

## THE GLORY OF THE CHRISTIAN SONSHIP.

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“Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God : therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not.

“Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be : but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him ; for we shall see him as he is.”—1 JOHN iii. 1-2.

**W**E cannot understand this passage unless we regard it as dedicated to one theme : the dignity, blessedness and glory of our filial relation to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. If that is regarded as its one subject, it immediately claims to be the last and the highest and the most comprehensive exhibition of Christian sonship in the New Testament. On all topics connected with the manifestation of the Son of God this epistle gives the last word ; finishing what had been left incomplete, and setting the touch of perfection on doctrines that had been waiting for that touch. It is needless to illustrate this by many examples. Our own illustration is quite enough for us, and it is, as at all points, full and satisfactory. Other teachers in the New Testament had dwelt on our new relation to God in Christ as His children : the supreme and peculiar

privilege of the new covenant. From the hour at the commencement when our Saviour declared generally "Ye must be born from above," and then more specifically, "That which is born of the Spirit is spirit," and that other later hour when He said, with a still more special meaning, "Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, ye have no life in you," the new life of our regeneration had been more or less fully exhibited. But, supposing all said on the subject that had been said by the Lord and His apostles, there remains in this paragraph the consummation and crown of all. Let us, in dependence on the Divine Spirit, mark how it is so.

I.

The first token of the glory of our sonship is found in the very terms with which the subject is here introduced. St. John had throughout the epistle implied this high prerogative, but had not expressly referred to it. At the beginning of this chapter he evidently pauses in order to bring it in with deep solemnity. Having closed the preceding paragraph with the words "He that doeth righteousness is born of Him," this gives him the fit opportunity; and nothing in his writings is more emphatic than the tribute he pays. "Behold!" is a new kind of address. "What manner of love the Father hath bestowed on us!" is also a new style of phrase. We are carried back to the beginning of the gospel, where John the Baptist twice greets the Lamb of God with the solemn word, "Behold!" and where the great demonstration of God's love to mankind is

made to be the gift of His Son : " So God loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son." It is not necessary to suppose that there was in the evangelist's mind any purposed reference to those earlier words. But certainly we may take occasion from the parallel to shew what was undoubtedly his meaning ; that our sonship places us in a special relation to the Son, and therefore is the impressive token of Divine favour to us.

Whosoever reads carefully the New Testament will be fully aware how closely our dignity as sons is bound up with the dignity of the Eternal Son. His manifestation in the flesh is the glory of the new covenant ; and our union with His Sonship is our reflection of that glory. By becoming man He stamped a certain honour upon our very nature ; and the most degraded of mankind is born to the prerogative of sharing the nature which the Son of God has shared. But we cannot fail to see that there is something over and above this. To be partakers of His Sonship, as He is the Incarnate Son, is the particular privilege of those who are His, who are in Him, who have received Him, and who are thereby taken out of the world. How this is we must see hereafter. Meanwhile, it is of great importance to remember here at the beginning that the glory of sonship is not the common glory of the race. It is the prerogative of those " to whom it is given of the Father," and those are they who " are given by the Father to the Son." Many have read the text with different eyes, and found in it a very different meaning. " Behold, what manner of love the Father hath given to the race in giving His Son, that the

lost family of Adam should be called again His children." That has a cheerful sound for mankind ; but it is not the genuine and natural music of the gospel. "To as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, to as many as believed on His name"; and let that be compared with our own passage: "Therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew Him not."

We must, therefore, be careful to lay the right stress on the words, "What manner of love!" and "The Father hath bestowed on us." The love of the universal Father is very great; but it has not in it this "manner of love." There need be no controversy on the Fatherhood of God. The prodigal sons are sons still, and their compassionate God is still a Father; but when they are reinstated in their forfeited relation they are sons in a much higher sense. That relation is the highest to which God can raise them; the highest to which man's nature can be raised. As the gift of the Son in the incarnation and on the cross is the glory of our redemption as a race, so our being made sons is the essence of the benefit. As the ages waited for the manifestation of the Son, so they waited for the manifestation of our adoption in Him. Our being justified freely and set at liberty from the sentence of the law is a great blessing; our being placed on the altar and consecrated to God is also a great blessing; our being regenerated and joined in a new life to the Son is also a great blessing. But the greatest of these blessings is the sonship; in fact, those others belong to this. We are "called sons," and as such are made pure and righteous as our Lord is.

