

## God-ordained unto Sonship

- 1 God ordained us unto sonship,  
     Ere creation's work was done,  
 To conform us by His Spirit  
 To the image of His Son;  
 That His only dear Begotten  
     Might become the firstborn One,  
 And by Him with many brethren  
     His expression full be won.
- 2 By divine regeneration  
     We the sons of God became,  
 But we must mature to fullness,  
     Thus the birthright to obtain.  
 Born and fully grown to manhood,  
     God's adoption we may share;  
 By the measure of full stature,  
     We God's sonship will declare.
- 3 All our spirit, soul and body  
     Unto Christ conformed must be;  
 This will be accomplished fully  
     When our glorious Lord we see.  
 By our body's full redemption  
     Shall adoption be complete;  
 By the final transformation  
     All God's purpose we shall meet.
- 4 By that final transformation,  
     We'll be fully sanctified;  
 God will bring us into glory,  
     With His Son identified.  
 All creation is expecting  
     Sons of God revealed to be,  
 That they might be freed from bondage  
     Into glorious liberty. (*Hymns, #741*)

If we read the Bible carefully with much prayer, we should be impressed that sonship is at the center of the divine economy. The apostle Paul uttered this profound fact in his Epistle to the Ephesians:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ, even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world to be holy and without blemish before Him in love, predestinating us unto sonship through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will. (1:3-5)

This clear revelation unveils God's firm determination to bring forth many sons through His uniquely begotten Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. In keeping with His divine resolve, He made a choice from among His pending creation before He actually established the universe. Based upon this selection, He predestinated the elect to become His many sons.

The above hymn begins, "God ordained us unto sonship, / Ere creation's work was done." A clear understanding of sonship in the Bible is essential for us to enter into this rich hymn written by Witness Lee. We need to spend some time to consider the meaning of sonship in the writings of Paul, the unique writer to use the term in the Scriptures. Kenneth S. Wuest has a helpful analysis of the Greek word translated in the Recovery Version of the Bible as "sonship" in Ephesians 1:5 (other versions of the New Testament use the word *adoption* rather than *sonship*).

We consider now the words "unto the adoption of children." The preposition is *eis*, which is sometimes translated "with a view to," signifying purpose or result. This marking out beforehand, this setting limits upon, this predestinating had in view the act of God adopting these selected out ones as children. The Greek word is *huiiothesia*, from *tithēmi*, "to place," and *huios* "an adult son." Thus, the word refers to the act of God placing these selected-out ones as adult sons. Paul speaks of this in Romans 8:15 in the words "Spirit of adoption." The apostle here uses as an illustration the Roman practice of legally adopting a child, and thus not only bequeathing to him the material possessions of the one adopting, but also giving him his civil status. Thus God takes a believing sinner, regenerates him, and by means of this makes him His child (*teknon*, a born one). Then He takes this child and places him in a legal position as an adult son (*huios*). We thus become joint-heirs with Christ, having been raised to a civil status as adult sons, in which we become heirs of God, inheriting jointly with Christ all that He possesses as an heir of God the Father by virtue of His Sonship and work on the Cross. This is one object of God's predestination. The other is that the believer is to be conformed to the image of God's Son (Rom. 8:29). Thus, God selected certain from among mankind to be included within the saving work of Christ, and those selected, He predestined to be placed as adult sons and to be conformed to the

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image of His own Son. Hence, predestination follows election, not in point of time, for the acts were simultaneous, but in point of divine economy or logical order. (36-37)

Wuest's word study helps us to realize that the object of God's placing His selected ones into sonship was to make them full heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, raising them "to a civil status as adult sons," that is, into sonship. But for God to accomplish His plan in time, He had to first call these elect from among sinful mankind, purge them and forgive them of their sinful condition, and then constitute them children of God through regeneration. Following their redemption and regeneration, these children of God must grow and mature in the divine life until they are qualified for adoption—the conferring of a new status upon the grown up children as sons and heirs of God. This elevation into sonship is not merely a legal act of God bestowing an objective title and status of heirs; it is the final result of God's full salvation in His divine economy issuing in fully grown and conformed sons who match Christ, the Firstborn. These redeemed and regenerated sinners have passed through a process of transformation and growth into maturity to become adult sons, conformed to the image of the firstborn Son. They are thus wholly qualified to inherit all that God is and has obtained and attained in Christ.

If we fail to clearly see this divine predestination unto sonship, we may have the erroneous concept that we are not God's organic sons, that we are merely legally adopted but forever different in kind from the Firstborn. This understanding ignores the clear revelation in the Scriptures that God's ordination of us unto sonship and conformation of us to the image of His Son occurs within the context of Christ becoming the Firstborn, the prototype of the many sons to follow.

