

Galatians 4:6-7 (Frank Binford Hole) 158543

Foundations of the Faith: Key Teachings, Fatherhood and Sonship

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One serious effect of sin entering the world was that mankind lost the true knowledge of God. Once lost, that highest and best of all knowledge could not be regained by any effort of man's will or intellect. "Canst thou by searching find out God?" (Job 11:7), was the question of Zophar, whilst in a previous chapter Job confessed his inability in that direction, saying, "Lo, He goeth by me, and I see Him not: He passeth on also, but I perceive Him not" (Job 9:11). Since, therefore, we cannot discover God, it is needful that He should make Himself known to us. Revelation becomes a necessity; and the crowning point of that revelation of Himself was touched when in Christ He made Himself known as Father.

1. It is quite clear that sin having entered, mankind did not lose the knowledge of God all at once. For evidence of this {vi 27949-27963}Romans 1:18-32 may be read. The Apostle Paul here draws a lurid picture of the state of the heathen world. Incidentally it reveals three things: That all, even the most degraded heathen peoples, once had the knowledge of God. It speaks of "when they knew God" (v. 21).

2. That not glorifying Him as God they gradually lost all true knowledge of Him. They "became vain in their imaginations," "their foolish heart was darkened," and so they "changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things" (v. 23).

3. That all this process took place because "they did not like to retain God in their knowledge" (v. 28). They were glad to forget Him.

This indictment shows that man's departure from God was in the first instance deliberate. It then became debasing and issued in gross sins that were disgusting.

Just when this darkness reached a climax subsequent to the tower of Babel, God commenced to work in the way of revealing Himself. We do not forget, of course, that some knowledge of Himself remained with chosen individuals all through, both before and after the flood, but with the call of Abram the epoch of revelation began. To him at the start the God of glory appeared, and later "when Abram was ninety years old and nine the Lord appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God; walk before Me and be thou perfect" (Gen. 17:1).

The Almighty power of God came out in the birth of Isaac, which was a humanly impossible thing; When at the announcement of his birth Sarah laughed incredulously, the Lord said, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" (Gen. 18:14). Can a living child be produced from parents as good as dead? Here clearly was involved the supreme test. Can life be brought out of death? It was brought out. Isaac was born. God is the almighty.

Four hundred years later God called the nation that sprang from Isaac out of Egypt. In so doing He revealed Himself in a fresh light. To Moses He said, "I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, by the name of God Almighty, but by my name Jehovah was I not known to them" (Ex. 6:3). Notice the exact wording here. He did not say, "They did not know My name Jehovah." Abraham knew the name Jehovah, for in Genesis we find him using it. He did not, however, know God by that name; that is, the real meaning and import of the name Jehovah never dawned upon him, inasmuch as the circumstances which demanded such a revelation had not arisen. But now the moment had come for it to be unfolded, and the Almighty One stood forth, pledged in connection with Israel, as the I AM the self-existent and therefore unchanging One, always true and faithful to His word. This was abundantly verified in Israel's history. At the end of the Old Testament God said, "I am the LORD [i.e., Jehovah]. I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed" (Mal. 3:6).

The full revelation of God, however, awaited the coming of the Lord Jesus. The utmost that was possible even for so great a man as Moses was to see "the back parts" of Jehovah (Ex. 33:23). Certain of the divine attributes were emphasized such as His mercy and long-suffering; the full-orbed revelation of Himself was only possible in the only-begotten Son who was God and became Man. "No man hath seen God at any time; the only-begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him" (John 1:18).

To Moses it was said, "Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see Me, and live" (Ex. 33:20). Yet it is possible for the Christian to say, "God... hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). Man can much less look upon God in His essence and uncreated glory than he can calmly fix his gaze upon the sun in noonday splendor, yet the believer today can contemplate all that God is as revealed in Jesus. Not one ray is absent, yet they all shine with a peculiar softness which brings them within the range of creatures such as ourselves. Redemption, of course, was necessary in order that we might stand unabashed before such a revelation. But then, He who was the Revealer was also the Redeemer.

Now the great name which characterizes the revelation of God in Christ is father. When near, or in, the Garden of Gethsemane the Lord Jesus lifted up His eyes to heaven and uttered the wonderful prayer recorded in John 17: He said, "Father... I have manifested Thy name unto the men which Thou gavest Me out of the world" (v. 6). We do well then reverently to inquire: What does the name of Father mean?

