gift of the Holy Spirit, is fed and revived by the Spirit, so that we cry out, "Abba! Father!" In this spirit of prayer and dependence, the believer comes to God crying out for his and others' needs to be met (Matt. 6:5-15; 10:29-30). In the spirit of prayer and confidence, the believer is assured that God will provide in this life and in the age to come (Matt. 6:19-34; Luke 12:32).

It is within the context of this well-ordered home environment that the Father trains and disciplines His children. What we are when we are called is a far, far cry from conformity to "the image of His Son" (Rom. 8:29). To be sure, the image has been restored in our union with Christ (Eph. 4:23-24; Col. 3:9-10). But what has been begun is not yet complete. We are *being renewed* to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who called us" (Col. 3:10). Hence we have need of fatherly training and discipline. The classic statement of this is Hebrews 12:1-13, though it must be stressed that Hebrews builds on an Old Testament foundation, thus relating Christian sonship

/chastening to that of the Israelites under the Law (vv. 5-6 with Job 5:17 and Prov. 3:11-12. See also Deut. 8:1-6; Ps. 6:1; 38:1; 94:12; 118:18 and others). The point is this: The sufferings of the Hebrew Christians, though originating from many sources, some of which are clearly intended to destroy them, are being used by their heavenly Father to train them in godly discipline to the end that they might be partakers of God's holiness (vv. 7 and 10). These things thus become, under God's hand, a source of blessing, peace, fruitfulness, and life (vv. 9-11). They ensure the children's perseverance and are in every way, contrary to appearances, tokens of the Father's love. The same strand of teaching is evident in Romans 8:12-39. The sufferings of this present time are the way that the children share in the sufferings of Christ (vv. 17-24). They are employed by the Father to conform the sons to the image of their Elder Brother (vv. 28-29). They are evidences of the Father's love and the love of Christ (vv. 37 and 39). They test and secure the perseverance of the children in hope and prayer (vv. 24-27), and prove that the sufferings called "all things" (v. 28), "these things" (v. 31), and "all these things" (v. 37), rather than destroying the children, are used to secure their final salvation in the love of God (v. 39). It is this process that Paul summarizes in the words of 1 Corinthians 11:32. In the face of awful chastenings which Paul calls "judgments," brought on by the sin of the Corinthians, Paul can assure them: "But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord in order that we may not be condemned with the world."

To be without such discipline is, in the words of Hebrews 12, to be "illegitimate children and not sons" (v. 8). John Newton was right: "Since all that I meet shall work for my good, the bitter is sweet, the medicine, food."

This is so because we have a heavenly Father who is lovingly ordering the details of our lives.

**"BEHOLD, WHAT MANNER OF LOVE!"**

If what we have seen so far may be likened to a symphony, then the *leit motif* running through it all is the love of God, our heavenly Father. "In love He predestined us to the adoption of sons by Jesus Christ to Himself" (Eph. 1:4-5). In love He created Adam and called Israel as sons (Deut. 7:7-11). In love He gave His unique Son in order to redeem His fallen sons from the curse (John 3:16; Gal. 2:20; 1 John 4:9-10). In love the Father called us to be His children (1 John 1:1-3). Indeed, one of the favorite designations for Christians in the New Testament, "beloved" (Rom. 1:7; 2 Cor. 7:1; Heb. 6:9; 1 Peter 2:11; 1 John 3:21; Jude 3 and others), can be traced to the love of God, who is the Father of the Beloved Son, Jesus (Matt. 3:17; 12:18; 17:5), in whom we have been accepted as sons (Eph. 1:5-6). Divine fatherhood and divine law are inseparable in the New Testament. As we have seen, even the harshest of fatherly discipline is a token of the Father's love. What will heaven be in light of this but, as Jonathan Edwards rightly saw, a "world of love!"

This love is compelling. In the power of the Holy Spirit, it both compels and supports faith (Gal. 5:6). It compels the obedience to which we have been called (Eph. 5:1-2). It compels hope in the face of terrible afflictions (Rom. 8:18-39). As such, the love of God as a Father seen in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the heart of the gospel. Adoption, or sonship, thus becomes not only the highest privilege of the Christian, but also the deepest reality in the nature of God Himself, revealed in Jesus the Son and in His design and desire to have us, fallen, pitiable men and women, as His sons and daughters. The Fatherhood of God lies, therefore, at the very heart of God as God, and at the core of His gracious intention to create and redeem humankind. It is only children, therefore, who can sing with profound understanding and gratitude the words of the gospel song:

I am so glad that our Father in heaven  
Tells of His love in the Book He has given;  
Wonderful things in the Bible I see—  
This is the dearest, that Jesus loves me.

*Author*

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