

The Liberty of Sons

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"Paul, an apostle (not from men, neither through man, but through Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised him from the dead)... I make known to you, brethren, as touching the gospel which was preached by me, that it is not after man. For neither did I receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but through revelation of Jesus Christ... it was the good pleasure of God... to reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the Gentiles; straightway I conferred not with flesh and blood... but they only heard say, He that once persecuted us now preacheth the faith of which he once made havoc" (Gal. 1:1,11-12,15,23).

In this time together so far, the Lord has directed our attention to that little clause - "the faith." The passages basic to our meditation have been those in the two letters of Paul to Timothy, first his exhortation to Timothy to fight the good fight of the faith, and then his own statement as to himself at the end - "I have fought the good fight, I have kept the faith," and it is into something of the meaning and significance of that phrase, "the faith," that we are being led to inquire at this time.

Here it is again in Gal. 1:23 - "He that once persecuted us now preacheth the faith of which he once made havoc." What was it that Saul of Tarsus sought to destroy, of which he set himself to make havoc? Well, he was a Jew, and of the Jewish party in Jerusalem, who summed up their charge and accusation against the Lord Jesus in those words - "He made himself the Son of God" (John 19:7). As we said before, it was not just the coming in of a new and rival religion, but something very much deeper than that, and all that is contained in that designation "the Son of God" (Jesus, the Son of God) is what is meant by "the faith." In a word, it is sonship, and all that sonship means as something that is out from God, and which has come into this world, and which being here, is altogether other than that which is already here: different in nature and different in position, and therefore different in destiny; something in this universe which is unique - sonship.

All the forces of hell, and of this world which lieth in the wicked one, are set against that sonship; in Christ primarily, pre-eminently, and then in those who are begotten of God, sons of God, through faith in Jesus Christ. It is that spiritual reality, that spiritual thing, namely, sonship which is the object and occasion of all hostility that makes it necessary for believers to fight. The contention is not for a creed, not for a system of truth, not for fundamentalism, but for a spiritual position and a spiritual nature, and for all that sonship means from God's standpoint; and for all that that sonship means from Satan's standpoint. As we said before, wherever we come on this matter of "the faith," we find ourselves at once in very close proximity to the element of conflict. Wherever it is mentioned, nearby there is warfare.

May I just repeat one word said in our previous meditation when we were thinking about our Lord's words recorded by Luke - "When the Son of man cometh, shall he find the faith on the earth?" (Luke 28:8). The question does not relate to what is called in general "the Christian faith." There will be plenty of the Christian faith on the earth. The Lord Jesus would have been a bad prophet, and have had very little foresight, had His question meant that in the day of His appearing there would be very little Christianity on the earth, in that general sense. No, His question went much deeper than that, and it is a very real question, if we recognise that sonship is something which has to be brought to fulness in believers, something which relates to Christ coming to fulness in His own and of His members coming into His fulness, unto that ultimate manifestation of the sons in full growth. If that is the meaning of sonship, then indeed there is room for the question - "Shall he find the faith on this earth?"

That could be put in other words. Shall He find on the earth a people who are really going right on in sonship to the fulness of Christ? And I do not think there is any doubt about the answer. He will certainly find a great many Christians who are not going right on, who have stopped short. It will not be so easy to find these who will go right on.

My trouble this morning is lack of time, and I really do not know where to begin and what to say, because the whole New Testament gathers around this very thing.

The New Testament as a whole - of course, I am referring to the Epistles - the New Testament as a whole just comes right down on this question of who is going on, or who is going to come under this terrible arresting effort of the enemy, in the matter of spiritual growth.

A Legal System Works Against the Faith

When you come to the letter to the Galatians alone - and I am led there very definitely at this time - you know

Paul has hardly got through his introductory word before he says, 'I marvel that you are so soon brought to a standstill, that your going on has so quickly been arrested.' The whole letter is on that matter, namely, their arrest, and Paul's urge that they should throw off the thing which has come upon them to arrest them, and go on.

