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Theme: Sonship

Study 1-Sonship Promised

Talk 1) A Sonship promised. The theme in the Old Testament

Talk 2) A Sonship observed. The theme in the Synoptic Gospels

Talk 3) A Sonship shared. The theme in the Gospel of John

Talk 4) A Sonship experienced. The theme in the letters of Paul

Talk 5) A Sonship lived. The theme in Hebrews, 1 John and Revelation

Why Study Sonship?

In Ephesians 1:3–10 Paul spells out with exuberance the plan of God from the beginning of creation. To bless us in Christ with Sonship through adoption. This is the lens through which we all may see life, the Word and the Father.

All of us will interpret the scriptures with a particular lens. None of us are neutral interpreters. More recently I have been seeking to read the scriptures through the lens of Sonship. Rather than a theological category, I have sought to make Sonship the perspective through which I read the entire scripture. It's been a wonderful revelation.

For good reason the Fatherhood of God has been a treasured foundation of our Christian identity and understanding. Jesus spoke of knowing the the Father and the Son as eternal life (John 17:2). Eternal life is a sharing in Jesus' face-to-face Sonship relationship with his Father. However, it is possible for us to take an 'outside looking in' stance to this beautiful eternal relationship as observers and not as participants. In doing so we miss the subjective experience intended for us by the Father as participants in the divine Fatherhood/Sonship relationship by grace.

This study looks at the theme of Sonship in the scriptures from the perspective of being a son or daughter in the Sonship of Jesus. However, before we get to Jesus we will look at the foundation laid in the Old Testament.

The Promise of Sonship

From creation it has been God's intention to have people made in his image, not as abstract icons but as children in a family. It is deeply filial. Adam is called the 'Son of God' (Luke 3:38). To be a son is to be made in the image and likeness of the Father. Adam referred to his son Seth as made in Adam's image and likeness (Gen. 5:3). The Father's intent was to create those who shared in his freedom, his rule, his holiness—not as mere reflections or images of God but in relationship of love with him as sons and daughters. It was to be a dynamic joyful, creative existence.

God "blessed them" (Gen. 1:28) as other fathers bless their children (e.g. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob). God blessed Adam and Eve, gave them gifts (the plants yielding seed, fruit of the trees) and a vocation to serve the Father (to be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and

subdue it) . They were to participate in God’s Fatherhood as Royal Sons of God (co-regents), carrying on the family vocation to care for the creation.

All this changed when Adam rejected his Sonship by obeying the evil word of Satan (through listening to Eve) rather than than the Word of his Father. Their banishment from the garden was akin to the banishment from the family home. Adam remained a Son but he now experienced corruption of his sonship and the associated fear of judgment. This fear resulted in an experience, not of sonship as he had experienced it, but of orphanhood and survival. This was the ‘image’ to which Seth and every other human being is born from which only a renewed sonship could save them. From the fall, human beings went on an endless search for true Fatherhood—i.e. idol worship.

The covenant given to Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3) was given with the view of the restoration of the Fatherhood /Sonship relationship. The promise was that as Abraham left his small ‘f father’s house with its idols (false fathers) he would come into the new promise of His Heavenly Father as a son of God. Yahweh would resume the responsibility of Father to “Bless him’ as His true Father. God would “make him a great nation”, he would make his name great, so that he would be a Blessing...(i.e. enact His Father’s likeness to the Families of the Earth).

Israel inherited the covenant relationship as Sons of God from Abraham and his sons Isaac and Jacob. Exodus 4:22–23 “You shall say to Pharaoh ; ‘Thus says the Lord “Israel is my First born Son’ and I say to you ‘Let my Son go so he may serve me’ ”. The Father fights for his Son by delivering him from slavery in Egypt (Hos. 11:1 ‘Out of Egypt I called my Son’), He equips his Son as a community in the likeness of his Father through the law of Moses and the worship life of Israel. Yahweh disciplines his Son for offences to the law and rewards Him for obedience (Deut. 28). The Lord restores his Son to himself through the covenant mercy of his Fatherhood and empowers the Son to worship and love the father by His Spirit.

“The LORD your God who goes before you will Himself fight on your behalf, just as He did for you in Egypt before your eyes, and in the wilderness where you saw how the LORD your God carried you, just as a man carries his son, in all the way which you have walked until you came to this place” (Deut. 1:30–31).

