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**FROM A**  
**PRISON CELL**

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Reflections on the  
"Prison Epistles"

A reprint from the "Bible Study Monthly"

## ***From a Prison Cell***

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## CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
1. <i>Prisoner for Christ</i> ... ..	3
2. <i>The Good Pleasure of His Will</i> ... ..	11
3. <i>God's Eternal Purpose</i> ... ..	17
4. <i>Chosen in Him</i> ... ..	27
5. <i>The Adoption of Sons</i> ... ..	33

## Chapter 1

### PRISONER FOR CHRIST

The Epistles to the Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians were written by Paul from a prison cell in Rome. Evidently his detention there was of a very mild nature, for, though under arrest, Paul was permitted to dwell in his own hired house alone, save for the presence of his military guard (Acts 28. 16). Pending the hearing of his case at Nero's judicial bar, he was permitted to continue under house-arrest for two whole years, with no greater inconvenience than his chains. During these two years he was permitted to receive all his friends without check, so that he "*received all that came in unto him, preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ. with all confidence, no man forbidding him*". (Acts 28. 31). Thus, spared the awful severities of ancient prison cells, his own home became both a sanctum and a cell.

Under conditions such as these the mighty qualities of his master-mind blossomed forth into full flower. To his native in-born genius the operation of the enlightening influence of the Spirit of the Living God gave new and

added powers, enabling him to develop and define those deeper things of God which mortal tongue had only once told before. No teacher save the Lord Jesus had trodden that path of truth. Even He had not spoken full and clear, because at that time none else could understand. The "many things" which He had wanted to say, but could not say (John 16. 12) were left for Paul to say, when hearing ears had been opened by the Spirit of truth. Then under the enlightening power of the promised Comforter, Paul was able to develop all those special features of the Lord's good news—now Paul's good news—and set them out in all their force and beauty, both in his conversations with his friends and in these letters to Ephesus, Colosse and Philippi. We have in these three letters the very essence and cream of all extant Christian literature, reaching the loftiest heights of sanctifying expressions of which human language is capable. To such incomparable altitudes of illuminating thought do some of these expressions soar that students are to be found who speak of these things as though they constituted another and better Gospel, distinct and separate from all the teachings of Paul's own earlier days. Distinctions are claimed between the Gospel of the Kingdom and the "fellowship of the Mystery" with suggestions that there is but little (if any) relationship between the two themes. It will be our privilege to investigate both these themes as our studies proceed, and we hope to be able to find that Paul wrote to his friends exactly the same things which he

spoke to those who visited his prison home (Acts 28. 31). It is possible to assign other reasons than that of another and better Gospel for the super-excellence of these Epistles without detaching them from earlier writings from the same pen. We have only to call to mind the unresting journeys of his active days, from Asia to Europe, from Europe back again, with scarce a moment's cessation from activity in which to concentrate and reflect. We only need to think of the footsore evangelist harried from place to place by relentless foes intent only on discrediting him, and of gathering to themselves the fruitage of his labours, to realise how impossible it had been for him to sit for long at ease in cool, calm consideration of the deeper points of the Gospel story. He had them in his mind, in germ and bud, and sometimes they flower forth from his pen, but not with the full bloom and beauty of the later ripened truth.

It was only when the rush and turmoil of an overcrowded life gave place to the safe peacefulness of his quiet prison retreat, first for two years in Cæsarea, and now again in Rome, that the undeveloped germs and unopened buds of earlier days blossomed forth into stately blooms, delightful to see and hear. Immature and rudimentary thoughts, difficult to express and harder still to pass along, assumed full-grown form and were clothed in words of rare beauty and great power. God cut those restless wanderings short, not only that Paul might testify at the Roman Court, but that he might have time to rest and open wide the portals of God's treasure-house, that

all who later came to believe might see set forth the amplitude of their inheritance in Christ. Without that season of enforced rest Paul might have burnt away the wick of life too soon, before even he himself had grasped the full immensity of the mystery of the fellowship in Christ. Had that been so, not his alone would have been the loss, but three score generations since his day would also have been deprived of these deeper, priceless things of God.

Paul was a deep thinker, and that was exactly what the Christian Church needed at the time. All other Apostles were untrained fishermen—men who had received no special training for their task. The Pharisees classed them as ignorant and unlearned men. Jesus had departed from the world leaving these untrained, untutored men to represent His cause. And while the propagation of truth was not intended to be accomplished by human power and intellectual might, its deeper aspect needed to be comprehended and stated by at least one penetrating well-balanced mind. Paul was a chosen vessel into which and through which Jesus could issue forth the things which He had to leave unsaid. Paul's mind could not leave a theme till he had traced it back to its first cause, nor until he had outlined its fullest sequences. Not enough was it for him to know that Jesus was the Son of God—he must dissect that statement into its compound elements, and know precisely what it meant. Not enough to know that Jesus died for sin. He wanted to know why and how that death could offset

