

NOTES ON THE BOOK OF GENESIS

by

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“After these things, the word of the Lord came unto Abram in a vision, saying, Fear not, Abram. I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward.”

The Lord would not suffer his servant to be a loser, by rejecting the offers of this world. It was infinitely better for Abraham to find himself hidden behind the Lord’s shield than to take refuge beneath the patronage of the king of Sodom; and to be anticipating his **“exceeding great reward,”** than to accept **“the goods”** of Sodom.

The position into which Abraham is put in the opening verse of our chapter, is beautifully expressive of the position into which every soul is introduced by the faith of Christ.

- The Lord was his **“shield,”** that he might rest in him;
- The Lord was his **“reward,”** that he might wait for him.

So with the believer now; he finds his present rest, his present peace, his present security, all in Christ. No dart of the enemy can possibly penetrate the shield which covers the weakest believer in Jesus.

And then as to the future, Christ fills it. Precious pardon! Precious hope! A portion which can never be exhausted; a hope which will never make ashamed. Both are infallibly secured by the counsels of God, and the accomplished atonement of Christ. The present enjoyment thereof is by the ministry of the Holy Ghost who dwells in us.

This being the case, it is manifest that if the believer is pursuing a worldly career, or indulging in worldly or carnal desires, he cannot be enjoying either the **“shield”** or the **“reward.”** If the Holy Ghost is grieved, he will not minister the enjoyment of that which is our proper portion, our proper hope.

Hence in the section of Abraham’s history now before us, we see that when he had returned from the slaughter of the kings and rejected the offer of the king of Sodom, the Lord rose before his soul in the double character, as his **“shield and his exceeding great reward.”**

Let the heart ponder this, for it contains a volume of deeply practical truth.

We shall now examine the remainder of the chapter.

In it we have unfolded to us the two great principles of sonship and heirship.

“And Abram said, Lord God what wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless, and the steward of my house is this Eliezer of Damascus? And Abram said, Behold, thou hast given to me no seed: and lo, one born in my house is mine heir.”

Abraham desired a son, for he knew upon divine authority that his **“seed”** should inherit the land. (Chapter 13:15). Sonship and heirship are inseparably connected in the thoughts of God.

“He that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir.”

Sonship is the proper basis of everything; and moreover it is the result of God’s sovereign counsel and operation, as we read in James, **“of his own will begat he us.”**

Finally, it is founded upon God’s eternal principle of resurrection.

How else could it be? Abraham’s body was **“dead;”** wherefore, in his case, as in every other, sonship must be in the power of resurrection.

Nature is dead, and can neither beget nor conceive aught for God.

There lay the inheritance stretching out before the patriarch’s eye, in all its magnificent dimensions; but where was the heir? Abraham’s body and Sarah’s womb alike answered **“death.”** But, the Lord is the God of resurrection, and, therefore, a **“dead body”** was the very thing for him to act upon.

Had nature not been dead, God should have put it to death ere he could fully show himself.

The most suitable theatre for the living God is that from which nature, with all its boasted powers and empty pretensions, has been totally expelled by the sentence of death. Wherefore, God’s word to Abraham was, **“look now toward Heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them; and he said unto him, so shall thy seed be.”**

When the God of resurrection fills the vision there is no limit to the soul’s blessing, for he who can quicken the dead, can do anything.

“And he believed in the Lord, and he counted it unto him for righteousness.”

The imputation of righteousness to Abraham is here founded upon his believing in the Lord as the Quickener of the dead. It is in this character that he reveals himself in a world where death reigns; and when a soul believes in him, as such, it is counted righteous in his sight. This necessarily shuts man out, as regards his co-operation, for what can he do in the midst of a scene of death?

- Can he raise the dead?
- Can he open the gates of the grave?
- Can he deliver himself from the power of death, and walk forth, in life and liberty, beyond the limits of its dreary domain?

Assuredly, not. Well, then, if he cannot do so, he cannot work out righteousness, nor establish himself in the relation of sonship.

“God is not the God of the dead, but of the living,” and, therefore, so long as a man is under the power of death, and under the dominion of sin, he can neither know the position of a son, nor the condition of righteousness. Thus, God alone can bestow the adoption of sons, and he alone can impute righteousness, and both are connected with faith in him as the One who raised up Christ from the dead.