Hence, the hymn continues, virtually quoting Romans: "To conform us by His Spirit / To the image of His Son; / That His only dear Begotten / Might become the firstborn One." Paul's summation of the dynamic process by which sinners become sons of God points out that the predestinated elect will be conformed to the image of the firstborn Son:

Because those whom He foreknew, He also predestinated to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the Firstborn among many brothers; and those whom He predestinated, these He also called; and those whom He called, these He also justified; and those whom He justified, these He also glorified. (8:29-30)

If we desire to fully cooperate with the Spirit for the carrying out of the divine economy, we must see clearly that *adoption* in the Scriptures is a term that refers to the completion of the process of the divine salvation which issues in the producing of God-men who are of the same kind and essence in life, nature, expression, function, and stature as the Firstborn. We, of course, do not share in His position and function in the Godhead, but when we, by growth in life, reach the full stature of Christ spoken of in Ephesians 4, we will be given the same status—sons who are heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. Then Christ will be not merely the only Begotten in relation to the Godhead but the Firstborn among the many brethren in relation to the goal of the divine economy in God's salvation—sonship.

Through His incarnation and His all-inclusive death and resurrection, the Lord Jesus in, with, and through the Spirit has redeemed and regenerated us to be sons of God. Now He is in the process of transforming and maturing us to become full-grown sons and heirs—not merely by the changing of our outward behavior and appearance or even our inward motivation and belief but by constituting us inwardly with His life and nature. Eventually, as life, He will permeate us and reconstitute us to make us His reproduction and duplication. The purpose of this divine operation is to produce the many sons of God so that the only Begotten might become

first among the many: "That His only dear Begotten / Might become the firstborn One, / And by Him with many brethren / His expression full be won." The only Begotten of the Father has now become the Firstborn, and we are His many brothers who match and reflect Him to be the full expression of the Father.

The remaining three stanzas touch on the details of the sonship we will inherit and the means by which the Father in the Son accomplishes His determined purpose in us.

The second stanza begins with the declaration of the initiation of the process: "By divine regeneration / We the sons of God became." Regeneration is much more than redemption, forgiveness of sins, and salvation from perdition. Although these are precious blessings through the Son's redeeming death, the real miracle and top blessing of God's full salvation is the divine birth within us to make us sons of God organically. This is the weight of the Lord's promise in John 1:12-13: "As many as received Him, to them He gave the authority to become children

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of God, to those who believe into His name, who were begotten not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” The clear testimony of the Bible indicates that by means of a divine birth from God Himself, the divine life has been imparted into us to constitute us sons of God. When we grasp the full significance of God’s purpose in us, our hearts and voices should be lifted up in solemn praise.

The stanza continues, “But we must mature to fullness, / Thus the birthright to obtain,” indicating that growth in the divine life is meant to follow our birth until “born and fully grown to manhood, / God’s adoption we may share.” We should not be content with just being born again any more than we would be content for a baby to remain an infant for the rest of his life. It is only “by the measure of full stature, / We God’s sonship will declare.” “Full stature” here is an apparent reference to Ephesians 4:13 where Paul declares the intended end of our full development and advancement in the life of God, our arrival “at the oneness of the faith and of the full knowledge of the Son of God, at a full-grown man, at the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” In Paul’s vision, the goal of our Christian life is not only maturity but also the building up of the Body of Christ corporately. Hence, we will corporately arrive at this stature of our dear Lord Jesus—a stature that matches Him.

The full stature in this hymn emphasizes the maturation of the regenerated believers through growth, experience, and spiritual edification—the perfecting of the saints through Christ’s gifted members (cf. vv. 11-12). This development is primarily in the soul—the mind, emotion, and will—of the believers. After being regenerated in our human spirit, we need to be transformed in our soul. This intrinsic change in our being is worked out primarily by the renewing of our mind, the leading part of our soul (Rom. 12:2).

The third stanza progresses from the transformation of our soul to the transfiguration of our body, the ultimate step of the complete conformation of our spirit, soul, and body to Christ. First, it introduces the fact that our tripartite being—our spirit, soul, and body—must be conformed to Christ. Our human spirit is conformed to the Lord when the Spirit enters into our spirit to regenerate and permeate it with the life of God. We are born of God in our human spirit (cf. John 3:6; Rom. 8:15). Romans 8:15-16 declares, “You have not received a spirit of slavery bringing you into fear again, but you have received a spirit of sonship in which we cry, Abba,

Father! The Spirit Himself witnesses with our spirit that we are children of God.” A footnote in the Recovery Version of the Bible points out that in verse 15, the word *spirit* is

our regenerated human spirit, mingled with the Spirit of the Son of God...Sonship in this spirit includes the life, the position, the living, the enjoyment, the birthright, the inheritance, and the manifestation of a son. Such an all-inclusive sonship is now in our spirit. (note 1)

Our initial experience of sonship is in our spirit—this is the key to our receiving the divine life and nature in order that we may become children of God.

