

The Birthright of the Sons of God

The New Testament tells us that we, the believers, have been born of God to be His children. John 1:12 and 13 say, "As many as received Him, to them He gave the authority to become children 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." To be begotten of God is to be regenerated in our human spirit by and with the Spirit of God so that we may have the divine life and the divine nature (3:6, 15; 2 Pet. 1:4). Thus, the Spirit Himself witnesses with our spirit that we are the children of God (Rom. 8:16; 1 John 3:1). In addition to *children*, the New Testament uses the word *sons* to denote the believers. Romans 8:14 and 15 say, "As many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For 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!" God's salvation makes sinners His sons, who have His life and nature, so that they may become members of Christ to constitute the Body of Christ for His expression.

Sons indicates a more advanced stage of growth in the divine life than does *children* in verse 16 (Recovery Version, v. 14, note 3). *Children* refers to the initial stage of sonship, the stage of regeneration in the human spirit. Sons are the children of God who are in the stage of the transformation of their souls (12:2). They have not only been regenerated in their spirit and are growing in the divine life, but they are also living and walking by being led by the Spirit. As sons of God, we are joined to the firstborn Son of God in order to be conformed to His image in every part of our being (8:29). Ephesians 1:5 says that we were predestinated unto sonship, and Galatians 4:5 tells us that the purpose of Christ's redemption is so that we might receive the sonship. God's economy is to make us sons of God, who inherit the blessing of God's promise, which was given to us for His eternal purpose that He may have His corporate expression in the church.

The divine sonship is a matter not only of the divine life but also of the position, right, and inheritance of the sons of God. This is closely related to the concept of the birthright of the sons of God. James 1:18 says, "He brought us forth by the word of truth, purposing that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures." God will eventually renew His entire creation to have a new heaven and

new earth with the New Jerusalem as the center (Rev. 21:1-2). To this end, He first regenerated us to be the firstfruits of His new creation by imparting the divine life into our being. In this sense, we are the firstborn sons of God. Hence, the church is called the church of the firstborn (Heb. 12:23). As the firstborn sons of God, we share in the birthright, that is, in the position, right, and inheritance of the sons of God. The birthright of the sons of God consists of the full enjoyment of Christ, the priesthood, and the kingship, both in the present age of grace and in the coming age of the millennial kingdom. As the firstborn sons of God, we must see the significance of the birthright in God's economy, count it precious, and fully participate in it. The truth of the birthright is a great word of blessing and encouragement in the Scriptures. However, along with the word of blessing comes a word of warning. As we shall see, the birthright can be shifted from the firstborn son by natural order to another. Thus, there is the danger of losing our birthright with all of its blessings, as Esau, Reuben, and the nation of Israel did. Therefore, we must receive a sober warning to carefully guard our birthright. This warning is the word of righteousness (5:13), to which we must give heed.

The Right of the Firstborn in God's Economy

The respect and rights of primogeniture were customarily practiced in the ancient Middle East and, particularly so, by the patriarchs of Israel. While all of a man's sons had his protection and some benefits, the firstborn son enjoyed a special inheritance (Baab 440), including the chieftainship, the rule over the entire family. For Abraham the blessing of the promise given by God to him included the future possession of the land of Canaan, covenant fellowship with Jehovah, and the progenitorship, the bloodline, of Christ, the One in whom all the families of the earth were to be blessed (Gen. 12:2-3; Keil 269; Lange 500; Lenski 448). As such, the birthright is the "continuation of the various excellent qualities and blessings of the forefathers" (Lee, *Truth* 108). By the time of Moses, the practice of the birthright (Heb. *bekorah*, from *bekor*, "firstborn") had become a precept of the law, known as the "right of the firstborn" (*mishpat habbekorah*; Deut. 21:17).

The main components of the birthright can be understood

from the accounts of Jacob, Reuben, Joseph, Levi, and Judah. The first aspect of the birthright is the double portion of the land of Canaan. As the firstborn son of Jacob, Reuben should have had the preeminence in dignity and power (Gen. 49:3), and according to the governmental arrangement in God's economy, he should have inherited the birthright. However, because of his indulgence in lust, the birthright was transferred through his brother Joseph to Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. Deuteronomy 21:16-17 states,

In the day when he gives what he has to his sons as his inheritance..., he shall acknowledge the firstborn..., giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the firstfruits of his vigor; the right of the firstborn is his.

According to Joshua 16 and 17, Ephraim and Manasseh were each allotted a portion of the good land, constituting a double portion as the right of the firstborn, which was transferred from Reuben to Joseph.

The second aspect of the birthright is seen in the transfer of the priesthood from the nation of Israel as a whole to the tribe of Levi. In Exodus 4:22 Jehovah says, "Israel is My son, My firstborn." As the firstborn of Jehovah, all of Israel was to be a kingdom of priests to Him (19:6). However, due to its failure in the worship of the golden calf, Israel as a whole lost this portion of the birthright, which was then given specifically to Levi (Deut. 33:8-10).

The third main component of the birthright is seen in the case of Judah. In blessing Judah, Jacob said,

Judah, your brothers will praise you; / Your hand will be on the neck of your enemies; / Your father's sons will bow down before you. / ...The scepter will not depart from Judah, / Nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, / Until Shiloh comes, / And to Him shall be the obedience of the peoples. (Gen. 49:8, 10)

Clearly, the rulership among his brothers is an important aspect of the right of the firstborn, which was given by Jacob, the blessing father, to Judah. Thus, the birthright that should have been Reuben's was divided among three other sons of Jacob. The priesthood eventually went to Levi, the kingship went to Judah, and the double portion of the land went to Joseph.