sin, and till he understood he deeply probed the records of the Word of God. He had to do among believing men the work which Jesus Himself could not do, because men could not understand. Hence Paul had to say the things Jesus could not say. These things became the theme and topic of Paul's enquiring mind and under the Spirit's influence the unsaid things of Jesus were said, in the main, by Paul. His writings, when arranged in chronological order, show that his mind was always getting deeper and still deeper into the things of his Lord; truth, roughly and immaturely stated at first utterance, became developed and complete as years rolled by. With progressive thought, ripeness of expression kept step, giving to the later products of his pen a mellowness rich and mature. Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians and Philemon are the rich ripe fruits of Paul's mellow years. We may well thank God for Paul's restraining chain, even though at times it may have deeply chafed his flesh. It set free his soul to soar up to the heavenly heights to give form and words to lofty thoughts, high as the heavens themselves, and more enduring than eternal hills. Only God Himself can estimate the debt which we all of later day owe but cannot pay, to this diminutive giant of a man.

From that little prison cell, the enforced home of a little wandering Christian Jew, set at the heart of the world's metropolis, with all the tawdry trappings of Imperial Majesty on every hand, the soaring mind of Paul swept forth throughout heaven and earth, and told, under the unseeing eyes of Rome's

sceptred prince, in language superb and sublime, that God was creating a universal throne at whose feet even proud Imperial Cæsar would have to bow. No bricks nor walls, no chains nor prætorian guard could chain down that Spirit-led mind of Paul and make him mindful only of his little day and his fettered circumstance. Back to times before the world began, forward to better days, when heaven and earth are cleansed from sin, the Spirit led that receptive mind, and as he grasped the great design, he wrote it down in rich superlatives. Ordinary diction was poor and tame; he must spin phrases of his own, phrases which seem meaningless to the profane, but phrases, each of which is a rich coronet clustered with gems to those who know the truth. Here are a few — *“blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavens in Christ”*; *“chose us in Him before the foundation of the world”*; *“holy and without blemish before Him”*; *“foreordained us unto adoption as sons . . . unto Himself”*; *“the glory of His grace which He bestowed on us freely in the Beloved”*. This and much beside is almost all new coin, never issued from any mint before, but all required to set forth the abundant grace of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Rome may have had her senators and orators, but no Cato or Cicero could speak like this. Rome may give her little men her franchise, and set them in her ranks of free-born men, but she could not make them sons of God! Rome may hoist her chosen Cæsar to her throne, but she could not lift her candid-

ate to the heavenly Throne! Within the very shadow of Roman majesty itself the words and thoughts which told of One who could elevate a beggar to joint-heirship in that Throne took shape and form. How near together, therefore, in that little cell came the sordid and the sublime—only a length of chain, which, binding their ambassadors together, separated those two worlds. Guard and prisoner constituted together a miniature of this present world—one, the emblem of the supreme power of these Gentile Times, one, the token of the persecuted Christ, whose day of power is yet to come.

From that small spot, abounding with such great contrast, flowed forth doctrine which has changed the world. It has been both food and light to help God's child along his way. It has developed faith and gendered hope, and kindled love in many hearts. There is no contradiction between this and the earlier themes. Ephesians and Colossians are built on the broad foundations laid in Romans and Galatians, but times and conditions were under change. The nation as a whole was drifting to its doom while the small elect remnant was growing up into Christ. In the early days Paul dwelt much on the First Coming of the Lord as the point towards which the history and destiny of the Hebrew race had long been tending; in his later days it is the Christ Who is Lord of angels and worlds, and to Whose Second Coming the whole array of the universe is moving. In the first days he sought to convince his kith and kin of their opportunity to accept and rally

to the Messiah whom God had sent into their midst. Hence, he stressed repentance and justification from sin. But when the nation was bent on plunging to its doom it was to the treasure within the field he paid greatest heed. He dwelt less on the redemptive work of Christ, and more on its Head and constitution; less on the justification of the repentant sinner and more on the sanctification of the elect saint; but all these later things had been implicit in his Gospel from the first, just as the earlier themes were never wholly absent from the later and more explicit themes. Throughout his ministry the burden of teaching sought to show the union of the believer with his redeeming Lord and for the description of this unity he has coined a whole vocabulary of phrases and illustrations; believers are "in Christ" and Christ in them; they bear relation to Him as stones to a foundation, as members to a Head, as a wife to her husband. This unity he shows to be "ideal" for before time began the Divine Father made the destiny of Christ and the destiny of the believer one.

