

The Eternal Purpose

From The Normal Christian Life By Watchman Nee

We have spoken of the need of revelation, of faith and of consecration, if we are to live the normal Christian life. But unless we see the end God has in view we shall never clearly understand why these steps are necessary to lead us to that end. Before therefore we consider further the question of inward experience, let us first look at the great Divine goal before us.

What is God's purpose in creation and what is His purpose in redemption? It may be summed up in two phrases, one from each of our two sections of Romans. It is: "The glory of God" (Romans 3:23), and "The glory of the children of God" (Romans 8:21).

In Romans 3:23 we read: "All have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God". God's purpose for man was glory, but sin thwarted that purpose by causing man to miss God's glory. When we think of sin we instinctively think of the judgment it brings; we invariably associate it with condemnation and hell. Man's thought is always of the punishment that will come to him if he sins, but God's thought is always of the glory man will miss if he sins. The result of sin is that we forfeit God's glory: the result of redemption is that we are qualified again for glory. God's purpose in redemption is glory, glory, glory.

Firstborn Among Many Brethren

This consideration takes us forward into Romans chapter 8 where the topic is developed in verses 16 to 18 and again in verses 29 and 30.

Paul says: "We are children of God: and 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 with him. For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed to usward" (Romans 8:16-18); and again: "Whom he foreknew, he also foreordained to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren: and whom he foreordained, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified" (Romans 8:29,30). What was God's objective? It was that His Son Jesus Christ might be the firstborn among many brethren, all of whom should be conformed to His image. How did God realize that objective? "Whom he justified, them he also glorified." God's purpose, then, in creation and redemption was to make Christ the firstborn Son among many glorified sons. That may perhaps at first convey very little to many of us, but let us look into it more carefully.

In John 1:14 we are told that the Lord Jesus was God's only begotten Son: "the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father)". That He was God's only begotten Son signifies that God had no other Son but this one. He was with the Father from all eternity. But, we are told, God was not satisfied that Christ should remain the only begotten Son; He wanted also to make Him His first begotten. How could an only begotten Son become a first begotten? The answer is

simple: by the Father having more children. If you have but one son then his is the only begotten, but if thereafter you have other children then the only begotten becomes the first begotten.

The Divine purpose in creation and redemption was that God should have many children. He wanted us, and could not be satisfied without us. Some time ago I called to see Mr. George Cutting, the writer of the well-known tract *Safety, Certainty and Enjoyment*. When I was ushered into the presence of this old saint of ninety-three years, he took my hand in his and in a quiet, deliberate way he said: ‘Brother, do you know, I cannot do without Him? And do you know, He cannot do without me?’ Though I was with him for over an hour, his great age and physical frailty made any sustained conversation impossible. But what remains in my memory of that interview was his frequent repetition of these two questions: ‘Brother, do you know, I cannot do without Him? And do you know, He cannot do without me?’

In reading the story of the prodigal son most people are impressed with all the troubles the prodigal meets; they are occupied in thinking what a bad time he is having. But that is not the point of the parable.

“My son ... was lost, and is found”—there is the heart of the story.

It is not a question of what the son suffers but of what the Father loses. He is the sufferer; He is the loser. A sheep is lost: whose is the loss? The shepherd’s. A coin is lost: whose is the loss? The woman’s. A son is lost: whose is the loss? The Father’s. That is the lesson of Luke chapter 15.

The Lord Jesus was the only begotten Son, and as the only begotten He had no brothers. But the Father sent the Son in order that the only begotten might also be the first begotten, and the beloved Son have many brethren. There you have the whole story of the Incarnation and the Cross; and there you have at the last the purpose of God fulfilled in His “bringing many sons unto glory” (Heb. 2:10).

In Romans 8:29 we read of “many brethren”; in Hebrews 2:10 of “many sons”. From the point of view of the Lord Jesus it is “brethren”; from the point of view of God the Father it is “sons”. Both words in this context convey the idea of maturity. God is seeking full-grown sons; but He does not stop even there. For He does not want His sons to live in a barn or a garage or a field; He wants them in His home; He wants them to share His glory. That is the explanation of Romans 8:30: “Whom he justified, them he also glorified.” Sonship—the full expression of His Son—is God’s goal in the many sons. How could He bring that about? By justifying them and then by glorifying them. In His dealings with them God will never stop short of that goal. He set Himself to have sons, and to have those sons, mature and responsible, with Him in glory. He made provision for the whole of Heaven to be peopled with glorified sons. That was His purpose in redemption.

The Grain Of Wheat

But how could God’s only begotten Son become His first begotten? The method is explained in John 12:24: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a grain of wheat fall into the earth and die, it abideth by itself alone; but if it die, it beareth much fruit.” Who was that grain?

It was the Lord Jesus. In the whole universe God had only one ‘grain of wheat’; He had no second grain. God put His one grain of wheat into the ground and it died, and in resurrection the only begotten grain became the first begotten grain, and from the one grain there have sprung many grains.