The three main components of the birthright—the priesthood, the kingship, and the inheritance of the land—can

be seen in God's original purpose in the creation of man. Genesis 1:26 and 28 say,

And God said, Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of heaven and over the cattle and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth...And God blessed them; and God said to them, Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it.

God's original intention was to have a corporate man to express Him with His image, which is the function of the priesthood; to represent Him with His dominion, which is the function of the kingship; and to take possession of the earth, which involves the allotment of land. Thus, the birthright, first presented in the account of the patriarchs in Genesis, is altogether an expression and further definition of God's purpose and intention with man.

C. H. Mackintosh points out that the book of Genesis is "full of the seeds of things;" and as we pass along its comprehensive pages, we shall find them teeming with all the

fundamental principles of truth, which are more elaborately wrought out in the New Testament" (107). The right of the firstborn with the priesthood, kingship, and double portion of the land is a seed of truth that takes the entire Bible to grow and blossom. In the New Testament we trace the birthright from the Gospels, where we see its principle (Luke 15:11-32; Matt. 21:28-32), to Revelation, where we see its consummation (1:6; 2:26; 5:10; 22:3, 5). Hebrews 12:16 in particular indicates that we, as the firstborn sons of God, have received the birthright, for which we must care diligently (πρωτοτόκια, from πρωτότοκος, "firstborn"¹). The birthright of the New Testament sons of God in God's salvation is the holy and royal priesthood, the kingship in the kingdom of the heavens, and the full enjoyment of Christ as our portion allotted by God (1 Pet. 2:5, 9; Rev. 1:6; 5:10; Col. 1:12).

The Double Portion of the Good Land

The first aspect of the birthright is the special allotment of the good land, the land of Canaan, when it was divided among the tribes of Israel. In Jacob's blessing to Joseph, he said,

The All-sufficient God appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and blessed me. And He said to me, Behold, I am going to make you fruitful and multiply you, and I will

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make of you a company of peoples and will give this land to your seed after you for an everlasting possession. And now your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, are mine; Ephraim and Manasseh will be mine, as Reuben and Simeon are. (Gen. 48:3-5)

Jacob's intention in this blessing was to replace Reuben and Simeon, his first two sons, with the two sons of Joseph, that Joseph might receive the right of the firstborn to participate in the special inheritance of the land as a portion of the birthright. The law of the firstborn defines this special allotment: "He shall acknowledge the firstborn..., giving him a double portion of all that he has" (Deut. 21:17; *piy shenayim*, "a portion of two"). Thus, this aspect of the birthright consists of the double portion of land, which was given to the sons of Joseph (1 Chron. 5:1-2).

The good land, the land of Canaan, is a full, complete, and consummate type of the all-inclusive Christ, who is the embodiment of the Triune God realized as the all-inclusive life-giving Spirit (Col. 2:9; 1 Cor. 15:45; 2 Cor. 3:17; Gal. 3:14), as the inheritance allotted to God's people for their enjoyment (Recovery Version, Deut. 8:7, note 1).² Colossians 1:12 says, "Giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you for a share of the allotted portion of the saints in the light." *Allotted portion*

refers to the lot of the inheritance, as illustrated by the allotment of the good land of Canaan given to the children of Israel for their inheritance (Josh. 14:1). The New Testament believers' inheritance, their allotted portion, is not a physical land; it is the all-inclusive Christ. He is the allotted portion of the saints as their divine inheritance for their enjoyment. (Recovery Version, Col. 1:12, note 2)

Moreover, the double portion of the land signifies the top portion of the enjoyment of the riches of Christ.

The land of Canaan is good in its spaciousness, in its ascendancy, and in its riches (Exo. 3:8; Deut. 32:13; Ezek. 34:13-14; Lee, *All-inclusive* 19, 29). Deuteronomy 8:7-9 is a description of the land that the Israelites were to inherit:

Jehovah your God is bringing you to a good land, a land of waterbrooks, of springs and of fountains, flowing forth in valleys and in mountains; a land of wheat and barley and vines and fig trees and pomegranates; a land of olive trees with oil and of honey; a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity; you will not lack anything in it; a land whose stones are iron, and from whose mountains you can mine copper.

The riches of the good land typify the unsearchable riches of Christ in different aspects as the bountiful supply to

His believers in His Spirit (Eph. 3:8; Phil. 1:19). The waterbrooks, springs, and fountains signify Christ as the flowing Spirit to water us, quench our thirst, and be our life supply in many aspects (John 4:14; 7:37-39; Rev. 22:1). The valleys and mountains signify the different kinds of environments in which we may experience Christ as the flowing Spirit (cf. 2 Cor. 6:8-10; Phil. 4:11-12). The valleys are the experiences of the cross, and the mountains are the experiences of resurrection, both of which cause the life of Christ to flow more and more.

The wheat of the good land typifies the incarnated Christ, who was crucified and buried to multiply Himself. John 12:24 says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, Unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it abides alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." Just as a grain of wheat releases its life element when it falls into the ground and grows, Christ's divine element, His divine life, was released from the shell of His humanity to produce many believers in resurrection. Barley was the first-ripe grain, coming forth at the beginning of the harvest (2 Sam. 21:9). As such, it points to the resurrected Christ as the firstfruits (1 Cor. 15:20). Christ as the firstfruits of resurrection is the Firstborn from the dead that He might be the Head of the Body (Col. 1:18). Vines typify the Christ who sacrificed Himself to produce wine to cheer God and man (Judg. 9:13). Christ as the new wine is the new life, full of vigor, stirring up people inwardly to enjoy Him (Matt. 9:17). The fig tree speaks of the sweetness and satisfaction of Christ as the life supply (Judg. 9:11). Pomegranates, being full of seeds, signify the fullness, the abundance and beauty, and the expression of the riches of Christ as life (Exo. 28:33-34; 1 Kings 7:18-20; S. S. 4:3, 13).