## II.

What has been already said will be made more plain if we consider our theme in the light of the two terms here used to indicate our sonship; "that we should be called," and that "we are" the children of God. In our modern theological language these would be distinguished as our adoption and our regeneration; in fact, that is the distinction which St. Paul gives us. He speaks of our being adopted into a new relation of sons, and invested with the privileges of that relation; but he always means that those who are adopted as sons are also really children. However, we are not dwelling on St. Paul's phrases. St. John gives us our text; and it has been already indicated that his doctrine has brought the whole subject into its perfect state. It will be enough for us to show how, by the terms our apostle uses, he exhibits the glory of our sonship.

When St. John says, "How great love has been conferred on us that we should be called children of God," it may at a first glance seem as if he employs a very ordinary expression. Some would tell us that he uses the word "called" simply in the Hebrew style, meaning only "that we should be" children of God. But then you see that he presently obviates that misconception by significantly adding, "Now are we the sons of God;" and, indeed, according to another reading here, the antithesis is still more marked; "that we should be called children of God, and such we are." There can be no

doubt that the word signifies very much what was signified by that sentence in the Gospel, "To them gave He power or authority or prerogative to become children of God." We need not ask curiously who it is that calls us children ; suffice that it expresses generally the grandeur of our relation. We are not only creatures of God, and, therefore, in a certain sense His offspring, not only sons of God as angels are, not only His children as the redeemed descendants of Adam, but children in union with the Supreme, Only-begotten, and Eternal Son. There lies the sublime dignity of our elevation ; that we are called up to the side of the one everblessed Son, and permitted to hear ourselves called what He was called, "The Beloved Son." Though we are not using St. Paul's term "adoption," it may furnish an illustration of St. John's meaning. That term indicates "the being placed in the relation of a son," not in the relation of a child, which is a different word. Our Lord's supreme name of dignity is always that of "the Son." Though he was in early years "the Holy Child," that name passed away, and He remained "the Son." We are "called children," it is true ; but our dignity is that we are the many sons of whom Jesus is the Elder Brother, and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ the common Father. That is, and will be for ever, our honour that we are invested with all the prerogatives of sonship in the unity of the Eternal Son. Those prerogatives are manifold, and we have them all in fellowship with Him. He calls God His Father ; so do we. He is the Heir ; we are joint-heirs with Him. He is free as the Son over His own house ; we are also

made free in Him from every kind of bondage, and the honour and dignity of the Father's house are ours.

But there is much more than this. Whether the abrupt and vigorous addition, "as we are," is to be received or not, the idea of it is in the whole passage. Those who are adopted, and have authority to call themselves sons, are really regenerate children. There is the advantage of St. John over St. Paul, if such words may be used: St. John's "called children" almost means "are children," while St. Paul's "adoption of sons" would mean, according to human analogy, placed among the sons without being actually such. In that sense, strictly speaking, there is no adoption. The Father reckons no children who are not born of Him through the Spirit forming the Son in them. Now this phrase, "forming the Son in them," is St. Paul's; and we may use it to illustrate St. John's teaching concerning the dignity of the regenerate life. He always presents it to us as being the inward possession of the Son. "He that hath the Son hath the life; and he that hath not the Son hath not the life." Our subject is the glory of our sonship; and there it is. By faith we understand that the new life is a new begetting, a new quickening, a new birth; our true life being not only hid with Christ in God, but being Christ Himself hid in us. We need to be reminded of this. Many current definitions of regeneration entirely forget it. There are some which swallow it up entirely in adoption: their abettors boldly declaring that Christ has given the whole race a new life of adoption into the divine family, and that no indi-