## Chapter 2

### THE GOOD PLEASURE OF HIS WILL

In the opening verses of his letter to the Ephesians, after the short introductory greeting, Paul piles up statement after statement in an almost bewildering way. The reflective mind is staggered by the immensity of the arguments as feature after feature is brought to view. This succession of amazing arguments presents, in the realm of religious thought, an appearance like a series of mighty mountain peaks towering up into heaven one up against the other, and stretching as far as the eye can see. So closely do the sentences run into each other, it is not easy to separate them one from another in order to take them each singly to analyse and explain them in turn, or in detail. By very careful differentiation, it is possible to divide the section (vs. 3-14) into three smaller sections, each of which seems to have its own outstanding particulars of teaching to impart. These three sub-sections are verses 3-6, verses 7-12, and verses 13-14. The first begins with ascription of praise to God for all His favours in general to the believer through Christ; the second with "*In whom WE have been blessed*" with

a part in those favours; the third with "*In whom YE ALSO*" have come to receive a share with those who first hoped (or trusted) in Christ. The first one deals with God's fore-ordination to take to Himself a family of heavenly sons; the second shows them as a first instalment resulting from the operation of a plan of reconciliation embracing both heavenly and earthly things; the third places on record the bestowment of a token or pledge of Divine assurance that the full and complete inheritance for these sons of God is sure without fail. Towering high above all these assurances is the assertion that everything forms part of God's unchanging purpose—"according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself"—"according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own Will" (vv. 9 and 11). In the words of a later section (Eph. 3. 11) they were "according to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord".

Three times the Apostle makes reference to varying aspects of God's Will. First (in v.5), he speaks of the process of adoption as being "according to the good pleasure of his Will", and lastly (v.11) he asserts that the whole scheme of reconciliation is "according to the counsel of his Will". Thus the outworking of God's Will is seen to be in absolute accordance with the counsel given by unerring Wisdom, and though at its first inception it was in the nature of a God-kept mystery, known only to Himself, it has now been revealed, and shown to be in full conformity with God's

unfathomed appreciation of all that is holy and true and good. The prompting motive throughout, at every stage, is God's free and unmerited grace—(v.6) "*to the glory of his grace*" (v.7)—"*according to the riches of his grace*". Wisdom, Love and Power are thus set forth by the Apostle as the attributes behind the whole design, and as operating from before the foundation of the world towards the completion of the universal Plan. At the centre of the whole plan God has set "One" upon whom He has placed His own gracious Spirit, and from which "act of placement" that One has taken His title and His Name. That honoured "One" is called "The Christ". "The Christ" is rightly depicted as the recipient of an "outpouring". In Mosaic times this "out-pouring" was represented in the anointing oil of the "chosen" person as God's High Priest. Hence the Apostle can speak of privileges embodied and residing in Christ as from distant days, but which became available to the follower of the Lord in these special days of grace. Thus we read of spiritual blessings in the heavenlies "*in Christ*", of God having fore-ordained us unto adoption as sons "*through Jesus Christ*"; of the grace, which He freely bestowed on us "*in the Beloved*"; of God's purpose to sum up all things "*in Christ*"; and that those "*should be unto the praise of His glory*" who had first hoped "*in Christ*". Thus, in the far distant times, God had issued from His own possession and by His own sole authority, a whole galaxy of honours and preferments to and for His Chosen One when time and circumstances



should cause that Chosen One to appear. "In Christ" the fulness ("pleroma") of Divinity was appointed to dwell (Col. 2. 9).

But more than this, all other beings in heaven and earth, all things visible and invisible, whether thrones, dominions, principalities or powers, were created in relationship to Him, for it was God's will for Him to hold them together, as a sovereign prince might coordinate and hold together many subordinate thrones. (Col. 1. 17). Their honours and stations were created and conferred to be ready for them to bear subordinate relationship to more exalted authority when He should reach His lofty throne. All this exalted superiority was vested "in Christ" before the world began and forms part of God's primordial out-pouring for His coming "Chosen One".

Twice the Apostle refers to an enabling power bestowed by God, the possession of which would activate and empower the members of the "Chosen One" to achieve the destiny to which they had been called. "Blessed us with all spiritual blessings . . . ye were sealed with the Holy Spirit of Promise" (vv. 3 and 13). The Holy Spirit is God's creative instrument, which can bestow blessing upon such as are in Christ—(spiritual light, spiritual food, and intense spiritual desire)—and at the same time mark or seal them as God's own. This is an outflow of Divine energy from the throne of God, in order to produce in His elect a disposition and character like His own—Divine power creating in the object of His choice a character that can contain and retain

for ever attributes of Divinity.

But all save one of this elect company have been subject to the power of sin. Twice Paul speaks of redemption for all such. First, such redemption as is represented by the "forgiveness of sin". But that is not the full measure of redemption contemplated. Full redemption belongs to a later day, and will imply much more than forgiveness of sin. There is a Day of redemption provided for—"the year of My redeemed". To redeem them from sin was ordained to cost their Lord and Leader His life. That Leader had to die for them, to procure cleansing for them from their sins, and further to enfold them about with His own spotless righteousness. To each forgiven follower the privilege was ordained for him to win his place in Christ, and be found in Him, by partaking of Christ's sufferings—being conformed to Jesus' death. It was thus necessary for the Chosen One—the Logos of creative days—to whom it pleased God to ordain pre-eminence in everything, to stoop down from his lofty place and be found in fashion as a man, and become humbled unto death so that He might redeem the intended sons from sin and death, and then when Himself raised from the dead, become their leader—as well as shepherd and bishop of their souls—to lead these many sons up to the ordained heights of glory, honour and immortality.

