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Theme: Sonship

Study 5—Sonship Lived

The Theme in Hebrews, 1 John and Revelation

Last week we explored the apostle Paul's Gospel of our Union in Christ the Son of the Father. With great joyful conviction Paul expounded the mystery of our inclusion in Jesus Christ with us through the Cross and made Sons. Paul also expressed that this new life is one of practical significance. It is a *life* in the Spirit. A theology of our adoption in the Son with no demonstration of Sonship is to have a form of Godliness but deny its power (2 Tim. 3:5)

This theme of a lived Sonship is also expressed by the writers of Hebrews, 1 John and Revelation. The context of these letters is conflict. Far from being a reality that is easily expressed in our lives, a life of shared Sonship in Christ in the world of Spiritual orphanhood will be contested within and without at every turn. Each book encourages the Church to believe the truth over the lie and press on into the grace we have received. Only in this way will we live out the love that the Son of God so radically shares in us.

The Calling of Sonship: Believe in the Gospel

The book of Hebrews is essentially a sermon on the identity and High-Priestly work of Jesus, the Son. It is written to a Christian community that, having stepped out into the open fields of faith in Christ, are tempted to retreat back into the so-called protection of Judaism. In addition to their union with Christ they were looking to the Law and specifically to supernatural experience through Angels to bring the sense of transcendence which their hearts so deeply desired. At the heart of the message is the Church's confidence. The difficulty and suffering they experience, especially in persecution, is not a sign of God's absence but a call to faith in the God we cannot see with our eyes. They need no other mediator than Jesus the Son and indeed to seek another is to drift away into endless restlessness and perishing.

Of particular concern to the Hebrews is not only that Jesus is the Son of God but also that the Son has been called to the particular ministry of priesthood or mediation between God and Man. Whereas the people of God once looked to the Levitical priests for their access to atonement before God, God now speaks through his Son as the finally effective and only necessary Mediator. The Son, at one with the Father, is the radiance of God's glory, the exact representation of His being. The Son serves His Father by sustaining all things by His Word. Having purified humanity in the Cross, Jesus sat down at the right hand of his Father God having completed his work. He is now the merciful and faithful High Priest who continually cleanses us and brings us to the heart of the Father's joy. Therefore he is superior to the Angels whose work is always incomplete. He is more effective than the Law, for the life it promises is dependent upon obedience by those who cannot keep it. Gloriously, the Son of God is the only one who gives life in His union with Man.

In Chapter 1, the writer quotes both Psalm 2 and 2 Samuel 7:14 (prophecy of the Messiah), reminding us that this one is in fact God's Son! As a Son he has a particular relationship with the Father that the Angels and even Moses could not give his people. They cannot share what they do not have. The best that the Angels and Moses can demonstrate is servanthood not Sonship, and this falls short of the glory of God. As Moses was faithful to God's house as a servant, Jesus is faithful to God as a Son over God's house (Heb. 3:1–5). Consequently the Son has far greater access than the servant. The Son who acts as our Brother/Priest has uninhibited access to the Father 'behind the curtain' (Heb. 6:18). To trust in anyone other than the Son is to remain imprisoned to the Law and fear. We will not escape restlessness and the fear of God and His judgement if we ignore such a great salvation.

This Son of God however is also none other than the sharer of our humanity. In our skin and on our behalf Jesus boldly declares, 'I will trust in him', and then he says, 'Behold I and the children God has given me' (Heb. 2:13). In Jesus we have a man who finally and fully trusts the Father. Jesus, as the first born Son, gathers the world up in his incarnation and joyfully redeems them in his blood and presents them with him in the assembly before God as their Brother/Priest. In so doing, this Son will bring many sons and daughters to glory (Heb. 2:10). Jesus is the willing Son of God who perfectly represents the Father's will. He is not ashamed to join himself with sinners in order to share his own 'indestructible life' with them (Heb. 7:16). He joyfully sings the praises to the Father as one with us (Heb. 2:12). In sharing our flesh and blood, the Messiah destroys the chains that held humanity prisoner in the grip of Satan and shame. Hallelujah! What a Joy for the Father and the Son! More than that, Jesus now continues to serve us in a continuing priesthood. Unlike the sinful human priests who died, Jesus now lives forever as eternal Son and Priest to make intercession for us. He is entirely different to sinners and able to serve us eternally because he is not subject to death anymore. Jesus offered His own body as a sacrifice for sin and having risen from the dead by the will of the Father, Jesus is the Great High Priest who will imprint his Sonship on the hearts of men and women (Heb. 8:10) through his prayers.

