

The Spirit of Adoption 2 Hos 11:1-11; Eph 1:3-10; Gal 4:1-7

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“What the cross cleanses the Spirit fills.” (Roy Hession) This sermon is about the taking away of judgement in the cross, next week will focus on the power of the Spirit in adoption.

Background

While I am generally hesitant about going outside of scripture to understand its metaphors, I think this can helpfully be done in the case of “adoption”. Whilst adoption was not practiced *within* the Old Testament, Paul’s adoption language is found in his letters to churches under Roman law (Rom 8:15, 23; 9:4; Gal 4:5; Eph 1:5). In Roman law the adoption of a son was usually delayed to teenage or older years, when the character of the adoptee had been established. An adopted son was freely chosen, desired and could never disowned. All prior debts were erased, and new rights taken on. Unlike in modern society inheritance began with adoption, not the death of the father, the new son was a joint-sharer in all the father’s possessions from the beginning. This was an unforgettable honour. The Roman understanding of adoption is of an overwhelmingly positive transaction, however true this may be at a human level, the true glories of adoption come together only in Jesus. This is true because only the Son of God radically revolutionises our understanding of divine judgement. I need to spend some time on as the usual human apprehension of the judgement of God because confused notions of punishment always distort our understanding of God as Father.

Judgement: Old Covenant

The glory of Israel was to be adopted by God (Rom 9:4), but her limitless shame came in descending to the point where her kings, officials, priests and prophets were saying “to a rock, ‘You are my father”” (Jer 2:11, 27). Hosea reminds Israel they were to revel in the reality that they were “loved and called...my son” by a God who had drawn them “with cords of kindness with the bonds of love” radiating from “a heart” of “compassion warm and tender” (Hos 11:1, 4, 8). The wonders of knowing the Lord as such a delightful Father are however rare under the old covenant. Later in the same passage in Hosea we hear a testimony by God which explains why there is so much confusion about his character. “I will *not* execute my burning anger; I will *not* again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and *not a man*, the Holy One in your midst, and I will *not* come in wrath.” (11:9). Deep down in our limitless egocentricity we think God is like us (Ps 50:21)! When we believe our anger is justified because the guilt of an offending part is clear and their condemnation just, we will inevitably carry out judgement speedily (Ecc 8:11). The Lord is totally unlike this. Even in the Old Testament the highest point of divine joy is to say, “I have no wrath.” (Isa 27:4). God’s holiness means his judgment is altogether *unlike* that of any human authority. In Isaiah he describes his own judgement as a “strange” and “alien” work (Isa 28:21). Rabbi Abraham Heschel isn’t far off the mark when he says, “To man, the anger of God incites the fear of pain, to God, the anger is pain.” More profoundly are the words of P.T. Forsyth, ‘the Father

suffered in His Son even more than the Son did'. A revelation of these truths brings a revelation of the true Fatherhood of God. This isn't as simple as it sounds.

Judgement: Jesus

I once sent an email to a pastor who in a sermon described John the Baptist as "harsh and legalistic". I believe his comments were a projection of his own painful experiences of being disciplined in childhood. After all, in the Spirit-inspired words of Scripture, John was sent "to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, 78 because of the *tender mercy* of our God" (Luke 1:77-78). John is a preacher of "repentance" in the context, as Luke 3 puts it, of being a preacher of "the *good news*" (Luke 3:3, 18). The painful discipline of God to which we are all subject is an expression of his tender-hearted loving Fatherhood, not a reminder of any human father/mother who might have failed to discipline us in love (cf. Heb 12:5-11). Human insensitivity regarding the true character of God as Father astonished even Jesus.

As late as the threshold of the cross, his intimate disciples of still didn't get the Father-thing! "Have I been with you *all this time*, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father?'" (John 14:9). If a noted bishop-theologian could say, "God is Christlike and in him is no un-Christlikeness at all". (A. M. Ramsay), we must also say, "The Father is Son-like, and in him is no un-Son-likeness at all." This relates directly to our dreadful fear of judgement (1 John 4:18).