The bread of the good land, which was to be eaten without scarcity, signifies Christ as the bread of life (John 6:48). Jesus said, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me shall by no means hunger, and he who believes into Me shall by no means ever thirst" (v. 35). The olive tree typifies Christ as the One who was filled with the Spirit and anointed with the Spirit (Rom. 11:17; Luke 4:1, 18; Heb. 1:9), and olive oil typifies the Holy Spirit, by whom we walk to honor God and whom we minister to honor man (Gal. 5:16, 25; 2 Cor. 3:6, 8; Judg. 9:9). Milk and honey speak forth the goodness and sweetness of Christ (Deut. 6:3; Exo. 3:8).

Both milk and honey are products of the combination of two kinds of lives—the animal life and the vegetable life. Milk is produced by cattle that feed on grass, and honey is made by bees from the nectar of flowers. Milk and honey signify the riches of Christ, which come from the two aspects of His life—His redeeming life, typified by the animal life (John 1:29), and His generating life, typified by the vegetable life (John 12:24). (Recovery Version, Exo. 3:8, note 2)

The stones of the good land signify Christ as material for building God's dwelling place (Isa. 28:16; Zech 4:7; 1 Pet. 2:4). The trustworthy Christ is a foundation stone and a precious cornerstone for God's building (Psa. 118:22; 1 Cor. 3:11). The iron and copper are for making weapons and typify our spiritual warfare by which we fight the enemy (2 Cor. 10:4; Eph. 6:10-20). Iron also signifies Christ's ruling authority, and copper, Christ's judging power (Matt. 28:18; Rev. 19:15; 1:15). Finally, the mountains from which copper is mined signify Christ's resurrection and ascension. By all the foregoing, we can see that Christ, the all-inclusive One, is all in all to the believers. Every positive matter is in Him, and He is everything to us. As the firstborn sons of God, we have been positioned to receive such a Christ and enjoy Him as our double portion.

A Warning concerning the Birthright: the Case of Esau

God's goal in His economy is not merely to redeem His people and save them from the world, typified by Egypt, but to bring them into Christ, typified by the good land, that they may possess Him and enjoy His unsearchable riches. (Recovery Version, Deut. 8:7, note 1)

Colossians 2:6 says, "As therefore you have received the Christ, Jesus the Lord, walk in Him." To walk is to live, to act, to behave, and to have our being. We should walk, live, and act in Christ that we may enjoy His riches, just as the children of Israel lived in the good land, enjoying all its rich produce. For this purpose, we need to be deeply rooted in Christ by continually absorbing all the riches of Christ as our nourishment so that we can be built up with others for the Body of Christ (v. 7; Eph. 3:17). This requires a daily, diligent exercise on the part of the believers.

The type in the Old Testament and its development in the New Testament set forth a serious warning concerning our inheritance and possession of the birthright, the top enjoyment of the riches of Christ as our good land. Genesis 25:29-34 gives the following account:

Jacob cooked a stew. And Esau came in from the field, and he was faint. And Esau said to Jacob, Let me swallow down some of the red stew, that red stew there, for I am faint...And Jacob said, First sell me your birthright. And Esau said, I am now about to die. Of what use then is this birthright to me? And Jacob said, First swear to me. And he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob. And

Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank and rose up and went away. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

Esau lusted after the enjoyment of the flesh, after the world and its worldly pleasures, and for a morsel of meat sold his own birthright. Because of his profaneness in giving up the birthright, it passed to Jacob and eventually to Jacob's sons. In despising his birthright, Esau was profane, carnal, and superficial. C. H. Mackintosh notes,

The natural heart places no value on the things of God. To it, God's promise is a vague, valueless, powerless thing, simply because God is not known...Thus Israel despised the pleasant land (Ps. 106:24); thus they despised Christ (Zech. 11:13); thus those who were bidden to the marriage despised the invitation (Matt. 22:5). Man has no

heart for the things of God. The present is everything to him. A mess of pottage is better than a title to Canaan. (107-108)

C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch add further,

There is proof enough that [Esau] knew he was giving away, along with the birth-

right, blessings which, because they were not of a material but of a spiritual nature, had no particular value in his estimation...The only thing of value to him was the sensual enjoyment of the present; the spiritual blessings of the future his carnal mind was unable to estimate. In this he showed himself to be βέβηλος (Heb. xii.16), a profane man, who cared for nothing but the momentary gratification of sensual desires...Just as Ishmael was excluded from the promised blessing because he was begotten "according to the flesh," so Esau lost it because his disposition was according to the flesh. (269)

Ishmael was excluded from the inheritance of the blessing promised to Abraham because of the source of his birth, but Esau forsook the inheritance because he was disposed to undervalue the spiritual things and instead seek the things of the world and the flesh.

In Hebrews 12:15-17 the writer of this Epistle applies the account of Esau to the weak and stumbling Hebrew believers. He says,

Looking carefully lest anyone fall away from the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and through this many be defiled; lest there be any fornicator or profane person [βέβηλος] like Esau, who for one meal gave up his own³ birthright. For you know that also

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afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected; for he found no place for repentance, even though he sought it with tears.

“No place for repentance does not mean that Esau had no ground to repent. Rather, it means that he had no ground, no way, to reverse by repentance the result of what he had done” (Recovery Version, v. 17, note 1). It is significant that the writer uses the case of Esau to admonish the Hebrew believers. This word clearly proves that among the Lord’s struggling believers there may be some “like Esau,” who despise and give up their birthright. Today if we choose to live as profane, world-loving, and world-seeking Christians, we will lose our enjoyment of the birthright both in the present age and at the Lord’s coming back, when we will stand before the judgment seat of Christ to receive the things done through the body according to what we have practiced, whether good or bad (James 4:4; 1 John 2:15; 2 Cor. 5:10). If we wish to deal with the world, we must exercise our regenerated spirit, love God supremely, be nourished by the Word of God, and be transformed by the renewing of our mind (1 John 5:4; 1 Pet. 2:2; Rom. 12:2; cf. S. S. 1:2-4). In the light of the record of Esau and the New Testament application to the believers in Hebrews 12, we must be soberly warned. Any worldly enjoyment, even one meal, could cause us to forfeit the inheritance and enjoyment of our birthright.