These, then, are the high peak points of Paul's opening argument in this great letter from a prison cell. Are all these points of doctrine new items of revelation never before

enunciated till his prison days? Did Paul say nothing on these great themes in Corinthians, Galatians, and Romans? And had Jesus nothing to say on any of these doctrines?

We shall see!

### Chapter 3

#### GOD'S ETERNAL PURPOSE

*"According to His good pleasure which He has purposed."* Eph. 1. 9.

The assertion that God is working to a Plan or Purpose is several times stated in the group of letters written from Paul's prison cell. The words just quoted are proof that God is following out His own designs, and that all that He does is "according to" a purpose drafted before He began to engage in His great work. Again, Paul follows this assertion by another which says that all who are in Christ were "*pre-destined according to the purpose of Him who worketh all things after the counsel of His Will*" (v. 11). Then in a great statement indicating that the principalities and powers in the heavenly places are learning more of God's diversified wisdom through His dealings with the Church than they had hitherto been able to learn, Paul states that even this is "*according to the eternal purpose*" (the plan of the Ages) "*which He purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord*". (Eph. 3. 11). Another reference to the activities of Him "who worketh all things after the counsel of His Will" is found in

Phil. 2. 13. "*It is God which worketh in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure*" (R.V.). This mighty energy which works creatively in the saints is linked at two points with the assertions in Ephesians. In both cases it is God that "worketh"; in both cases it is according to His "good pleasure"; hence the creative work in the hearts of the saints is part of His own great Plan.

Paul had already made known to the Church, before his prison days, that God was working to a Plan. This was no new feature of his doctrine. In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul states that both the death and resurrection of Jesus took place in conformity with previous evidences given in the Scriptures. "*Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures . . . and hath been raised . . . according to the Scriptures.*" (1 Cor. 15. 3-4). Whatever occurred "according to the Scriptures" is proof of conformity to a design. He who caused the Scriptures to be written also designed, prior to the inspiration of the prophetic testimony, that Jesus should die as an offering for sin, and that afterwards He should be raised. Again, on the same point, Paul says "*while we were yet weak*" (R.V.) "*in due season Christ died*" (Rom. 5. 6). What occurred "in due season" also conforms to design. This same thought is also applied to His birth, "*When the fulness of time came God sent forth His Son, born of a woman . . .*" (Gal. 4. 4). "Times" also, as well as the form of Divine activity, were incorporated in the Plan. Then in Rom. 8. 28, this thought of design come out in great prominence. The con-

trol of the affairs of life by Divine Providence is assured to all who are "*called according to His purpose*". Again, in the distant days of Isaac, in conformity with the purpose of God it was said that the elder son should serve the younger, "*that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of Him that calleth . . .*" (Rom. 9. 11). That incident therefore in Rebecca's life was also accomplished in conformity with a "Plan".

Thus it is abundantly demonstrated that God is no mere opportunist, no strategist or tactician, waiting to seize and exploit some flaw in his opponent's methods and activities, but the Lord and Master of every circumstance, the originator of every cause, and the director of every effect. That this is so is proved by the fact that God was working to His Plan before sin came in. It was not by the act of sin by Adam, nor yet the previous act of sin by Satan, that brought the plan into operation. It was in operation untold Ages before sin began. God did not require to make any strategic move to checkmate the tactics of the great rebel who had become His open enemy. His plans were already made, and to those plans the Most High strictly adhered throughout.

God's plans began to be executed in His first-born Son. He was the "*first-born of every creature*" (of every created thing) far back in the unfathomable depths of undated time. (Col. 1. 15). That was according to God's Plan, that He might enjoy pre-eminence in the great family of God. Thenceforward, each angelic "being" and every instituted dignity

was created and set in its place to bear some relationship to Him. Paul says they were created "by" Him. But they were also created "for" Him—just as an instrument is made for a man to use or employ. But even more than this, every created being was created "in Him"—"in" a combined fellowship under His control, to accomplish a great design which had been entrusted to the Firstborn Himself to be brought to full accomplishment when a certain course of Ages had run. They were to be as working members or limbs of a body, over which He was to preside as the directing brain or Head, each member being responsible, and yielding allegiance to, Him and His command. Every grade of power or rank was instituted with special relationship to what He had to bring to full accomplishment when the fulness of the appointed time should have arrived. And of the agencies in the earth which have been or will yet be found in harmony with righteousness and truth, this is also true. For *"in Him were all things created, in the heavens and upon the earth, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers: all things have been created through Him and unto Him . . ."* (Col. 1. 16). "He is before (prior to and in advance of) all things (in the creative and authoritative procession) and in Him all things consist" (are held together) v. 17.