How then do we become full-grown sons conformed to the image of the Firstborn? Primarily, this is the process by which our soul is sanctified to be conformed to the Son. The Spirit of God first enters into and mingles Himself with our spirit to make us His children. Then the Spirit in our spirit transmits the essence of God into our soul to constitute us sons of God. This is our growth

in the divine life. In 2 Corinthians 3:18 this metabolic change is described: “We all with unveiled face, beholding and reflecting like a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, even as from the Lord Spirit.” The Greek word translated “transformed” is *metamorphoo*, which indicates

the change into another form or nature. Rienecker says that the word denotes “to change the inward reality to something else” (461). Trench contrasts the meaning of the same Greek word, *metamorphoo*—“transformed”—with the Greek word *suschematizo*—“fashioned, or conformed”—used in Romans 12:2. To demonstrate the difference between the meanings of the two words, Trench employs the illustration of Satan, who is able to make himself like an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14). Satan can fashion (*metaschematizo*) himself as an angel of light:

He can take the whole outward semblance of such. But to any such change of his it would be impossible to apply the [*metamorphoo*]: for this would imply a change not external but internal, not of accidents but of essence. (263-264)

Thus, the soul is being conformed through a process of transformation “from glory to glory” as we behold and reflect the Lord by the Spirit’s spreading into our soul.

Our body is conformed by a sudden change to be like the

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resurrected body of the Lord Jesus (Phil. 3:21; cf. 1 Cor. 15:51-53). "This will be accomplished fully / When our glorious Lord we see." The transfiguration of our body is the final application to our being of the work that was wholly finished through Christ's death and resurrection. Our body is the final part of our being that will be redeemed by the Lord. This consummation will occur when we see the Lord at His triumphant return. Now we who have the firstfruits of the Spirit "groan in ourselves, eagerly awaiting sonship, the redemption of our body" (Rom. 8:23).

The fourth stanza declares that this final transformation and conformation of our spirit, soul, and body will be our full sanctification and the consummation of sonship. The apostle encouraged the young believers in Thessalonica: "The God of peace Himself sanctify you wholly, and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thes. 5:23). The Spirit's work of sanctification is an extraordinarily detailed labor in which first our spirit becomes one spirit with the Lord (1 Cor. 6:17), then our soul becomes fully saturated with the life and nature of the Lord to become mingled with Him in mind, emotion, and will, and finally our body becomes transfigured to be like His glorious body of resurrection. With this completion in view, the apostle John wrote:

Behold what manner of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and we are...Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not yet been manifested what we will be. We know that if He is manifested, we will be like Him because we will see Him even as He is. (1 John 3:1-2)

In addition to wholly sanctifying us in the three parts of our being, "God will bring us into glory, / With His Son identified." In that consummate work of the Spirit at the Lord's coming back, we, the many sons, will be brought into glory, and we will also be glorified. Christ, the Lord of glory (1 Cor. 2:8), calls us into His own kingdom and glory (1 Thes. 2:12), the God of all grace has called us into His eternal glory (1 Pet. 5:10), and God, for whom are all things and through whom are all things, is leading His many sons into glory (Heb. 2:10). But we are not only being led into glory outwardly; we are becoming glorious inwardly in and with Him. The Son told the Father that He gave to His disciples the glory which the Father had given Him (John 17:22). The afflictions we experience are a preparation for the glory to be revealed upon us (Rom. 8:18), and those whom the Father predestined,

called, and justified, He also glorified (vv. 29-30). When the many sons are glorified, the issue is glory to the Father. His goal in His eternal salvation will be realized. We will be glorified with Him from the inside out, and we will be brought into the realm of His glory, fully identified with His Son.

In the third major accomplishment of God's full salvation, even the creation will experience freedom from the corruption which was introduced into the universe through the fall of man:

The anxious watching of the creation eagerly awaits the revelation of the sons of God. For the creation was made subject to vanity, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will also be freed from the slavery of corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. (vv. 19-21)

This indicates that the final restoration of the universe to its proper place of harmony with God Himself awaits the final event in the process of sonship. At that coming

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moment in history, the sons who have matured into full sonship will burst forth into the glory God has prepared, and we with the Firstborn will glorify the Father who planned and purposed all things according to the counsel of His will. At the same moment, the creation will be freed from corruption into glorious liberty. This is the

fullness of the God-ordained sonship. As we see and enter into this divine revelation according to His heart's desire, we are constrained to exclaim in wonder that this is "God's wisdom in a mystery, the wisdom which has been hidden, which God predestined before the ages for our glory" (1 Cor. 2:7).

by Gary Kaiser

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