The Priesthood

The second main aspect of the birthright, both in the Old Testament type and the New Testament fulfillment, is the priesthood. Of the three main aspects of the birthright, the priesthood is the sweetest and most intimate portion. The Old Testament priests had the privilege of drawing near to God and of serving God. Furthermore, they could wait before God and could offer to God the fat and the blood of the sacrifices to satisfy God’s righteousness, holiness, and glory. Ezekiel 44:15-16 says,

The Levitical priests..., who kept the charge of My sanctuary when the children of Israel went astray from Me, they shall come near to Me to minister to Me; and they shall stand before Me to present to Me the fat and the blood, declares the Lord Jehovah, it is they who will enter My sanctuary, and it is they who will come near to My table to minister to Me, and they will keep My charge.

Verse 28 continues, “They shall have an inheritance: I am their inheritance. And you shall not give them a possession in Israel—I am their possession.” To be sure, the right and charge of the priesthood imply the most intimate fellowship with God in service to Him. What a blessing this is!

In order to know what it means to be a priest, we must

keep in mind that God’s original intention is to work Himself into a group of people so that He may be their life and they may be His expression. Thus, man was destined to receive God, to be filled with God, to be saturated and permeated with God, and to flow God out, so that he may be the living expression of God (Gen. 1:26; 2:8-10; John 7:37-39; Eph. 3:19; 1:22-23; Lee, *Living* 94). According to God’s divine determination for man, a priest is one who receives God into him, contacts God, and is filled, saturated, and permeated with God. He is one with God, taken over by God, possessed by God in a full way, and built up with others in the flow of the life of God to be a living, corporate expression of God on the earth today. Therefore, the main work and conduct of a priest is to spend time in the presence of the Lord to be filled with Him until he is one with Him in the spirit (1 Cor. 6:17).

When the priests entered the Holy Place, they bore the names of the children of Israel in the breastplate of judgment, and they put on the breastplate of judgment the Urim and the Thummim, by which God spoke (Exo. 28:29-30). This shows that through the priesthood the Levites were able not only to bring satisfaction to God but also to bring God’s people into His presence. Moreover, they were able to receive God’s guidance so that they might teach the people God’s law and God’s judgments.

As the New Testament believers, we have been reborn as priests. Revelation 1:5 and 6 say, “To Him who loves us and has released us from our sins by His blood and made us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father.” The redemption accomplished through Christ’s blood made us priests to God (1 Pet. 2:5, 9). As the New Testament priests, we serve God with Christ by enjoying Christ and being filled with Christ to offer Christ to God and minister Him to others. This requires that we remain in our regenerated spirit, pray in the spirit, be filled in spirit, and be possessed by the Lord in every part of our being (John 4:24).

In Romans 15:16 Paul says, “That I might be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, a laboring priest of the gospel of God, in order that the offering of the Gentiles might be acceptable, having been sanctified in the Holy Spirit.” Paul’s being a priest of the gospel of God to minister Christ to the Gentiles was a priestly service to God, and the Gentiles whom he gained through his gospel preaching were an offering presented to God (Recovery Version, v. 16, note 3). By this priestly service many Gentiles, who were unclean and defiled, were sanctified in the Holy Spirit and became such an offering, acceptable to God. They were set apart from things common and were saturated with God’s nature and element, and were thus sanctified both positionally and dispositionally.

Thus, the New Testament priests offer spiritual sacrifices, including Christ as the reality of the types of the Old Testament sacrifices, and they also offer sinners, who are saved by gospel preaching, to God as sacrifices. Furthermore, they help the believers to present themselves as a living sacrifice to God (12:1), and they exercise all wisdom to present every believer full-grown in Christ (Col. 1:28). This kingly priesthood is being exercised in today's church life, it will be practiced intensively in the millennial kingdom (Rev. 20:6), and it will be ultimately consummated in the New Jerusalem (22:3).

A Warning concerning the Birthright: the Case of Unfaithful Israel

As a portion of the birthright in the Old Testament, the priesthood should have been Esau's, and after it was transferred to Jacob, it should have been Reuben's, the first-born son of Jacob. Due to the failures of Esau and Reuben, however, the right of the priesthood passed to Levi. When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the tablets of the Testimony, he saw the people worshipping the golden calf that Aaron had made for them (Exo. 32:15-19). Moses threw down the tablets, burned the golden calf, and called all those who belonged to Jehovah to come to him. Out of all the tribes, only one tribe, the tribe of Levi, gathered themselves to him (v. 26). Moses said,

Thus says Jehovah the God of Israel, Let each man put his sword upon his thigh, and go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each man kill his brother, and each man his companion, and each man his neighbor. (v. 27)

The sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. Because of their faithfulness, Jehovah gave to Levi a special portion. In Deuteronomy 33:8-10 Moses blessed Levi, saying,

May Your Thummim and Urim be with Your faithful man... / He who said of his father and mother, / I do not regard him; / And his brothers he did not acknowledge, / And his children he did not recognize; / For they [the Levites] have kept Your speaking / And have guarded Your covenant. / They shall show Jacob Your ordinances, / And Israel Your law; / They shall put incense before Your nostrils / And whole burnt offerings upon Your altar.