vidual new birth is necessary. Others lay much stress on the moral change wrought in the nature, whereby evil becomes hateful and goodness desirable: a view that is undeniably sound so far as it goes; but is in great danger of vitally falling short. Our new life is not, cannot be, the mere improvement of our old life. There must be an altogether new beginning. And it is the glory of St. John's final teaching that it has brought out the glory of the sonship itself: making it the birth of the Son of God within us. This is the third, which is the greatest of three, each being true. The three are contained in a sentence of St. Paul: "The law of the Spirit of Life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death." Regeneration is a new moral law governing the life: "the law of the Spirit." It is the Holy Ghost as "the Spirit of life in Jesus." But the emphasis is on the third, "in Christ Jesus," which is always to be inverted if you would find the meaning, "Christ in us." Be sure that you remember this. Fix your mind attentively on this great thought. Ponder it until you feel all its grandeur; but do not rest there. Bring more than your views to be changed. Bring your life itself to be filled up and replenished and made perfect. Ask the Son of God to enter and bring with Him the perfection and glory of life, that you may have what the Scripture itself calls "life indeed."

### III.

The next mark of the glory of our sonship follows directly from the former. If our new life is really



the life of the Son within us, then its development and perfection must be really His ; at any rate, He must be in all things the standard of it. The bearing of the two is obvious. The life of the Son of God within us must grow up into the fulness of the stature of the life of the Son of God without us. But it is plain that St. John is not thinking of a blessed necessity of natural or supernatural development: his idea is that we have a hope in us of being like our Lord, and in that hope strive to be like Him here that we may be found like Him hereafter. "We know," he says, "that we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is." Only the pure in heart can see God ; that is Christ, or God in Christ ; if, therefore, we are to see Him as He is in that other world, we must become pure in heart as He is pure in this world ; we must be righteous as He is righteous, if we would not be ashamed before Him at His coming. Leaving the future for the future, let us consider now the glory of sonship that it aims at the Son's likeness.

First, see this in the negative freedom from the stain and impurity of all sin. In the early part of the epistle it is said that if we "WALK in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanseth us from all sin." Now we are said, strange to say, in our present passage, to have this as our business to "Purify ourselves even as He is pure." These two we must reconcile by remembering that if we use the divine provision for cleansing we cleanse ourselves, and also that it is a personal matter, as all sonship is : "He that hath this hope in him"—that is, the

hope of being like Him—"purifieth himself," with this standard before him, the Son of God "in Whom is no sin," and Who "was manifested to take away our sins," Whose blood can take away the stain and guilt, and Whose Spirit can take away the very sin itself. "As He is pure" is the standard: it does not say whether or not it is or may be perfectly reached; and, leaving that alone for the present, we may be content with the grandeur of the filial life which aims to reproduce that faultless image. Our pattern, the Son of God Incarnate, is pure, holy, sanctified: we, as the sons of God, must become the same. Observe that He is not set before us as the pattern of the method of becoming pure and undefiled. He does not say "Follow Me in the pursuit of purity;" nor do the apostles tell us to reach after what the Great Exemplar reached. He came into a pure nature, and kept it pure: no stain could ever dim its lustre of holiness. The meaning, therefore, is that the Christian, whose hope is to be like Him, for ever makes it his ceaseless study to use all the means ordained for the removal from his soul of every stain of sin. It is the glory of our sonship that it must be, and shall be, as free from impurity as the Holy One Himself is. Whether here or hereafter, that is the standard, and no other than that.

But, secondly, it must be noted that purity is only a negative thing: freedom from all stain. Now, deliverance from sin is also deliverance from disobedience to law; and the apostle goes on to show that a son of God has the high prerogative of copying the Incarnate Son in His actual, positive, practical righteousness, and thus becoming "righteous,

even as He is righteous." Here again, however, we are not exhorted to acquire righteousness as He acquired it ; but to become righteous, "even as He is righteous." The Eternal Son Incarnate did accomplish all righteousness, and kept His Father's commandment ; but His obedience was for us, and not for Himself, and He never acquired righteousness as one who had been unrighteous. The meaning therefore is that the regenerate child of God must not only be sanctified from sin, but also made righteous and obedient up to the standard of that perfect conformity with divine law which is seen in the righteous Servant of God. And it is carefully to be observed that St. John is deeply solicitous to impress this : "Let no man deceive you," he says, as if there would be attempts to teach the children of God that they had nothing more to do with law ; or that in some sense holiness was the conclusion of the whole matter of religion : "He that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as He is righteous." He who fixes his eye on the purity of the Son must fix his eye also on His righteousness ; and be righteous, "even as He is righteous."