It is in this way that the apostle handles the question of Abraham’s faith, in Romans 4, where he says, **“It was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed unto him; but for us also to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead.”**

Here the God of resurrection is presented **“to us also,”** as the object of faith, and our faith in him as the alone ground of our righteousness. If Abraham had looked up into Heaven’s vault, spangled with innumerable stars, and then looked at **“his own body now dead,”** how could he ever grasp the idea of a seed as numerous as those stars? Impossible. But he did not look at his own body, but at the resurrection power of God; and, inasmuch as that was the power which was to produce the seed, we can easily see that the stars of Heaven and the sand on the sea-shore are but feeble figures indeed; for what natural object could possibly illustrate the effect of that power which can raise the dead?

So also, when a sinner hearkens to the glad tidings of the Gospel, were he to look up to the unsullied light of the divine presence, and then look down into the unexplored depths of his own evil nature, he might well exclaim, How can I ever get thither? How can I ever be fit to dwell in that light? Where is the answer? In himself? Nay, blessed be God, but in that blessed One who traveled from the bosom to the Cross and the grave, and from thence to the throne, thus filling up, in his person and work all the space between those extreme points.

There can be nothing higher than the bosom of God, – the eternal dwelling-place of the Son; and there can be nothing lower than the Cross and the grave; but, amazing truth! I find Christ in both. I find him in the bosom, and I find him in the grave. He went down into death in order that he might leave behind him in the dust thereof the full weight of his people’s sins and iniquities.

Christ in the grave exhibits the end of everything human, – the end of sin, – the full limit of Satan’s power. The grave of Jesus forms the grand terminus of all.

But resurrection takes us beyond this terminus and constitutes the imperishable basis on which God’s glory and man’s blessing repose forever.

The moment the eye of faith rests on a risen Christ, there is a triumphant answer to every question as to sin, judgment, death, and the grave. The One who divinely met all these is alive from the dead, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the majesty in the heavens; and, not only so, but the Spirit of that risen and glorified One, in the believer, constitutes him a son.

He is quickened out of the grave of Christ; as we read, **“and you, being dead in your sins, and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses”** (Colossians 2:13).

Hence, therefore, sonship, being founded all resurrection, stands connected with perfect justification, perfect righteousness, – perfect freedom from everything which could, in any wise, be against us. God could not have us in his presence with sin upon us. He could not suffer a single speck, or stain of sin upon his sons and daughters.

The father could not have the prodigal at his table with the rags of the far country upon him. He could go forth to meet him in those rags. He could fall upon his neck and kiss him, in those rags. It was worthy, and beautifully characteristic of all grace so to do; but then to seat him at his table in the rags would never do.

The grace that brought the father out to the prodigal, reigns through the righteousness which brought the prodigal in to the father.

It would not have been grace had the father waited for the son to deck himself in robes of his own providing; and it would not have been righteous to bring him in in his rags; but both grace and righteousness shone forth in all their respective brightness and beauty when the father went out and fell on the prodigal’s neck; but yet did not give him a seat at the table until he was clad and decked in a manner suited to that elevated and happy position.

God, in Christ, has stooped to the very lowest point of man’s moral condition, that, by stooping he might raise man to the very highest point of blessedness, in fellowship with himself. From all this, it follows, that our sonship, with all its consequent dignities and privileges, is entirely independent of us. We have just as little to do with it as Abraham’s dead body and Sarah’s dead womb had to do with a seed as numerous as the stars which garnish the heavens, or as the sand on the sea-shore. It is all of God.

God the Father drew the plan, God the Son laid the foundation, and God the Holy Ghost raises the superstructure: and on this superstructure appears the inscription,

“THROUGH GRACE, BY FAITH, WITHOUT WORKS OF LAW.”

But, then, our chapter opens another most important subject to our view, namely, heirship.

The question of sonship and righteousness being fully settled, – divinely and unconditionally settled, – the Lord said unto Abraham, **“I am the Lord that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give thee this land to inherit it.”**

Here comes out the great question of heirship, and the peculiar path along which the chosen heirs are to travel ere they reach the promised inheritance.

“If children, then heirs, heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.”