From this point, the sons of Levi were separated from their brothers to replace the kingdom of Israel in taking

up the charge of God's priesthood. This should be a warning to us today. All Christians have been reborn as priests, but because of their unfaithfulness and neglect, many have lost their priesthood in essence and in practice. Instead of exercising their spirit and praying in the spirit to minister to God and to man, many today live in the natural life of their fallen soul, causing them to be soulless men, unable to receive the things of the Spirit of God, ignoring their spirit, not using the spirit, and even behaving as if they do not have a spirit (1 Cor. 2:14; Jude 10). Thus, they have lost their ability to enter into the Holy of Holies practically by praying in the spirit and contacting God by their spirit in communion with the Spirit of God (Heb. 10:19-22).

If we would keep our priesthood, we must be like the Levites, forsaking our natural life, interests, and relationships and caring only for God's interests. If God's desire has the first place in our hearts, we shall be close to Him and keep the priesthood. If we are not faithful, however, we shall lose our intimate fellowship with the Lord, neglect the true worship to Him in our spirit, and be unable to bear people before Him and present them as New Testament offerings. In other words, we will lose the most precious portion of our birthright both in this age and in the age to come.

The Kingship

The third aspect of the birthright of the sons of God is the kingship, which Judah received in the blessing of Jacob:

Judah, your brothers will praise you; / Your hand will be on the neck of your enemies; / Your father's sons will bow down before you. / Judah is a young lion; / From the prey, my son, you have gone up. / He couches, he stretches out like a lion, / And like a lioness; who will rouse him up? / The scepter will not depart from Judah, / Nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, / Until Shiloh comes, / And to Him shall be the obedience of the peoples. (Gen. 49:8-10)

Jacob's prophetic blessing is a poetic picture depicting Judah's fighting and gaining the victory and his resting in victory as a king (Lee, *Truth* 111-112). The scepter and the staff represent kingship, or dominion. The words *between his feet* are a poetic term denoting seed, or posterity. This indicates that Judah has the kingship and that rulers come out of his posterity. Judah's descendants not

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only ruled over God's people but eventually brought forth the kingly Christ (Heb. 7:14). Christ, as Judah's seed, became the Lion of the tribe of Judah (Rev. 5:5). As such, He has overcome and has been given all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18). When Christ, as Shiloh ("Peace Bringer"), comes again, the whole earth will be filled with peace, and all the nations will obey Him. At that time, the kingdom of the world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He will reign forever and ever (Rev. 11:15).

The kingship, like the priesthood, fulfills God's original intention for man. Genesis 1:26 says, "Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of heaven and over the cattle and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." The creeping things typify Satan, the serpent, his angels, and the demons (3:1; Rev. 12:9; Matt. 25:41; Luke 10:19). Thus, a major function of the kingship in God's economy is to rule over and subdue the evil one and those who followed him in his rebellion against God. This will ultimately be fulfilled at the end of the millennium, when the devil, the fallen angels, and the demons will be cast into the lake of fire and brimstone (Rev. 20:10, 13-14).

We, the believers, who have been redeemed by the blood of Christ, not only have been born of God into His kingdom but also have been made a kingdom for God's economy (John 3:5; Rev. 1:6). When Christ came, He brought the kingdom of God with Him (Luke 17:21; Matt. 12:28). This kingdom has been enlarged into the church, which will accomplish the establishing of the kingdom of God on the whole earth (16:18-19). On the one hand, the kingdom of God today is in the church, but on the other hand, the kingdom of God is coming through the overcoming believers (Rev. 12:10). At the Lord's coming, Christ and the overcoming believers will reign over all the nations in the millennial kingdom (2:26-27; 20:4, 6).

The kingship follows the priesthood. When we have the priesthood, we also have the divine authority of the kingship to represent God and to bring God to man. In the New Testament all the believers in Christ are reborn to be kings. We were regenerated with a divine, kingly, and royal life, which now enthrones us to reign as kings over all things. Romans 5:17 and 21 say,

If, by the offense of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ...In order that just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness unto eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The life that we have received does not merely save us

from a few things. Rather, it enthrones us as kings to reign over all things. The abundance of grace is God Himself as our all-sufficient supply for our organic salvation, and the gift of righteousness is God's judicial redemption applied to us in a practical way. Having received righteousness objectively through Christ's righteous act of dying on the cross, and as we receive the abundance of grace continually by our full enjoyment of the indwelling Christ, we reign in life subjectively. To reign in life is to conquer, subdue, and rule over Satan, the world, sin, the flesh, ourselves, and all the environmental circumstances.

In our experience, to reign in life is to be under the ruling of the divine life. In order to reign in life over all the rebellious things, we must first be obedient and submissive to the Lord, practicing the restriction and limitation in the divine life. This was the faith of the centurion, who appealed to the Lord's authority and asked Him only to speak a word for the healing of his servant. He said, "I also am a man under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to this one, Go, and he goes; and to another, Come, and he comes; and to my slave, Do this, and he does it" (Matt. 8:9). The apostle Paul also deeply knew and experienced the principle of being under the Lord's authority for the purpose of his ministry. He writes, "Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in the Christ and manifests the savor of the knowledge of Him through us in every place" (2 Cor. 2:14). Only by being under the authority of the heavenly King, as captives in His triumph, are we able to reign in life over all the negative things.

As those who love the Lord Jesus and have come under the pleasant rule of the Son of God's love (5:14; Col. 1:13), we must open ourselves to the Lord for Him to flood us with Himself as life so that He may flow out to others. When we have the flow of life with the priesthood, there will be the authority of the kingship to bring God to man (2 Cor. 5:20). By exercising the priesthood and the kingship, the believers bring man to God and bring God to man that both God and man may have enjoyment and satisfaction. This is the principle of the kingship in God's New Testament economy.