If you put the two together and look at the picture they present, and then regard that picture as in its framework and setting, you will perceive that this most triumphant testimony to the glory of sonship aims at a very high mark indeed. Here we see the Form of the Son of God become the Son of man, with His two attributes of holiness and righteousness : the perfect image of excellence as it is freedom from sin and discharge of all duty. And it is said to be the dignity and honour

of our sonship that every child of God makes Him the standard: "As He is pure," "As He is righteous." There is no need to occupy our thoughts with the question whether or not there may be a perfect attainment of this image in the present life. Let me simply point out the setting and frame of the text. "The Son of God was manifested to take away our sins;" not simply to atone for them, but to remove them; as is plain from what follows: "In Him is no sin." Now pass suddenly from that to the next chapter: "Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is we are in the world." The glory of our sonship shines through all this most gloriously. We cannot but be reminded of St. Paul's word that we were "predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son": a solitary sentence, which shows that our heavenly Father, when He gave His Son for us, determined that every one of the multitudes saved through His mediation should be exactly a counterpart and similitude of Him. Now there is no limitation. It is one great process going on always: "We are changed into the same image from glory to glory." But the image of sinlessness must be stamped upon us here, in order that the image of glorious perfection may be stamped upon our triple nature, body and soul and spirit, hereafter. Let us not diminish the glory of our Christian sonship in the Son.

#### IV.

After all this you will not wonder at another most impressive view of the sublimity of our filial charac-

ter which glides in as it were by the way, and is in danger of being lost sight of: the utter inability of the world to understand the character of the children of God. This sentence, however, is far from doing full justice to the wonderful words, especially when they are taken as a whole, "even as it knew Him not" being included. The more you ponder it the more clearly will you see that there is nothing which can surpass this note of dignity. Alas! there is no note of our dignity that becomes at the same time a more condemning test than this.

When the Saviour was departing He told His disciples that they would be persecuted by those who should think that in killing them they were offering acceptable sacrifice to God; so little would the world understand God or His Son or His people. St. John afterwards refers to the persecution: "Marvel not if the world hate you." But here he seems to throw out the passing suggestion, as if it were a meditative parenthesis. "Ye are sons of God: a glory and dignity quite beyond the world's apprehension, which never understood the Son Himself when He was here." Thus the glory of which we have been speaking is of a kind altogether different from anything to which the world assigns that term, or which the world counts glorious. But then that very fact constitutes the true value of the Christian dignity. The glory of our sonship is not worldly glory; but it is all the more glorious on that account. Think, brethren, what it means to be thus set on a par with the Incarnate Son of God. Think of Him as living and moving and having His being on earth and among men: in the supreme dignity of His

Divine holiness, and yet by all men as such, and, until illuminated by the Spirit, either despised or condemned or unknown. Can you imagine any dignity beyond His? And would you not count it of all honour the most honourable to share His lot, His credit, and His repute? Now St. John says that the sons of God are those who are like Christ, beyond the world's capacity of understanding or estimating aright. Their spirit and temper and life and action and hope are all above and out of the world's reach. St. John does not say that this is one element of the glory of Christian sonship. But we may so interpret his thought; and none can reverently read the whole paragraph, with all that has been said in it about the image of the Son, without feeling that St. John meant no less, and that, whatever he said, all this was in his mind.

Here, however, we must pause to make the sad application already hinted at. Of how very few may it be said that they are incomprehensible to the world: objects of the same kind of wondering awe that the Lord Jesus excited among the people who watched His unworldly life. Incomprehensible too many Christians are, inasmuch as their conduct and their professions are so glaringly discordant. The wonder among men is not that these Christians fail to reach the high standard; but that they do not, living as they do, give it up altogether. The fact is that they who excite that kind of wonder among men of the world are not verily and effectually sons of God: the mark of the children here given is inalienable. The ways of the Lord's true brethren are not so like the world's that no difference is ever seen.