Our way to the kingdom lies through suffering, affliction, and tribulation; but, thank God, we can, by faith, say, **“the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.”**

And further, we know that **“our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh out for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.”**

Finally, **“we glory in tribulation, knowing that tribulation worketh patience, and patience experience, and experience hope.”**

It is a high honor and a real privilege to be allowed to drink of our blessed Master’s cup, and be baptized with his baptism; to travel in blest companionship with him along the road which leads directly to the glorious inheritance. The Heir and the joint- heirs reach that inheritance by the pathway of suffering.

But let it be remembered that the suffering of which the joint-heirs participate has no penal element in it. It is not suffering from the hand of infinite justice, because of sin; all that was fully met on the Cross when the divine Victim bowed his sacred head beneath the stroke.

“Christ also hath once suffered for sins,” and that **“once,”** was on the tree and nowhere else.

He never suffered for sins before, and he never can suffer for sins again. **“Once, in the end of the world, (the end of all flesh,) hath he appeared to put away sin, by the sacrifice of himself.” “Christ was once offered.”**

There are two ways in which to view a suffering Christ: first, as bruised of the Lord; secondly, as rejected of men.

- In the former, he stood alone; in the latter, we have the honor of being associated with him.
- In the former, I say, he stood alone, for who could have stood with him?

He bore the wrath of God alone; he traveled in solitude down into **“the rough valley that had neither been eared nor sown,”** and there he settled forever the question of our sins.

With this we had nothing to do, though to this we are eternally indebted for everything.

- He fought the fight and gained the victory, alone; but he divides the spoils with us.
- He was in solitude **“in the horrible pit and miry clay;”** but directly he planted his foot on the everlasting **“rock”** of resurrection, he associates us with him.

- He uttered the cry alone; he sings the “**new song**” in company. (Psalm 40:2, 3).

Now, the question is, Shall we refuse to suffer from the hand of man with him who suffered from the hand of God for us? That it is, in a certain sense, a question is evident from the Spirit’s constant use of the word “**if**,” in connection with it.

“If so be we suffer with him.” “If we suffer, we shall reign.”

There is no such question as to sonship.

We do not reach the high dignity of sons through suffering, but through the quickening power of the Holy Ghost, founded on the accomplished work of Christ, according to God’s eternal counsel. This can never be touched. We do not reach the family through suffering.

The apostle does not say, “*That ye may be counted worthy of the family of God for which ye also suffer.*” They were in the family already; but they were bound for the kingdom; and their road to that kingdom lay through suffering; and not only so, but the measure of suffering for the kingdom would be according to their devotedness and conformity to the King.

The more like we are to him, the more we shall suffer with him; and the deeper our fellowship with him in the suffering, the deeper will be our fellowship in the glory.

There is a difference between the house of the Father and the kingdom of the Son: in the former, it will be a question of capacity; in the latter, a question of assigned position.

All my children may be round my table, but their enjoyment of my company and conversation will entirely depend on their capacity. One may be seated on my knee, in the full enjoyment of his relationship as a child, yet perfectly unable to comprehend a word I say; another may exhibit uncommon intelligence in conversation, yet not be a whit happier in his relationship than the infant on my knee but when it becomes a question of service for me, or public identification with me, it is evidently quite another thing. This is but a feeble illustration of the idea of capacity in the Father’s house, and assigned position in the kingdom of the Son.

But let it be remembered that our suffering with Christ is not a yoke of bondage, but a matter of privilege; not an iron rule, but a gracious gift; nor constrained servitude, but voluntary devotedness. “**Unto you it is given, in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for his sake**” (Philippians 1:29).

Moreover, there can be little doubt but that the real secret of suffering for Christ is to have the heart’s affections centered in him. The more I love Jesus, the closer I shall walk with him, and the closer I walk with him, the more faithfully I shall imitate him, and the more faithfully I imitate him, the more I shall suffer with him.

Thus it all flows from love to Christ; and then it is a fundamental truth that “**we love him because he first loved us.**”

In this, as in everything else, let us beware of a legal spirit; for it must not be imagined that a man, with the yoke of legality round his neck, is suffering for Christ; alas! it is much to be feared that such an one does not know Christ; does not know the blessedness of sonship; has not yet been established in grace; is rather seeking to reach the family by works of law, than to reach the kingdom by the path of suffering.

On the other hand, let us see that we are not shrinking from our Master's cup and baptism.

Let us not profess to enjoy the benefits which his Cross secures, while we refuse the rejection which that Cross involves. We may rest assured that the road to the kingdom is not enlightened by the sunshine of this world's favor, nor strewn with the roses of its prosperity.