A Warning concerning the Birthright: the Case of Reuben

The account of Reuben is a strong warning that the blessings of the birthright can be forfeited because of the sins of the firstborn son. According to the governmental arrangement in God's economy, Reuben the firstborn, should have inherited the birthright (Gen. 35:23). However, verse 22 records, "While Israel dwelt in that land, Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine, and Israel heard of it." In 49:3-4 Jacob says of Reuben,

Reuben, you are my firstborn, / My might and the first-fruits of my vigor, / Preeminent in dignity and preeminent in power. / Ebullient as water, you will not have the pre-eminence, / Because you went up to your father's bed; / Then you defiled it—he went up to my couch.

Reuben had the preeminence of the birthright, but because his lust boiled over like water, he lay with his father's concubine, thus defiling his father's bed. That indulgence in lust caused him to lose his birthright. In God's arrangement regarding human relationships, each man must keep himself pure with self-restraint for his existence and propagation. Hence, what God abhors most is fornication, and especially incest. Reuben not only committed fornication, but he also committed incest with his father's concubine. Therefore, the God of holiness removed the birthright from him and did not allow him to inherit any of the blessings that his forefathers received from God (Lee, *Truth* 108-109). This is a very serious matter.

First Chronicles 5:1 says, "Reuben...was the firstborn; but because he defiled his father's bed, his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph the son of Israel."

That Joseph received the birthright must have been because of his purity. When Potiphar's wife attempted to seduce Joseph, he refused, resisted, and fled from her (Gen. 39:7-12). In so doing, he lived a life that corresponded to the vision he saw in his two dreams (37:5-11). Joseph conquered his lust, behaving as a sheaf full of life and conducting himself like a heavenly star that shines in the darkness. Joseph's life under the heavenly vision was the life of the kingdom of the heavens described in Matthew 5 through 7. By living such a life, he was fully prepared to receive the blessings of the birthright and to reign for God.

Hebrews 12:15 and 16 say, "Looking carefully...lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one meal gave up his own birthright." As we have seen, the profane person is exemplified by Esau. The phrase *lest there be any fornicator* may have been written with Reuben as the background.⁴ Here the writer of Hebrews plainly links the sin of fornication to the losing of the birthright in God's New Testament economy. Although being genuine children of God who are born of the Spirit, Christians who commit fornication are in danger of losing their birthright in the coming kingdom. This birthright includes the full enjoyment of Christ with the priesthood and kingship. To have the birthright is to have the right and position to enjoy Christ in full and to be priests and

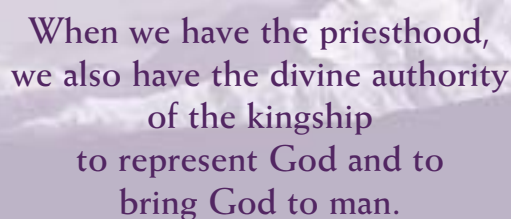
kings. Any Christian who commits fornication immediately loses his enjoyment of Christ, his priestly function of coming into the presence of God to bring man to God, and his going with the authority of Christ to bring God to man. Furthermore, no fornicator (one who practices fornication) will enter into the millennial kingdom to have the fullest enjoyment of Christ and to be a priest of God and a co-king with Christ. This is made clear again and again in the ministry of Paul (1 Cor. 6:9-10; Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 5:5). This should be a solemn warning to us to honor and respect our birthright and to treasure, enjoy, and be diligent concerning the living out of our birthright in this age so that we may inherit the full blessing of the birthright in the next age.

The Shifting of the Birthright

The record of both the Old and New Testaments indicates that the birthright can be shifted from one son to another. Although Esau was the firstborn of Isaac, the birthright that should have been his was transferred to Jacob. Apparently, this was accomplished through Jacob's cunning and deceit, but it was actually carried out through

the sovereignty of God, who had already ordained that the older would serve the younger (Gen. 25:23). In the next generation, the birthright was once again shifted. The double portion of the land that should have been Reuben's was instead given to Joseph, the priesthood was passed to Levi, and the kingship was assigned to Judah.

In the New Testament age of grace we also see the shifting of the birthright from the nation of Israel to the church. In the beginning of the Lord's earthly ministry, He still considered Israel as the firstborn son (Exo. 4:22) and the tax collectors and sinners as the second son. In the parable of the receiving father, it was the younger son, the second of the two, who took his share of the father's estate, squandered it, and was received back by the waiting father (Luke 15:11-24). The older son, the firstborn, represents the Pharisees and scribes, who pursued the law of righteousness, signified by the son's slaving in the field and keeping the father's commandments (vv. 25, 29). Practically speaking, the enjoyment of the birthright fell to the younger son, who received the robe, the ring, and the sandals and who ate the fattened calf. This signifies that the Pharisees had forfeited the enjoyment of the Savior in God's New Testament economy, but the repentant sinners gained the enjoyment of the redeeming and life-imparting Christ so that the Father and those who came to Christ could be merry together.



When we have the priesthood,
we also have the divine authority
of the kingship
to represent God and to
bring God to man.

Toward the end of the Lord's ministry, the shifting of the birthright became even clearer. The parable of the vineyard in Matthew 21:28-32 indicates that the repentant tax collectors, harlots, and sinners, of whom the church was to be composed, were the first son and that the Pharisees, representing Israel, were the second. Jesus began the parable, "A man had two children. And he came to his first son and said, Child, go today and work in the vineyard. And he answered and said, I do not want to; yet later he regretted and went" (vv. 28-29). The first son represents the Gentiles, who in former ages did not care for the interests of God the Father but later repented at the preaching of Jesus. The second son said, "I will, sir" (v. 30), just as the children of Israel had said, "All that Jehovah has spoken we will do" (Exo. 19:8), yet he did not do the Father's will. Jesus concluded, "Truly I say to you that the tax collectors and the harlots are going into the kingdom of God before you" (Matt. 21:31). The nation of Israel lost its status as the firstborn son, and the birthright was passed to the redeemed and regenerated sinners who would constitute the "church of the firstborn" (Heb. 12:23).