Perhaps this may best be illustrated by reference to the co-ordinated offices blended together in the king's government. In affairs of State, whereby the government of the people is carried out, several distinct offices

are blended together each having its own province or sphere of operation. First we might mention the legislative sphere, by means of which the laws are made. The nature of the legislative body may vary from dictatorship on the one hand, to an open deliberate assembly on the other. The dictator (advised by his council) will decree law, the deliberative assembly may enact it, but for the purpose of this illustration it matters not which system is in operation. Laws are promulgated either for the King (by his Parliament) or by the King (as an autocrat). That is one office. Next we may cite the Constabulary office, whose duty is to see that the law is observed by the King's subjects. If the subject fails or refuses to observe the law, the Constabulary cites the offender before the Judiciary. The members of the Judiciary Office "try" the case presented against the offender and if the occasion requires it, mete out punishment upon the offender. When the offence so warrants, the Judiciary hands over the offender to the "detention" officers, and the offender is sent to prison for the period specified by the Judiciary.

Only the legislative body made the laws, but all the others apply them. The Constabulary is composed of many ranks and grades of authority, from the supreme chief at the centre of the Administration down to the humblest village policeman. The Judiciary is also composed of many ranks or grades of office, from the high chief down to the lowest prison officer. In addition to the legal machinery there is also the customs and excise, taxing

and rating authorities, health authorities, etc., etc. Each department is separate from its fellows, yet each and all are "in" the King's confidence, and do the King's business in his stead. They are thus "in" the kingship—"in him"—yet while they are all held together "in" him and "by" him, he is "before" them all—higher in rank and prior in time. He is "first" in procession and "first" in prerogative.

Thus it was with the first-born Son of God in relation to the whole range of authorities, dominions and powers in the heavenly realms. All these sons of light were created to bear relationship to Him in the government committed to His care. By Him each had been created; by Him each had been commissioned and authorised to act in His name, having dignity in rank, and splendour in person, according with the allotted sphere or task.

One member of this hierarchy, a being of high and illustrious rank appears to have been accorded vice-royalty over the earth, to act first as representative of his Lord and next as overseer and caretaker of man. Of him alone could the words of Ezekiel 28: 12-15, be true. He only had been in Eden the Garden of God—and had been full of wisdom, and perfect in his beauty. He had been the cherub that had "covered"—that had spread his wings of authority over man. But iniquity (lawlessness) was found in him. He wanted to sit, not as viceroy for his appointed Lord, but as king and ruler in his own right. The story of his fall, and of the seduction of his charge from loyalty to God is too wide a story for this present exposition. Suffice it now for us to

note the fact. Here, by the rebellious act of Lucifer, that ideal oneness was broken. Sin had appeared both in the heavens and in the earth. Subsequently other discontented heavenly messengers, rebelling against the Creator-Lord, left their own and sank to a lower estate to gratify evil desire. In due course the Heavenly Powers put these rebels under restraint, thus to remain until the Judgment day. (Jude 6). Thus sin and rebellion spread itself in the heavenly sphere and throughout the earth.

As that ideal "one-ness" in and under the first-born Son was the great design with which the creative work began, that "one-ness" is still the goal towards which all subsequent developments are directed. There is no alteration in the nature of the great plan, for it is still God's purpose "*in the fulness of the times to sum up*" (to head up) "*all things in Christ, the things in the heavens and the things upon earth*". (Eph. 1. 10). Not even the rebellion of Satan nor the fall of man changed the fore-ordained design. Before the world began arrangements had been made for the call and elevation of beings from the human plane to the highest heavenly plane. ". . . he chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blemish before Him . . ." (Eph. 1. 4). That is proof that the entrance of sin had been fore-known, and that every step, from the tremendous step-down from His exalted place by God's first-born Son (and who in course of time came to be known as Jesus of Nazareth), on through the throes of death, until He was

raised up to His Father's right hand, as the first-born among many brethren, was all fore-known and fore-ordained. Even the defection of some of the angelic host produced no alteration of the plan, for the government of heaven and earth carried right on without their aid, carried on in spite even of their bitterest opposition. At every step of the development on earth, the evil discontents of heaven have sought to thwart and overthrow the Plan, and seem destined to fight it to their bitter end. Some Scriptures seem to indicate that despite this opposition there will open a door of hope for them in a later day, if they cease to interfere in human affairs and wait in patience for the day when judgment will begin. For all things in the heavenly sphere as well as on this earthly globe, that can be reconciled, will be reconciled to the supreme Lord of the great Plan, and to the great Designer of this sweeping universal Purpose. *"For it was the good pleasure of the Father that in Him"* (the glorified Lord) *"should all fulness dwell, and through Him to reconcile all things unto Himself . . . whether things upon the earth or things in the heavens."* (Col. 1. 19-20). Thus the unreconciled "sons of darkness" are to have the opportunity to become again "sons of light", and return to the sphere from which they fell, and dwell again "in Him" and "for Him" for evermore. And all the rebellious sons of men, who likewise, on invitation, leave the ways of sin, will be accepted into His dominion, and as the earthly viceroy of Him who is the head of all power and dominion and every dignity that can be

named, rule the earth in His name, and establish universal peace for both man and beast, *"according to the good pleasure which He purposed in Him unto a dispensation of the fulness of the times, to sum up"* (to head up) *"all things in Christ, the things in the heavens and the things in the earth"*. (Eph. 1. 9-10).