And what is it that has come in to arrest? Well, it is the same thing you find in so many other directions in the Church of the New Testament times. It is those Judaizers from Jerusalem who were following Paul wherever he went, coming after him and in amongst the fruits of his ministry, his converts, and saying, "Except ye be circumcised, ye cannot be saved," bringing in the old traditional system of religion, a fixed thing, in all its legality, and seeking to impose it upon them. And the tragedy, the shame, the grief of it is this, that it is so infectious that even a Peter can become contaminated; even a Peter, a pillar in the Church, a foremost apostle, a good and godly man, devoted to and serving the Lord. Here in this letter to the Galatians, Paul says, 'Certain came down from James, and Peter was infected, and he compromised, and I withstood him to the face.' That is a terrible passage, a terrible situation. But do you see what it implies? There are few people so good, so high up spiritually, so distinguished for their service to the Lord, and their relationship with the Lord, so few who cannot be infected with this something which works so insidiously against the faith in its essence: good men, godly men, devout men, Peters, men of the first three, touched by this thing that is at work. What is it? A legal system set and fixed, be it Jewish or Christian, which straddles the path of going right on with the Lord to His full thought, which just comes right in the way of all that sonship means.

For you see how the Apostle leads right off on this matter of sonship in the letter to the Galatians. He is dealing with this spiritual, heavenly seed. His introduction is all concerning that. 'Paul, an apostle, not of men but of God, Who raised Jesus from the dead... to deliver us from this present evil world.' How significant is every word. There is something here that is not of this earth, not from down here at all, something not of men - "I received it not of man, I was not taught it of man." There is something here that is from heaven. This thing from heaven was on the basis of resurrection; and that is of God, and God only, something above all that is here. We are delivered from this present evil world or age, and Paul in his mind was not only thinking of the vast, sinful world of paganism and heathenism; he was thinking also of the religious world. "It pleased God to reveal his Son in me." We mark, then, all the spiritual elements about his very introductory words.

Where the Fight of the Faith Arises

And then, when he has struck tremendous blows at this system of things, this religious system, and has challenged Peter over it, in respect of his dissimulation, he goes on about this heavenly and spiritual seed. "We are sons of God by faith in Jesus Christ" (3:26). Then he moves to Ishmael and Isaac, the seed after the flesh and the seed after the Spirit, and brings in this whole matter of what sonship really is, as being something after the Spirit. What he is saying in this whole letter is just this in a word: Sonship, with all that God means by sonship, is what is in view, and over against it there is this breaking in continually of things religious, subtle, beautiful, with all the argument that God is in them; but, nevertheless, breaking in with one object, all hidden from sight, namely, to cut right across the path of the believer in his going right on to God's fullest thought in sonship; and it sets up a warfare.

Let us be perfectly frank and plain. Beloved, it is true that there are many good people, many leading Evangelical people, many Peters if you like, touching whose devotion to the Lord we can have no question: their zeal, their consecration, is not open to discussion; and yet they are so tied by a fixed system that they become points of conflict where the matter of going right on with the Lord is concerned. They oppose, they make the difficulty and the trouble: and it is not themselves personally but the thing which binds them. In principle it is this Judaism cropping up again, a fixed system which has held for generations and centuries, a tradition which is established, and anything that seems to require a superseding of that tradition - I choose the word carefully - at once provokes antagonism and conflict. Is it not strange? Why do I use the word supersede? Because of what Paul says here. He says there are those who have come in with another Gospel, which is not another. He means this, that all that came in with Israel was intended to lead right on to Christ, but now it is being used to hold back from Christ. The effect of it is to obstruct the way of realising the end for which it exists. It is not really two things that are here. Christ is the complement and the fulfilment of all that came in through Moses, and if only you understand and interpret Moses aright, you will go right on with Christ. But now this thing is brought in as though it were another thing. Really, in essence the two things are one, intended to be one, in the thought of God, but it is being made two things now. But the intention of God is that there should be this glorious issue - Christ in fulness: so that, what can lead to Christ is to be superseded by Christ. You are not going to say that Judaism is all wrong, you are not going to say, all the Old Testament is wrong, is false, you are not going to say that what came in through Moses is all error. Not at all! But you are going to say that it was intended to come to a place where all that to which it was pointing would supersede it.