Each of the cases of the shifting of the birthright brings a great blessing to the younger son. Through God's predestination and sovereignty, Jacob received the birthright from Isaac, and from him it passed to Joseph, Levi, and Judah. Eventually, the birthright in the New Testament shifted to the church, composed mostly of Gentiles, who are the wild olive branches grafted into the cultivated olive tree in order to partake of the root of fatness of the olive tree, which is the unsearchable riches of God in Christ (Rom. 11:17; Eph. 3:8). What a grace it is that the "second son" can become a partaker of all the blessings in God's economy!

However, in each case of the shifting of the birthright there was one, the firstborn son according to the natural order, who suffered loss. Esau, in his profaneness, gave up his own birthright and sold it cheaply for the enjoyment of a single meal. On the one hand, the birthright depends on God's sovereign predestination, but on the other hand, whether or not we shall have the birthright depends on our attitude and our deeds. Esau's attitude was to despise his inheritance, and his action in selling it was foolish. Although we are not able to gain the birthright by our own effort, we can sell it once we have it. It was not because of Jacob's doing that he gained the birthright, but it was because of Esau's wrongdoing that he lost it.

Whereas Esau lost his birthright because of his lust in eating, Reuben lost it because of the defilement of his lust. Thus, the blessings inherited by Joseph, Levi, and Judah resulted directly from Reuben's fall and his subsequent great loss. Likewise, the shifting of the birthright to the church in the New Testament is a direct result of the

unbelief of the nation of Israel. It was through Israel's stumbling that salvation came to the Gentiles, and its misstep became riches for the world, although a loss to Israel (Rom. 11:11-12). This is a warning to the believers today as the firstborn sons of God. Whether or not we enjoy our birthright today and inherit it in full in the next age depends on how much we honor, respect, treasure, and guard it in our heart and in our daily walk. Those who count their birthright of little value, give themselves over to the pleasures of the world, indulge in the sin of fornication, or become overtaken with unbelief will become the firstborn ones who are rejected by God and will thus lose the blessings of the enjoyment of the birthright.

The Birthright as a Reward in the Coming Kingdom

As the firstfruits of God's creation, the firstborn sons, and the church of the firstborn, the New Testament believers have received the birthright in God's economy. This birthright includes the double portion and top enjoyment of Christ with all His riches, the priesthood, and the kingship. Christ is the allotted portion of the saints as their divine inheritance for their enjoyment (Col. 1:12). The all-inclusive Christ is "theirs and ours," into whose fellowship and participation we have been called (1 Cor. 1:2, 9). Therefore, we walk in Him and are rooted in Him as our good land (Col. 2:6-7). Moreover, we come forward to the Holy of Holies, where Christ our High Priest is (Heb. 10:21-22). Today the Lord Jesus as our Priest is in heaven, and He is also in our spirit (9:12; 2 Tim. 4:22). Hence, whenever we turn to our spirit, we enter into the Holy of Holies, where we meet God, who is on the throne of grace (Heb. 4:16). Here in God's presence we minister to Him as priests by absorbing Him, being filled with Him, being saturated with Him in our entire being, and being led by Him through the shining of the reality of the breastplate, the Urim, and the Thummim. In this way we also bear men before Him in prayer. In addition, we reign in life as kings over all negative matters, including the flesh, the self, sin, and the world. In this way we subdue and exercise dominion over "every creeping thing" (Gen. 1:26)—Satan, the evil angels, and the demons.

These three main aspects of the birthright—the double portion, the priesthood, and the kingship—will be the main blessings in the coming kingdom of one thousand years. What we are privileged to enjoy in Christ today is the foretaste of the blessings in the coming kingdom. The proper enjoyment of this foretaste will usher us into the full taste of the kingdom blessings. God's intention is that all the church express Him through the priesthood, represent Him with the kingship, and take possession of Christ as the land. However, not all Christians partake of their portion of the birthright. Because of this, the birthright will be a reward given to the overcoming Christians in the millennial kingdom.

The kingdom of God, and particularly the kingdom of the heavens as revealed in Matthew (4:17; 10:7; 13:11; 16:19; 25:1), is of two main sections. In the dispensation of grace today, the believers are in the kingdom in its inward reality, and in the dispensation of the kingdom in the coming age, the kingdom will appear in its open manifestation. We were regenerated into the kingdom and were transferred into the kingdom (John 3:5; Col. 1:13). Now we are in the kingdom, which today is the proper church life (Rev. 1:9; Rom. 14:17). However, what we are in now and what is in the church today is the kingdom in its reality, whereas what will come with Christ's return in the future will be the kingdom in its manifestation (Recovery Version, Heb. 12:28, note 1). If by faith we take grace, enter into the Holy of Holies, and cooperate with God, we will live out the birthright, and as we live in this birthright, we shall spontaneously be in the reality of the kingdom of the heavens. Then the reality that we are living out today will become our reward in the manifestation of the kingdom. Galatians 5:21 and Ephesians 5:5 speak of the inheritance of the kingdom of God. The inheritance of the kingdom is the enjoyment of the coming kingdom as a reward to the overcoming believers. It is not the same as a believer's salvation; rather, it is a reward in addition to salvation. Not all believers, only the overcoming ones, will participate in the millennium. In the coming age the unclean, defeated ones will have no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.

As the firstfruits of God's creation, the firstborn sons, and the church of the firstborn, the New Testament believers have received the birthright in God's economy.