In that happy day every creature of every rank in heaven as well as in earth will occupy his allotted place and fulfil his allotted task. This is great doctrine—broad and deep and wide, yet it was not exclusive to Paul's prison days. He knew of it in an earlier day. While he does not enter into so many details in his earlier exposition, he covers all the ground relative to the subjugation of all enemies of God and of righteousness, until all things are under the First-born's feet. Then the Son surrenders the whole subjected and purified dominion to His Father and His God, so that God Himself may be all in all. In his letter to the Corinthians, written several years prior to his imprisonment at Rome, Paul wrote: *"Then cometh the end"* (envisaged in the Plan) *"when He shall deliver up the Kingdom to God, even the Father; when He shall have abolished all"* (antagonistic) *"rule and all"* (contrary) *"authority and power. For He must reign till He hath put all enemies under His feet . . . And when all things have been subjected unto Him then shall the Son also Himself be subjected unto Him"* (God) *"that did subject all things unto Him"* (the Son) *"that God may be all in all"* (1 Cor. 15. 24, 25, 28). This is the early germ of this great thought—Ephesians and Colossians give the

full rich fruit, matured and complete.

#### Chapter 4

### CHOSEN IN HIM

*“According as He hath chosen us in Him before the foundation of the world.”* (Eph 1. 4).

One of the most wonderful and astonishing of these great thoughts with which the Epistle to the Ephesians begins is that embodied in the words of the text. Quoting the small section in full, we read: *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blemish before Him in love, having foreordained us unto adoption as sons through Jesus unto Himself”* (vv. 3-5).

There is far too much in this short section for this present study, and we must confine attention to just the few words in the head text, for they contain much food for reflective thought. It is a wonderful and solemnising thought to realise that the faithful of this Gospel Age have been chosen in Christ from before the foundation of the world, and that we, also, of these strenuous days, if

found faithful unto death, may also win Christ and be found "in Him" when the ever living God makes up the number of His elect.

The context tells of many great positions of authority and power created for those high heavenly beings which were brought forth to be helpers and assistants to the first-born Son of God in the great Plan entrusted to His care, and into which they will enter in the fullest sense, when all things in heaven and earth are "headed-up" by Christ. In the words of the text Paul has transcendentally great news for those from the human family who follow faithfully in the footsteps of their beloved Lord. In the unfathomable depths of ages gone by the same almighty sovereign God who framed the great all-comprehensive universal plan for the various gradations of heavenly beings also fore-ordained that a company of earthly beings, born as members of a fallen race, should be redeemed from the power of sin and death, and follow their Saviour and Redeemer from the confines of this terrestrial plane up into the highest place of the heavenly realms to be His own family of sons. This phase of the Divine intention took shape at the same time that Divine wisdom devised the great Plan for the heavenly realms—that is, it took shape even before the creation of the heavenly beings, for their respective places in the Plan. By this fact we are informed that ages before man was created God had purposed that man should be created. And by the same evidence it was foreseen that circumstances would arise among men whereby

a way would be opened so that beings of a lower sentient plane could be transformed and carried up to a higher plane. There must be some deep and unique reason for this procedure, otherwise, like all the native members of the heavenly hosts, they could have been created, at first move, in those heavenly realms. To be first born as men, and then changed and adapted afterwards to heavenly conditions is an experience without parallel in the vast creative Plan. So far as one can say, there can be no other reason for such a course than to give them contact with sin, on the lowest plane where the evil moral consequences of sin could be experienced and understood; and then for some great purpose, too deep at present to understand, have been lifted up to the highest place as companions and brethren of the first-born Son. Divine foreknowledge was fully equal to the task of knowing that man would fall into sin, and be allowed to die, and framing its Plans accordingly. That knowledge would not implicate the Divine Creator as conniving in man's fall any more than that He was responsible for Satan's fall. With full knowledge of the heavenly realms and of universal law. Satan fell by deliberate choice. He exercised the freedom of his will, and decided to rebel against high authority. So also did man—though within more circumscribed circumstances.

Divine foreknowledge could foresee the fatal swing away from righteousness of man's free-will, and planned to save man from the consequences of his fatal choice, and under



the same circumstances call from among man's progeny a company to be transformed and then transferred to the higher sphere. Right back there in that distant past God purposed that man should be redeemed, and at that distant time made choice of One to be man's Redeemer. That is what Peter says when he writes: ". . . ye were redeemed . . . with precious blood as of a lamb without blemish and without spot, even the blood of Christ, who was foreknown indeed before the foundation of the world" (1 Pet. 1. 18-20). This statement is an exact parallel to the words of Eph. 1. 4-7. Right back there in the unfathomable depths of time God purposed that man should be redeemed, and not only so, but that from among fallen men he would invite such as were right-hearted before Him to follow His well-beloved Son through death to His heavenly throne. This is what Jesus means in His great committal prayer. "And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self, with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was . . . Father, those whom Thou hast given me, I will, that where I am, there they may be also, that they may behold my glory which Thou hast given me, for Thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world." (John 17. 5 and 24).