Oh, the conflict is there, and the fight of the faith comes right in amongst Paul and Peter in principle. That is a terrible thing. The fight of the faith! Oh, you would never find Paul and Peter fighting one another over the deity of Christ. You would never find them in conflict over any of these fundamentals of Christianity; the inspiration of the Scriptures, the Person of the Lord Jesus, the coming again. Oh no. You would find them absolutely one on all those matters, however many they were. But here, strangely, we find Peter and Paul in conflict, one having to withstand the other to the face, and it is the faith which is involved.

What the Faith Is

What is the faith? The faith is this, that Jesus is the Son of God. But that is something more than a personal, objective relationship. That is a spiritual reality which has to come into expression through Him in the Church, in His members as representing the heavenly seed, coming to the fulness of Christ; which being accomplished, is to supplant and oust all this other seed which Satan has introduced into God's universe. That is the faith. The faith comes down to this, namely, what we are spiritually in God's universe. That is the faith.

What are we intended to be? We are intended to be in our experience, in our spiritual life, in our presence here, a living proof that Jesus is the Son of God; not just to declare this as a tenet of our faith and creed, but to be here as children of God growing up into sonship, by which sonship His sonship is put into expression. Do you follow what I mean?

Oh, it is over this that there is all the conflict, and I say again, the conflict gets right in inside, amongst godly people, godly men, devout men. Why? Because some are so held by their traditions, by their fixed system, by the thing established here in Christianity. Somehow or other that very thing gets in the way of what Paul calls here in the Galatian letter "the liberty of sons."

The Liberty of Sons

I wonder what that phrase means to you, what it is becoming to mean to you - the liberty of sons. Oh, if you have known bondage to legal Christianity and the Lord has led you in any measure into spiritual liberty, that is a very cherished phrase - the liberty of sons. It is a great, great position to be in. You are not being brow-beaten in your conscience for a moment about what you must do or must not do, this whole tremendous, colossal system of Shalts and Shalt nots that has come into the midst of Christianity, making Christianity into something that is put on you. They bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders (Matt. 23:4). That is what the Lord said about the Jews, but that is what many Christians are doing, and it is very easy for us to slip into the position where our Christianity and the Christian life becomes a burden almost grievous to be borne.

To be emancipated from that into the liberty of sons; what does this mean, and how is it brought about? You go after the Lord, that is all. It is not a thing, a system, it is Himself, Christ. Skim through this Galatian letter and put your pencil mark under every mention of the name of Christ, and you will get a surprise; and you have got the message of the letter, for it all resolves itself into this - it is the Lord, not Judaism, not Christianity, not a system at all; it is the Lord. And if it is the Lord, you are emancipated; you need not worry about anything else. You will not go wrong on any of those thousand points, if it is the Lord upon Whom you are set. You are bound to go right, if you are after the Lord. That is liberty, and that is deliverance.

You see the nature of the conflict. The fight of the faith is not fighting with modernism in the first instance, nor standing for the virtues of the Christian faith. It may work out that way, it may at times have to do with that, and doubtless it does include that, but there is something very much deeper than that. Right in the innermost part of our being we know there is a spiritual conflict going on, and that spiritual conflict has to do with whether we are going on with the Lord, and that going on with the Lord is the development or outworking of sonship, it is coming to the consummation of sonship. That is where the challenge is, and anything the enemy can bring in to stop that, he will.

The Lord give us light on all this.