It was not of any merit from Israel that they earned the right to Sonship. As with any sonship of human beings with God it is all of grace. Deuteronomy 7:7–8

As the ‘first-born’ Son (Hosea 11:1), Israel belonged to God (The ‘first-born’ of every offspring of Israel belonged to the Lord: Exod. 13:2) and had rights and responsibilities over the families of the earth. The ‘first-born’ has a derived fatherly responsibility over the rest of his family and received a double portion of the inheritance (Deut. 21:17). Israel’s inheritance was the Promised Land which the Father gave into their hand (Joshua 2:24).

However, the meaning of the name of Israel, “Struggles with God” (Gen. 32:28), illustrates the unique difficulty associated with being God’s Son with the fear and independent spirit of an orphan. Israel struggled with God in fulfilling his role, rights and privileges as God’s first-born Son. Despite this, God remains the eternal Father.

Interestingly at the time of the exile the metaphor for the relationship between God and Israel shifts from Sonship to spouse (See Ezekiel 16... ‘You adulterous wife! You prefer strangers to your own husband!’). The image of Sonship is still present in the Prophets and particularly when speaking of restoration of Israel (Jer. 31:9). It seems you might be able to break a covenant of marriage but you cannot stop being a Son.

They will come with weeping; they will pray as I bring them back. I will lead them beside streams of water on a level path where they will not stumble, because I am Israel's father, and Ephraim is my firstborn son (Jer. 31:9).

The promises of a Son concentrated in a person.

As Israel was establishing itself in the Promised Land, the people asked for a king (1 Sam. 8). The sad history of the Israel's first king, Saul, demonstrated that this desire for an earthly king was not going to end well—as Samuel had prophesied). And yet the Royal Sonship of Yahweh remained fundamental to God's plans for Israel. The promises and calling of the Son now focused on a representative individual, the Son of King David. 2 Samuel 7:12–15 spells out God's promise of a Son of David who specifically would be God's son:

When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹³ He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. ¹⁴ I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with a rod wielded by men, with floggings inflicted by human hands. ¹⁵ But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. And your house and your kingdom will be made sure forever before me”.

This Son of David would be God's Son who would have an everlasting Kingdom. The dual divine/human sonship would be a fulfilling of the Father's intention for a first-born Son who would successfully bear the responsibility for his brethren for God. As the Spirit of the Lord ‘rushed’ upon David at his anointing as King, signifying the Lord's choosing (1 Sam. 16:13), so the Spirit would anoint David's Son as King over the Father's Kingdom. Nathan's prophecy to David confirmed the human descendant of David—Solomon—like his father, would sin before the Lord. The true Royal Son of the the Father promised in Nathan's words was to come.

Isaiah speaks of the Messiah, the Royal Son with a particular task as servant:

*Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen one in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him,
and he will bring justice to the nations
(Isa. 42:1–2).*

Isaiah 53 then spells out the extent of that service.

The Psalms further elaborate the promise of the Son to come—e.g. Psalm 2.

The Father's affection for his Son-whether it be an individual king or the whole nation of Israel-is echoed throughout the Old Testament. He is faithful Father. Even amidst the judgments upon his Son, the Father will never waver from his covenant promises to him. (see Jer. 31:20; Hosea 11:1-9).

Son of Man

Jesus as the fulfilment of the promised Son of God in Nathan's prophecy in 2 Samuel 7, preferred self-designation as the Son of Man rather than the Son of God. This is not to deny his self-understanding as God's Son but stresses the dual ministry of this 'first born Son'. Son of Man not only points to his full participation in our humanity (the servant of the Lord), as a real flesh and blood human being, but also points to the prophetic witness to the Messiah, one like the Son of Man in Daniel 7. The Son of Man is the one 'given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed' (Daniel 7:14).

The Old testament lays the foundation of the Father's eternal purpose of Sonship. We are left looking for the Son to come who will fulfill the longing of our hearts for a true father and as faithful sons and daughters. As Israel demonstrated, left to our own resources we seek a father in idolatry and fear the wrath of the true Father. As he woos us back to Himself, He promises a Redeemer who will once and for all establish true sonship in the hearts of men and women by the Spirit.