This is the transcendental thought that amazes all who can comprehend it, and stirs their hearts to the very depths with emotion too deep for words. It is not easy to think back into those distant times and ponder on the Divine purposing, but, whether we can comprehend it or not, this inheritance in

Christ was made secure by the sovereign will of God. And, more wonderful still, the fore-ordination of this purposing actually gave God joy and delight. Long ages before He would look upon this company of sons, God found pleasure in anticipating the days of their coming, and in the good pleasure of His Will deliberately ordained and chose this company and arranged its acceptance into His presence through His well-beloved Son. That great pleasure sprang out of His great love for His unborn family, for it was "in love" that He predestined it to be adopted. That all-seeing eye of God could look forward down the long distance of time, and as He saw what would come to pass among men as the story of His grace was told, He felt the warm movements of His loving heart expand towards those who believed and responded to His call.

Full sonship and full access to the Father's glorious presence belong to a later day, when every trace of sin and selfishness has been cleansed away, and when the clinging tendrils of this earth have been cut away once for all. No trace of unholy thought or defiling desire can be carried up into His heavenly home. Hence His future sons must be set free from these undesirable things here and now. To that end He most graciously forgives their sins—covering them with the precious blood of the worthy Lamb of God—and thus looks upon them approvingly through the abundant merit of His Son.

Then, to help them break the power of sin in their lives God has sent His Holy Spirit

into their hearts, as a source of energy and strength, upon which they can draw in time of need. It is as though the Divine hand reached down to snap all the fetters of sin and to lift His prospective child over every stone and obstacle, by making every right impulse and desire stronger every day, and impressing the mind of His beloved with firmer resolve to live always and only for this purpose of God. Thus, holiness is engendered in the adopted one's heart—first, a desire to be free from sin; next, a determined resolve to become devoted in every sense and degree to the Will and purpose of his Father and his God. Thus holiness becomes complete.

Who would not go through fire and flood, and fight down every foe, for such an inheritance as this? Who would not relinquish every earthly prize and count it as unworthy refuse to win such a place in Christ? Do we wonder that Paul writes words which glow with living fire, as he contemplates what that future inheritance will mean (Phil. 3. 17-24).

God grant this thought to lie heavily on our hearts so that in the few years of this earthly life it may penetrate and permeate us through and through with deeper longing to be accounted worthy to go up into the higher realms to see and share the glory of the worthy Lamb.

## Chapter 5

### THE ADOPTION OF SONS

*Having fore-ordained us unto adoption as sons through Jesus Christ unto Himself.*" (Eph. 1. 5).

There are two viewpoints in the Word of God concerning the mode whereby we become Sons of God. One of these is based upon the process of spirit-begettal and ultimate spirit-birth. This thought originates from the words of Jesus in His conversation with Nicodemus. "*Except a man be born anew he cannot see the kingdom of God . . . Except a man be born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God*" (John 3. 3 and 5). This is the viewpoint also of Peter and John (1 Pet. 1. 23; 1 John 5. 1. 4, 18). Paul presents another view. He speaks not of begettal, but of adoption into the family of God. This view is based on a Roman custom which allowed a man of noble birth and standing to take into his family and account as his own son a youth of lowlier birth. This was all done in proper legal form. The first step was to take the intended son before a public notary and there give due note of the intention, subject to certain conditions being

forthcoming at a future specified time. These centred in the response of the young man himself to the training and tuition, necessary for his prospective position, to which in the meantime he would be subjected. If he responded satisfactorily, then at the appointed day the status of full sonship would be publicly conferred, and from that day the adopted son was accounted as fully a son as though he was a child by birth.

But at the time when the father intimated his intention to adopt, a public token of his good faith in the matter was made in the presentation of a robe or ring or other gift to the intended son—a kind of pledge that he would be faithful to his promise, provided the young “adoptee” had so improved in education and general bearing as to be a credit to the house and standing of his kindly benefactor.

The Greek word here translated “adoption” literally means “placing as a son”. It is the “placing as a son” one who is not such by birth, and entitling him to the peculiar privileges of such a connection, as fully and completely as a child by birth. Thus there were two stages to the legal process of adoption. First a provisional stage, with certain conditions applicable to both parties, but mainly contingent upon the good conduct and progress of the intended son. Thenceforth the whole Roman world would treat him as the father’s true son in every act in which duty caused him to become involved.