In respect of His divinity the Lord Jesus remains uniquely “the only begotten Son of God”. Yet there is a sense in which, from the resurrection onward through all eternity, He is also the first begotten, and His life from that time is found in many brethren. For we who are born of the Spirit are made thereby “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4), though not, mark you, as of ourselves but only, as we shall see in a moment, in dependence upon God and by virtue of our being ‘in Christ’. We have “received the spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit himself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are children of God” (Rom. 8:5,16). It was by way of the Incarnation and the Cross that the Lord Jesus made this possible. Therein was the Father-heart of God satisfied, for in the Son’s obedience unto death the Father has secured His many sons.

The first and the twentieth chapters of John are in this respect most precious. In the beginning of his Gospel John tells us that Jesus was “the only begotten from the Father”. At the end of his Gospel he tells us how, after the Lord Jesus died and rose again, He said to Mary Magdalene, “Go unto my brethren, and say to them, I ascend unto my Father and your Father, and my God and your God” (John 20:17). Hitherto in this Gospel the Lord had spoken often of “the Father” or of “my Father”. Now, in resurrection, He add, “... and your Father”. It is the eldest Son, the first begotten, speaking. By His death and resurrection many brethren have been brought into God’s family, and so, in the same verse He uses this very name for them: “My brethren”. “He is not ashamed to call them brethren” (Heb. 2:11).

The Choice That Confronted Adam

God planted a great number of trees in the garden of Eden, but “in the midst of the garden”—that is, in a place of special prominence --

He planted two trees, the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam was created innocent; he had no knowledge of good and evil. Think of a grown man, say thirty years old, who has no sense of right or wrong, no power to differentiate between the two! Would you not say such a man was undeveloped? Well, that is exactly what Adam was.

And God brings him into the garden and says to him, in effect, ‘Now the garden is full of trees, full of fruits, and of the fruit of every tree you may eat freely. But in the very midst of the garden is one tree called “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil”; you must not eat of that, for in the day that you do so you will surely die. But remember, the name of the other tree close by is Life.’ What, then, is the meaning of these two trees? Adam was, so to speak, created morally neutral—neither sinful nor holy, but innocent—and God put those two trees there so that he might exercise free choice. He could choose the tree of life, or he could choose the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Now the knowledge of good and evil, though forbidden to Adam, is not wrong in itself. Without it however Adam is in a sense limited in that he cannot decide for himself on moral issues. Judgment of right and wrong resides not in him but in God, and Adam’s only course when faced with any question is to refer it to Jehovah God. Thus you have a life in the garden which is totally dependent on God. These two trees, then, typify two deep principles; they represent two planes of life, the Divine and the human. The “tree of life” is God Himself, for God is life. He is the highest form of life, and He is also the source and goal of life. And the fruit: what is that? It is our Lord Jesus Christ. You cannot eat the tree but you can eat the fruit. No one is able to receive God as God, but we can receive the Lord Jesus. The fruit is the edible part, the receivable part of

the tree.

So—may I say it reverently? --the Lord Jesus is really God in a receivable form. God in Christ we can receive.

If Adam should take of the tree of life, he would partake of the life of God and thus become a ‘son’ of God, in the sense of having in him a life that derived from God. There you would have God’s life in union with man: a race of men having the life of God in them and living in constant dependence upon God for that life. If on the other hand Adam should turn the other way and take the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, then he would develop his own manhood along natural lines apart from God. Reaching a peak of attainment as a self-sufficient being, he would have the power in himself to form independent judgment, but he would have no life from God.

So this was the alternative that lay before him. Choosing the way of the Spirit, the way of obedience, he could become a ‘son’ of God, living in dependence upon God for his life; or, taking the natural course, he could put the finishing touch to himself, as it were, by becoming a self-dependent being, judging and acting apart from God. The history of humanity is the outcome of the choice he made.

Adam’s Choice The Reason For The Cross

Adam chose the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and thereby took up independent ground. In doing so he became (as man is now in his own eyes) a ‘fully developed’ man. He could command a knowledge; he could decide for himself; he could go on or stop. From then on he was “wise” (Genesis 3:6). But the consequence for him was death rather than life, because the choice he had made involved complicity with Satan and brought him therefore under the judgment of God. That is why access to the tree of life had thereafter to be forbidden to him.

Two planes of life had been set before Adam: that of Divine life in dependence upon God, and that of human life with its ‘independent’ resources. Adam’s choice of the latter was sin, because thereby he allied himself with Satan to thwart the eternal purpose of God. He did so by choosing to develop his manhood—to become perhaps a very fine man, even by his standards a ‘perfect’ man—apart from God.

But the end was death, because he had not in him the Divine life necessary to realize God’s purpose in his being, but had chosen to become instead an ‘independent’ agent of the Enemy. Thus in Adam we all become sinners, equally dominated by Satan, equally subject to the law of sin and death, and equally deserving of the wrath of God. From this we see the Divine reason for the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. We see too the Divine reason for true consecration— for reckoning ourselves to be dead unto sin but alive unto God in Christ Jesus, and for presenting ourselves unto Him as alive from the dead. We must all go to the Cross, because what is in us by nature is a self-life, subject to the law of sin. Adam chose a self-life rather than a Divine life; so God had to gather up all that was in Adam and do away with it. Our ‘old man’ has been crucified. God has put us all in Christ and crucified Him as the last Adam, and thus all that is of Adam has passed away.