Holy fear is an appropriate response to this call (Heb. 4:1). The writer's warning is that we must all check ourselves to see whether we are in the faith. This will be tested. As children, we will will experience the sanctifying work of God as Sons and Daughters through suffering. Suffering is not a sign of our orphanhood. God is at work in the midst of it for our good:

And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says,

*“My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline,
and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,
because the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.”*

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? (Heb. 12:5–7).

And so, even in the midst of trial and hardship the Spirit of the Son and the Father enables and commands us to live as Sons and Daughters. As Sons and Daughters of God we have the grace of God to live according to the pattern that Jesus our Brother/Priest sets before us. Hebrews tells us this includes such things as not neglecting to do good; showing brotherly love; giving hospitality to strangers; remembering those believers in prison and those who

are mistreated; honouring the marriage bed; being free from the love of money, and content with what you have. This is the Lived Sonship—full of hope in Jesus Christ who is the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb. 13:8).

1 John

John writes his Letter to the *Teknia*: “little children” who have been ‘born again’ through faith in Jesus. His purpose for writing is stated in Chapter 1:2, ‘We proclaim to you the eternal life that which was with the Father and has been made manifest to us . . . so that you may have fellowship with us; the same fellowship that is with the Father and the Son’. Then in Chapter 3, John grabs our attention saying, ‘Behold, what love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called children of God. And that is what we are!’ (3:1). John wants us to know exactly what sort of love the Father has for us in the Son. This is a love far different to other loves, therefore it must be made distinct. This love we are to ‘behold’ is incomprehensible—the love of God; that of the Father and the Son. It is so vital that we know this! This comes as much as a wake-up call for the Church as it is a declaration of praise and thanksgiving. Several times in John’s Letter we are told that God is love. However, John is as concerned about its practice as his theological description:

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters (1 John 3:16).

One of the burning questions for John is: How can we tell who the children of God are? If we are reborn in the love of the Son we should bear the characteristics of the family of God. There are many contrasts in his Letter—between light and dark (1:5); love of the Father or love of the world (2:15–16); children of God or children of the devil (3:1–10); and so on. For John, the grace of God will be demonstrated in bearing the distinct quality of love of God by the ones born of him through the Spirit. ‘Doing right’ is not a condition of our Sonship but it is the evidence of it. It is the sign of a new identity, not as children of the world but as children of God:

If you know that he is righteous, you know that everyone who does what is right has been born of him (2:29).

There will always be charges of hypocrisy against the church and most of them will be true and come from our own hearts. But whenever our hearts condemn us we have an Advocate. We see our Sonship through a mirror dimly, but one day we will see ourselves as we truly are. But we are not to live as though the grace of God is not effective. We are not orphans but Sons in Christ and while the full sight of this will not come in this world, we can look to Jesus:

Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure (1 John 3:2–3).

One way we may be assured of our love for God is in our love for one another:

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands (1 John 5:1-2).

Throughout the Letter John uses the term *Adelphoi* which is translated 'brothers and sisters'. This is a rich compound word (*a* = from; *delphus* = womb). Brothers and sisters are together of the one womb of the Gospel. Therefore we will love one another as brothers and sisters as we abide in the Son through faith and action in the power of the Spirit.

We may now abide in the love God has for us and walk in love. We can have confidence in the day of judgement because as He is so are we in this world. This is our identity. We do not need to fear the judgement of God because we are born again of an imperishable seed. But do we believe such a bold statement? That is the invitation of faith. While we see our sin, let us see even brighter the righteousness of the Son in us and the calling to walk as He walked.

Revelation 21:3–8

The final hope that purifies us is explicitly expressed in John's great vision of the new heaven and the new earth. In his vision he sees the holy city (the church) coming down from Jerusalem like a bride adorned for her Husband. A loud voice from the throne is heard saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people and God himself will be with them as their God.' And then we hear the words of the Son of God:

It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son (Rev. 21:7).

The goal of heaven is Sonship seen and fully experienced: 'I will be his God and he will be my son'. This will be Sonship by sight and not just by faith. Until then we have the downpayment of the Spirit of the Son, who cries out 'Abba! Father!', guaranteeing what is to come. In this world we really have two options in regard to our Sonship: longing or denial. But those who hope in the Lord will on that Day be fully satisfied.

So we may now think with the mind of Christ. We bear the righteousness of the Son through the grace of the Father and the Son and the Spirit. We must now see ourselves as Sons and Daughters in the Sonship of Jesus. We have this grace that continually washes us. There is a power in the Gospel that continually calls us out of our orphan thinking to live and love as Sons and Daughters and as brothers and sisters. See just what kind of love the Father has lavished on us that we should be Children of God. Go out and love. You are Sons of God together.