This illustration is the scaffolding upon which Paul builds his great theme of Divine

Fatherhood and saintly sonship. God is the beneficent and kindly Master of a great house, who desires to find fitting companions for His one true Son. It was in His own unchallengeable prerogative to choose to do this thing. Nothing could compel or obligate Him so to do, had He willed it otherwise. To Him belongs the right to say who shall be invited, and on what terms they may be acceptable before Him. It is for Him to determine what tuition, and of what kind, every invited candidate must receive to make them fitting companions for His only begotten Son. And to him belongs the right finally to decide who among the invited ones had reached up to the standard of worthiness sufficient to qualify for the position involved.

To whom did God make this gracious offer of adoption into the closest circle of His family? To the resplendent sons of the morning? No! They could not be a spectacle to man. Humankind could never have understood all that this most intimate sonship means if God had adopted His sons from them. It was from the lower plebeian level of men, and not from the patrician ranks of heaven, that God condescended to choose His sons.

As proof of the Divine good faith, the worthy Father decided to give a pledge, in the bestowment of His own good Spirit, to all who among men should respond to His call. This was to be accounted as an “earnest”—“a pledge-gift”—to every responding soul, assuring them that if they diligently applied themselves to the necessary education and

refinement to fit themselves for acceptance into this elect position in God's great house, the gracious Father would be true to His promise and pledge and accept them as His own true sons

The Greek word for "earnest"—"*arrhabon*"—primarily had to do with "exchange", and so had reference to a mutual pledge exchanged between two parties when making an agreement; a token payment when the transaction was first agreed, to be returned to each party on fulfilment. But later usage changed its meaning to an "earnest"—a part price, given as a tangible promise that the whole would be paid in due time. Paul tells us that the "earnest" which God bestowed upon His invited sons is His Holy Spirit—the Holy Spirit of promise—which is a pledge to stand good until the day of redemption of God's own—translated in the A.V. as "*until the redemption of the purchased possession*". This privilege of sonship belonged primarily to Israel, as Paul states in Rom. 9. 4 "*... whose is the adoption . . .*"; this same thought is asserted again in Gal. 4. 4-6 "*When the fulness of the time was come God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, that He might receive the adoption of sons. And because ye are sons (first-stage sons) God sent forth the Spirit of His (well-beloved) Son into your hearts, crying 'Abba Father'.*"

The Galatians were sons of fathers who had at one time been under the law, but were divorced from it for unfaithfulness. Some among them were in danger of being enticed

back under the law by Judaizing teachers. Paul wanted them to realise that God was now calling "sons", not servants; children of the free-woman, not of the bond-woman. Only a remnant of Israel was found sufficiently responsive to heed the heavenly call, and thus the privilege was extended to the Gentiles. It is in this larger sense that Paul describes the privileges of the sonship of Rom. 8. 14-16. Here he writes to a mixed church in a Gentile city, in which Gentile believers predominate. To these he says, "*For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. For ye received not the Spirit of bondage again unto fear; but ye received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father*". The full thought concerning this spirit of adoption is brought out in the words of Eph. 1. 14. It is the promise of God that those faithful souls who mortify the deeds of the body (Rom. 8. 13) thus responding to Divine tuition and refinement, shall receive, in due time, the full inheritance of sonship as heirs of God and joint-heirs of Jesus Christ.

Deep in the counsels of eternity God purposed to win from among men a company of sons who should be raised to the highest place in the heavenly realm. The fall of man into sin necessitated the descent to earth of His firstborn Son to become man's Redeemer, and after that, the Princely-Leader of "many-brethren" up to those heavenly heights. The great privilege of sonship in this exalted closer sense was offered first to the sons of Abraham. As a people they rejected the

invitation, only a remnant "according to the election of grace" being found in Israel. The invitation was then offered to those among the Gentiles whose hearts the Lord opened (Acts 16. 14). To such as made response with good and honest heart God gave the pledge-gift of His Holy Spirit, to be at once the earnest of their inheritance, and the transforming power within, to enable them to become trained and transformed, and thus made ready to become companions in full and complete sonship with His well-beloved Son. That is the story of adoption, planned before time began, but worked out in the little lives of such among men as have been found responsive to the love of an all-wise creator and Father.

Brethren in the Lord! Your calling is no small hole-in-the-corner affair in the sight of God. It is an integral part of a great plan spanning ages for its sphere. It is part of a plan which includes angels as well as men, and which, when complete, will place creatures which once were sinful human dust among and above the spirits which surround the heavenly throne. The eternal God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, long ages ago looked down the long distances of time, and with joy and delight anticipated the homecoming of His sons. The door to that heavenly home still stands open to-day, for all who are ready to follow in the steps of our beloved Lord. What do you think of it all, dear brethren in the Lord? What do you think of such a benefactor-Father, and of such a call? And, if you have received the

earnest of your inheritance, the Holy Spirit of promise, are you still assured that this is the token of your future sonship and joint-heirship with the Lord?

There need be any doubt, for "*He is faithful that has promised*". Think it out again, and let that thought inspire to greater faithfulness day by day. Put your present little day into its insignificant relationship with the exceeding and eternal weight of glory which that heavenly invitation opens up! Then thank God for His unspeakable gifts and calling!