To begin with, it clearly means relationship. The knowledge of God as Almighty or as Jehovah did not involve this, which doubtless accounts for the way in which unconverted people use, such a term as "Almighty God" in speaking of Him and instinctively avoid "Father." In their case the relationship does not exist.

Further, it means relationship of the closest kind. The correlative terms to Father are “children” and “sons,” and both these are used in the New Testament of Christians. The closeness of the relationship is further emphasized by the fact that it is real and vital and not something merely assumed. We are children of God inasmuch as we are born of God ({vi 26057-26058}John 1:12-13; {vi 30589-30590}1 John 3:9-10).

But the crowning point in the revelation of God as Father lies in the fact that the Lord Jesus Christ Himself as incarnate is the Son. He was ever “the Son” in the unity of the Godhead, but we refer to the place He took in Manhood here (see Luke 1:35; Gal. 4:4). Hence in His advent there was the full setting forth of all that God is as Father in connection with all that He Himself is as Son; and the light in which we know God is as “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph. 1:3).

Much depends upon this, and we urge the reader to ponder it prayerfully until he makes it his own. Our tendency is to connect God’s Fatherhood merely with ourselves, with the result that we lower it until it becomes to our minds just a matter of the fatherly care that gives us food and raiment and the mercies of this life. All these things are indeed ours from our Father’s hand, but the Father’s thoughts and the Father’s love soar infinitely beyond them.

Connect God’s Fatherhood with Christ the Son— who is the worthy Object of His love, and in whom a perfect response is given— and at once you have the key that opens the subject in its fullness. That is the standard! There you see the revelation in its perfection!

We are indeed sons of God with “the Spirit of His Son” in our hearts “crying Abba, Father”; but sonship is only ours as the fruit of God’s Son being revealed and redemption accomplished (see {vi 29136-29138}Gal. 4:4-6). Only thus was that wonderful message made possible. “I ascend unto My Father, and your Father; and to My God, and your God” (John 20:17).

“Sonship,” then, is the word which most fully expresses the nearness and dignity of the place of blessing which is occupied by the saint of today. The word does not actually occur in the Authorized version since the translators preferred to paraphrase it as “the adoption of sons” in Galatians 4:5, and similarly in other places. The whole passage, {vi 29124-29139}Galatians 3:21-4:7, should be read, when the Apostle’s argument will be seen to be that the coming of Christ has inaugurated a new epoch. Before He came the law, with its partial revelation of God, held sway, and believers then were like minors in a family, under a schoolmaster. Having come, and consequently redemption having been accomplished, we are like children come of age, emancipated from the nursery regime and in the full liberty of the Father’s house. “Wherefore,” says the Apostle, “thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ” (Gal. 4:7).

Our place with God is in exact correspondence with the light in which He has been pleased to reveal Himself to us. But both the brightness of the revelation and the standard and pattern of the place, are found in Christ.

No teaching is more popular today than that of “the universal Fatherhood of God.” What truth is there in it?

None at all, as the doctrine is popularly presented.

The Scriptures clearly reveal “the universal Creatorship of God,” and if this were what is meant when God’s Fatherhood is spoken of there would be little to take exception to. But this is not the case, for the theory is that Christ, by assuming Manhood, has lifted up mankind into this relationship with God, or at least that He brought to light the relationship that existed between God and the human race. In any case it means that Christ is but the finest specimen of the race of Adam and that the race as such is acknowledged and owned of God; whereas the truth is that Christ is the second Man and also the last Adam the Head of a new race which is of His order or kind and that those of His race are in relationship with God, and no others.

God is the “Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph. 1:3) and consequently the Father of those who are in Him. Again John 1:12 tells us that “as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God”; and those who received Him are described, not as everybody, but as those who “believe on His name” and who are “born of God.”

Further, the Jews claimed a kind of “universal Fatherhood of God” in the presence of our Lord, saying, “We have one Father, even God.” His answer was, “If God were your Father...” A big if that! He even went further and said, “Ye are of your father the devil... When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it” ({vi 26423-26426}John 8:41-44), thus branding their true origin upon them and the doctrine they represented.