The inheritance of the land in the coming age is of two aspects. On the one hand, it is the full and top participation in Christ as our good land, which will be the overcoming's richest enjoyment. On the other hand, it will be the full recovery and possession of the earth. The earth was created for the fulfillment of God's purpose (Gen. 1:1; Psa. 24:1; Zech 12:1). However, through the corruption of God's enemy, Satan, it became the vessel of his world system (Matt. 4:8; 1 John 5:19). At Christ's second coming He will take possession of the earth, which has been given to Him as His possession, and will establish God's kingdom on the whole earth, thus recovering God's right over the earth (Rev. 10:1-2; 11:15; Psa. 2:8). At that time, Christ's overcoming believers will share in the rule over the earth as His co-kings (Rev. 2:26; 20:4).

In the coming age, the overcoming will also be priests unto God. Revelation 20:6 says, "Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no authority, but they will be priests of

God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years." In the millennium the overcoming will draw near to God and Christ and satisfy them, but those who are defeated in this age will forfeit this reward. However, after being dealt with by the Lord in the millennium, these defeated ones will participate in the blessing of the priesthood to serve God in the new heaven and new earth for eternity (22:3).

Likewise, the kingship in the kingdom of God is an exercise today, and it will be a reward to the overcoming in the next age. As those who are faithful to submit to the kingship of Christ and thus reign in life over all negative things, the overcoming will be rewarded with the rule as co-kings with Christ in the coming millennial kingdom. The Lord told His disciples, "Truly I say to you that you who have followed Me, in the restoration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you also shall sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matt. 19:28). In the coming kingdom the overcoming will sit on thrones to reign over the earth. The first twelve apostles will judge the twelve tribes of Israel, and the other overcoming will rule over the nations. Revelation 2:26 and 27 say,

He who overcomes and he who keeps My works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations; and he will shepherd them with an iron rod, as vessels of pottery are broken in pieces, as I also have received from My Father.

To reign with Christ over the nations in the millennial kingdom is a prize to the overcoming. This promise of the Lord strongly implies that those who do not answer His call to overcome will not participate in the reign of the millennial kingdom.

If we do not enjoy Christ today as our good land, we will not be able to inherit the earth with Him in the coming age. Likewise, if we do not exercise our priesthood today to contact Him and prayerfully minister to Him, we will not be able to fulfill our priestly duty in the kingdom. Moreover, if we do not exercise our spirit with the God-given authority to rule our self, our flesh, our entire being, and the enemy with all his power of darkness today, we will not be able to be Christ's co-kings and rule the nations with Him in His kingdom. Our enjoyment of Christ and the practice of the priesthood and kingship today are the preparation and qualification for our participating in Christ's kingdom tomorrow. Nothing is as precious as our birthright. Nothing is more valuable than

expressing God, representing God, and participating in the kingdom of God. If we enjoy our birthright today, we shall share in the coming kingdom where we shall express God and represent Him for His purpose. However, if we choose to live as profane, world-loving, world-seeking, and sinning Christians, we will lose our enjoyment of the birthright at the Lord's coming back. This is a warning to us to honor, respect, and fully participate in our birthright today.

by John Campbell

Notes

¹Πρωτοτόκια ("birthright") in Hebrews 12:16 is the equivalent of Hebrew *bekorah* in the account of the patriarchs. It is the word favored by the Septuagint as the translation of *bekorah* (Gen. 25:31-34; 27:36).

²For the order and presentation of the points of truth in this article, the author acknowledges "The Significance, Preciousness, and Enjoyment of the Birthright in God's Economy," unpublished outlines presented at Male Ciche, Poland, July 2010.

³In Hebrews 12:16 "the reflexive ἑαυτοῦ ["his own"]... serves to intensify the unworthiness of the act" (Alford 249).

⁴Some apply *fornicator* in Hebrews 12:16 to Esau, who is named in the same verse. However, this is based to a large degree on the Jewish tradition that Esau was a fornicator, of which the Scriptures say nothing (Alford 248; Lenski 446). Since the case of Reuben is a significant and obvious example of

one who lost his birthright through fornication, it is much more likely that the writer of Hebrews had him in mind.

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Footnote from the Recovery Version of the Bible

"Therefore receiving an unshakable **kingdom**, let us have grace, through which we may serve God well-pleasingly with piety and fear" (Heb. 12:28).

kingdom: The kingdom in its reality, or the reality of the kingdom, is an exercise and a discipline to us (Matt. 5:3, 10, 20; 7:21) in the church today, whereas the kingdom in its manifestation, or the manifestation of the kingdom, will be a reward and an enjoyment to us (Matt. 16:27; 25:21, 23) in the millennial kingdom in the coming age. If we take the Spirit's exercise and God's discipline in the reality of the kingdom today, we will receive the Lord's reward and enter into the enjoyment of the coming Sabbath rest (4:9) in the manifestation of the kingdom in the coming age; otherwise, we will miss the coming kingdom, we will not be rewarded with the manifestation of the kingdom at the Lord's coming back, we will have no right to enter into the glory of the kingdom to participate in Christ's reign in the millennial kingdom, and we will lose our birthright and therefore will be unable to inherit the earth in the coming age, to be the royal priests serving God and Christ in His manifested glory, and to be Christ's co-kings ruling all the nations with His divine authority (Rev. 20:4, 6). To miss the coming kingdom and to forfeit our birthright does not mean that we will perish. It means that we will lose the reward but not our salvation... We will suffer loss but still will be saved, yet so as through fire (1 Cor. 3:14-15). This is the basic concept on which all five warnings in this book are given and with which they are all pervaded. All the negative points of these warnings are related to the suffering of the loss of the reward in the coming kingdom, whereas all the positive points are related to the reward and enjoyment of the kingdom.