Jesus declared, "For the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, 23 that all may honour the Son, just as they honour the Father.... he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man." (John 5:22-23, 27). Christ's words mean we cannot separate being judged by God as Father from being judged by Jesus. Equality in judging has been shared by the Father with Christ *as a human being* (cf. John 17:2). The Father judges in and through the Son as his perfect image (Col 1:15-16 cf. John 8:16). That Jesus is the agent of God's judgement at the Last Judgment is a prominent theme in the New Testament (Matt 25:31-32; John 5:27; Acts 10:42; 17:31; Phil 2:10; 2 Tim 4:1; Rev 6:16) and a source of confidence and exhilaration (Jude 24). The profound reality that someone like us, a fellow human, will be our Judge at the End cannot be separate from how God judges in the present, or from what happened at the cross.

One of my old mentors used to say, "*the punishment for sin is sin*" (Bingham, citing Augustine cf. Rev 22:11, 15). He based this conviction on Paul's exposition of God's wrath in Romans 1:18-32, where we are told repeatedly that "God gave them (idolatrous humanity) up to" ever increasing depravity (vv.24, 26, 28). This key expression, "gave up" is used later in Romans about how the Father handled Jesus, "He who did not spare his own Son but *gave him up* for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Rom 8:32). The giving over of Jesus to the fulness of divine wrath at the cross (Rom 3:25) undoes his judgement against us. Whilst the "children of wrath", as Paul puts it (Eph 2:3), have always been blind, passive and ignorant about their lost state, with eyes fully open Jesus agrees with the will of God that wrath fall on him. His prayer in Gethsemane, "Abba, Father, all things

are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.” (Mark 14:36) is the deepest possible cooperation of the will of man with the will of God revealed as a limitlessly intimate Father. John MacLeod Campbell correctly says, “This confession . . . must have been a perfect Amen in humanity to the judgment of God on the sin of man.” This union of wills grounded in eternity (1 Pet 1:20; Rev 13:8) extends through the Passion of Jesus forever assuring us of salvation and restoration. In perfecting his union with the Father through obedient suffering (Heb 2:10; 5:9) Jesus became the Judge slain and raised (Rev 5:6). At the limits of intelligibility, we must say that in Christ God (the Son) is the Judge judging himself in our place.

As a decision made by Father, Son and Spirit (John 10:17-18; Heb 9:14) the death of Jesus releases the presence and power of the Last Judgement. “*Now* is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. 32 And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” 33 He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die.” (John 12:31-33). Calvin was right to say that the cross was the real “descent into hell”. “How was the humanity Jesus able to commit to such agonies?” Only through his Spirit-empowered relationship with the Father.

The Son knows he is absolutely loved. “For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. 18 No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.” (John 10:17-18 cf. John 3:35). Knowing such love, Jesus’ heart was filled with faith that he could bring honour to God as a Father in a way that would abolish all the dishonour of humanity’s Fall into lost glory (Heb 12:2). From Adam to the prodigal son shame belongs to sons who dishonours their F/fathers (Gen 2:25>3:8-9; Prov 19:26; 28:7; Luke 15:19, 21), but joy is a sign that a F/father has been honoured. The joy enjoyed by Jesus in heaven has forever cast out all that would shame God’s children (Heb 12:2). What remains for us in Christ is God’s “good pleasure” as our Father (Luke 12:32; Gal 1:15-16; Eph 1:5, 9; Phil 2:13).

Conclusion

The revelation of God in Christ testifies to a loving Father who can be grieved but is never wrathful or punishing towards his children (Matt 3:17; Eph 1:6; 5:1; 1 John 3:2). To borrow some language from C.S. Lewis, the Father is totally good, even if according to our measure of thinking he is not “safe”. For these truths to be prophetic, i.e. for them to witness to Jesus (Rev 19:10), I need to set them in the context of the current coronavirus crisis. The difference between those who have had a revelation of the goodness of fatherly discipline and those whose “guts” are impacted by the wrath of God will come to the surface more and more. (This is the story line of the book of Revelation.) By grace, the COVID 19 crisis can be a tremendous gift to the people of God. A gift whereby in the midst of turmoil, panic and confusion we can look to Jesus, who is the heart of the Father once for all unsurpassably revealed to the world (John 1:18). Anyone who by faith looks only to Jesus will be supernaturally and wonderfully stilled. This is the true state of the sons God. Praise the Lord.