Clear, cutting language this! The universal-Fatherhood-of-God idea is, in fact, a lie fathered by Satan.

What, then, about the universal brotherhood of men?

This idea springs out of the one we have just dealt with, and is a corollary to it. It also has some truth in a creatorial sense inasmuch as God has “made of one blood all nations of men” (Acts 17:20). It is not true in any other sense. The Scriptures draw the most distinct line imaginable between the believer and the man of the world. In his first epistle, 1 John 3 and 1 John 4, the Apostle John has much to say to the Christian as to his brother. And who is the brother in question? Any other child of Adam? No, any other child of God; anyone who is “born of God.” John, indeed, wields his pen in the clear and cutting style of his great Master and speaks of “the children of the devil” in contrast to “the children of God” (1 John 3:10).

A universal cousinship, in very attenuated degree, exists amongst men. The only true Christian brotherhood is that which exists amongst Christians as born of God.

We are sometimes said to be the adopted children of God. Is this correct?

It is, thank God, not correct. If we were just adopted into God’s family there would lie no more vital connection between God and ourselves than exists between the director and some homeless child when the latter is happily sheltered in the benevolent institutions founded by the late Dr. Barnardo. The believer is born of God and thus there is a most vital connection.

The believer is not only a child of God by being born of God, but is also a son. This speaks of position and dignity, and therefore in Romans 8:23 we are said to be “waiting for the adoption [literally— sonship], to wit, the redemption of our body,” inasmuch as our full entrance upon the dignity which that glorious position entails is yet future, and will take place when our bodies are redeemed at the coming of the Lord.

The word “adoption” occurs in our English Bible, but in every case it is a translation of the Greek word meaning “sonship” or “placing as a son.”

Also our excellent Authorized Version does not clearly distinguish between the two terms “son” and “child.” A good concordance will show that in John’s writings he always speaks of us as children of God and not sons; and he it is who so frequently alludes to the fact that we are born of God; whilst in Galatians we are always spoken of as “sons.”

If God was not fully revealed until Christ came, would that not involve a certain inferiority in Old Testament believers?

In one way it would. {vi 29124-29139}Galatians 3:21-4:7, as we have already remarked, contrasts the position of the Old Testament believer with the New Testament saint. The former—a child under age, “shut up” with no real liberty or access to the Father, but kept under the law as a schoolmaster, and this condition persisted “unto Christ”; that is, till Christ came and accomplished redemption. The latter—a son of full age in the liberty of the Father’s home.

It did not, however, mean any inferiority in these Old Testament saints as to what one may call their spiritual caliber. The fact that they could know but a little of God in their day makes the clearness and strength of their faith in what they did know only the more remarkable. They had great faith in a partial revelation; we, alas! often have little faith in a full revelation.

Is the revelation of God in Christ something which has taken place once for all?

It is. The revelation is complete and absolute. The Lord Jesus could say, “He that hath seen Me, hath seen the Father” (John 14:9). He is “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15). God spoke in time past by the prophets, but now He has spoken to us, not by or through anyone, but “in His Son” (Heb. 1:2, R.V.) He Himself without intermediary spoke to us in that character, for the Son was and is God equally with the Father. Hence there is nothing more to be said. God is fully “in the light” (1 John 1:7) and finality is reached.

This does not mean that there was no further unfolding of God’s mind and purpose subsequent to the Lord’s own ministry, for He Himself promised that there should be when the Holy Ghost was come (see {vi 26739-26742}John 16:12-15); and this promised ministry was carried out through the apostles and preserved for us in the epistles.

Nor does it mean that the Lord Himself revealed everything as to the Father at once. The way He spoke of the Father to His disciples just before leaving them as recorded in {vi 126632-126728}John 13-16, and in His prayer of John 17, is manifestly far in advance of anything He said in such a discourse as that recorded in {vi 123236-123318}Matthew 5-7. In the Sermon on the Mount it was the making known of the Father in heaven who has a loving interest in His people on earth, whereas in John it is the Father in His own love and purposes that is presented to us and the lifting of His disciples’ hearts into communion with the Father in His own circumstances. In the Sermon on the Mount the Father stoops to our humble little cottage on earth. In the sermon in the upper chamber we are lifted to the Father’s palace above.

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