If a Christian is advancing in the world, he has much reason to apprehend that he is not walking in company with Christ. **"If any man serve me, let him follow me; and where I am, there shall also my servant be."**

What was the goal of Christ's earthly career? Was it an elevated, influential position in this world? By no means. What then? He found his place on the Cross, between two condemned malefactors.

"But," it will be said, "God was in this."

True; yet man was in it likewise; and this latter truth is what must inevitably secure our rejection by the world, if only we keep in company with Christ.

The companionship of Christ, which lets me into Heaven, casts me out of earth; and to talk of the former, while I am ignorant of the latter, proves there is something wrong.

If Christ were on earth, now,

- What would his path be?
- Whither would it end?
- Where would it terminate?
- Would we like to walk with him?

Let us answer these inquiries under the edge of the word, and under the eye of the Almighty; and may the Holy Ghost make us faithful to an absent, a rejected, a crucified Master.

The man who walks in the Spirit will be filled with Christ; and, being filled with him, he will not be occupied with suffering, but with him for whom he suffers. If the eye is fixed on Christ, the suffering will be as nothing in comparison with the present joy and future glory. The subject of heirship has led me much further than I intended; but I do not regret it, as it is of considerable importance.

Let us now briefly glance at the deeply significant vision of Abraham as set forth in the closing verses of our chapter.

“And when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and an horror of great darkness fell upon him. And he said unto Abram, Know of a surety, that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years: and also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge: and afterward shall they come out with great substance . . . And it came to pass, that when the Sun went down, and it was dark, behold, a smoking furnace, and a burning lamp that passed between those pieces.”

The entire of Israel’s history is summed up in those two figures, the “**furnace**” and the “**lamp**.”

The former presents to us those periods of their history in which they were brought into suffering and trial; such, for example,

- As the long period of Egyptian bondage,
- Their subjection to the kings of Canaan,
- The Babylonish captivity,
- Their present dispersed and degraded condition.

During all these periods they may be considered as passing through the smoking furnace. (See Deuteronomy 4:20; I Kings 8:51; Isaiah 48:10).

Then, in the burning lamp, we have those points in Israel’s eventful history at which the Lord graciously appeared for their relief, such as

- Their deliverance from Egypt, by the hand of Moses;
- Their deliverance from under the power of the kings of Canaan, by the ministry of the various judges;
- Their return from Babylon, by the decree of Cyrus; and
- Their final deliverance, when Christ shall appear in his glory.

The inheritance must be reached through the furnace; and the darker the smoke of the furnace, the brighter and more cheering will be the lamp of God’s salvation.

Nor is this principle confined merely to the people of God as a whole; it applies just as fully to individuals.

All who have ever reached a position of eminence as servants, have endured the furnace before they enjoyed the lamp.

- “**An horror of great darkness**” passed across the spirit of Abraham.
- Jacob had to endure twenty-one years of sore hardship, in the house of Laban.
- Joseph found his furnace of affliction in the dungeons of Egypt.
- Moses spent forty years in the desert.

Thus it must be with all God’s servants.

They must be “**tried**” first, that, being found “**faithful**,” they may be “**put into the ministry**.”

God’s principle, in reference to those who serve him, is expressed in those words of Paul, “**not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride, he fall into the condemnation of the devil**” (I Timothy 3:6).

It is one thing to be a *child of God*: it is quite another to be a servant of Christ.

I may love my child very much, yet, if I set him to work in my garden, he may do more harm than good. Why? Is it because he is not a dear child? No; but because he is not a practiced servant.

This makes all the difference.

Relationship and office are distinct things.

Not one of the Queen’s children is at present capable of being her prime minister.

It is not that all God’s children have not something to do, something to suffer, something to learn. Undoubtedly they have; yet it ever holds good that *public service* and *private discipline* are intimately connected in the ways of God.

One who comes forward much in public will need that chastened spirit, that matured judgment, that subdued and mortified mind, that broken will, that mellow tone, which are the sure and faithful result of God’s secret discipline; and it will generally be found that those who take a prominent place without more or less of the above moral qualifications, will sooner or later break down.

Lord Jesus, keep thy feeble servants very near unto thine own most blessed person, and in the hollow of thine hand!

~ end of chapter 15 ~

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