On the other hand, the men of the world must not triumph over the children of God too readily. There is often something behind and below the seeming inconsistency of religious professors which ought to be taken into account; but the critic knows nothing of it. The hidden life of many a child of God would, if known, save him from too severe comment. But, after all, this note of sonship dignity is one that should set us all on most solemn self-examination and earnest revision of our life.

## V.

The last element in the grandeur of our sonship, it hardly need be said, carries us not beyond the world's estimate but beyond the world itself. It might indeed appear that the apostle has nothing to say on the future estate, and also that he desires us to know nothing and to make no inquiry. "What we shall be doth not appear." That, however, says very much, especially as following the declaration that we shall be like our Lord, the Only-begotten and Eternal Son.

Our likeness to Him in the present life has been spoken of. We were "predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son:" St. Paul says, having used the same word "predestined" to express our sonship generally. The only predestination known to the New Testament is this: that we should be perfectly like the Son of God. Now there is no doubt that this conformity is general, and applicable to both worlds: the present conformity being the condition of the future. "We shall be like Him,

because we shall see Him as He is :” that does not give us the reason why we shall be like Him, but the proof that we must have become like Him already. “Blessed are the pure in heart ; for they shall see God :” not because they see God are they pure in heart, but being pure in heart they see God. So they who are pure as He is pure will see Christ as He is : they are already like Him, and therefore can behold His glory. But their likeness to Him will embrace body and soul and spirit : they will be conformed to His glorious Person at all points. But observe how it is introduced. We know not what we shall be ! One thing, however, we do know : “ We shall be like Him !” That will be compensation hereafter, and is compensation now for all other ignorance. We know not a thousand things we should like to know : what our manifestation will be, what our relation to each other, what our employments, what the other “ sons of God ” who first bore the name will be to us, and endless other matters we literally know nothing about. But one thing we know ! We shall be each one of us a perfect counterpart of the Incarnate Son : having long borne the image of the earthly Adam, we shall bear for ever the image of the Heavenly. And surely the dignity of sonship cannot go beyond this.

Mark, in conclusion, how beautifully consistent all is here. “ We know not ” is really “ we know ; ” and “ we know ” is really “ we know not. ” Both belong to the glory of our estate of sonship. What we know—that “ we shall be like Him ”—is beyond all language glorious. Nothing can surpass it save the ignorance that knows not all that is contained in that



amazing hope. And let it not be said that this has nothing to do with our sonship in particular: being generally true of our hope of heaven. The simple truth is that our sonship is here altogether and only concerned. It gives a specific character to our future state. Heaven does not exhaust the idea of our destiny: that will be the common abode of all but the lost. Nor does life: for that will be shared by endless multitudes of beings of whom we as yet have little revelation. Nor, indeed, does the vision of God: that will be shared by all the pure intelligences whose companions we shall be. But to be one with the Eternal Son Incarnate in His glory, and to be one with Him as He is one with the Father, and to be sharers of all that the Father will give Him as the reward of His humiliation and sorrow and death: all this is the special characteristic and prerogative and dignity of the sons of God. To borrow St. Paul once more: We were "predestinated unto the adoption of sons!" And we wait for our eternal destiny, as "waiting for the adoption!" To Him, the Eternal Son, incarnate for us, with the Holy Ghost, be glory for ever. Amen.

## THE NIGHT COMETH: THE DAY IS AT HAND.\*

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“The night cometh, when no man can work.”—JOHN ix. 4.

“The night is far spent, and the day is at hand.”—ROM. xiii. 12.

WE may take it for granted that there is no contradiction here ; though the two texts seem to affirm the exact opposite of each other. The Lord on one side of the day of Pentecost, and the apostles on the other side of it, always agree, though very often their language differs. To harmonize them, and in doing so to mark the reasons of the apparent discrepancy, is one of the most profitable exercises of our devout meditation : let the subject be what it may. The instance we have now before us is one of the most striking in itself and of the most profoundly interesting in its application. Our Saviour tells us that our day is passing and our night is coming ; St. Paul tells us that our night is passing and our day is coming. We must now aim to reconcile these two ; to show how they are one in our personal religion ; and to derive salutary lessons from their unity. This would be of the deepest importance at any time ; but it is specially commended to

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