Then Christ arose in new form; with a body still, but ‘in the Spirit’, no longer ‘in the flesh’. “The last Adam became a life-giving spirit” (1 Cor. 15:45). The Lord Jesus now has a resurrected body, a spiritual body, a

glorious body, and since He is no longer in the flesh He can now be received by all. "He that eateth me, he also shall live because of me", said Jesus (John 6:57). The Jews revolted at the thought of eating His flesh and drinking His blood, but of course they could not receive Him then because He was still literally in the flesh.

Now that He is in the Spirit every one of us can receive Him, and it is by partaking of His resurrection life that we are constituted children of God. "As many as received him, to them gave he the right to become children of God ... which were born ... of God." (John 1:12,13).

God is not out to reform our life. It is not His thought to bring it to a certain stage of refinement, for it is on a totally wrong plane.

On that plane He cannot now bring man to glory. He must have a new man; one born anew, born of God. Regeneration and justification go together.

He That Hath The Son Hath The Life

There are various planes of life. Human life lies between the life of the lower animals and the life of God. We cannot bridge the gulf that divides us from the plan above or the plan below, and the distance that separates us from the life of God is vastly greater than that which separates us from the life of the lower animals.

In China one day I called on a Christian leader who was sick in bed, and whom, for the sake of this story, I shall call 'Mr. Wong' (though that was not his real name). He was a very learned man, a Doctor of Philosophy, and one esteemed throughout the whole of china for his high moral principles, and he had long been engaged in Christian work.

But he did not believe in the need for regeneration; he only proclaimed a social gospel.

When I called on Mr. Wong his pet dog was by his bedside, and after speaking with him of the things of God and of the nature of His work in us, I pointed to the dog and inquired his name. He told me he was called Fido. 'Is Fido his Christian name or his surname?' I asked (using the common Chinese terms for 'personal name' and 'family name').

'Oh, that is just his name', he said. 'Do you mean that is just his Christian name? Can I call him Fido Wong?' I continued. 'Certainly not!' came the emphatic reply. 'But he lives in your family', I protested, 'Why don't you call him Fido Wong?' Then, indicating his two daughters, I asked 'Are your daughters not called Miss Wong?' 'Yes!' 'Well then, why cannot I call your dog Master Wong?' The Doctor laughed, and I went on: 'Do you see what I am getting at? Your daughters were born into your family and they bear your name because you have communicated your life to them.'

Your dog may be an intelligent dog, a well-behaved dog, and altogether a most remarkable dog; but the question is not, Is he a good or a bad dog? It is merely, Is he a dog? He does not need to be bad to be disqualified from being a member of your family; he only needs to be a dog. The same principle applies to you in your relationship to God. The question is not whether you are a bad man or a good man, more or less, but simply, Are you a man? If your life is on a lower plane than that of God's life, then you cannot belong to

the Divine family. Throughout your life your aim in preaching has been to turn bad men into good men; but men as such, whether good or bad, can have no vital relationship with God.

Our only hope as men is to receive the Son of God, and when we do so His life in us will constitute us sons of God.' The Doctor saw the truth, and that day he became a member of God's family by receiving the Son of God into his heart.

What we today possess in Christ is more than Adam lost. Adam was only a developed man. He remained on that plane, and never possessed the life of God. But we who receive the Son of God not only receive the forgiveness of sins; we receive also the Divine life which was represented in the garden by the tree of life. By the new birth we receive something Adam never had; we possess what he missed.

They Are All Of One

God wants sons who shall be joint-heirs with Christ in glory. That is His goal; but how can He bring that about? Turn now to Hebrews 2:10 and 11: "It became him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the author of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For both he that sanctifieth and they that are sanctified are all of one: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren."

There are two parties mentioned here, namely, "many sons" and "the author of their salvation", or, in different terms, "he that sanctifieth" and "they that are sanctified". But these two parties are said to be "all of one". The Lord Jesus as Man derived His life from God, and (in another sense, but just as truly) we derive our new life from God. He was "begotten ... of the Holy Ghost" (Matthew 1:20 mg.), and we were "born of ... the spirit", "born ... of God" (John 3:5;

1:13). So, God says, we are all of One. "Of" in the Greek means "out of". The first begotten Son and the many sons are all (though in different senses) "out of" the one Source of life. Do you realize that we have the same life today that God has? The life which He has in Heaven is the life which He has imparted to us here on the earth. That is the precious "gift of God" (Rom. 6:23). It is for that reason that we can live a life of holiness, for it is not our own life that has been changed, but the life of God that has been imparted to us.

Do you notice that, in this consideration of the eternal purpose, the whole question of sin ultimately goes out? It no longer has a place. Sin came in with Adam, and even when it has been dealt with, as it has to be, we are only brought back to the point where Adam was. But in relating us again to the Divine purpose—in, as it were, restoring to us access to the tree of life—redemption has given us far more than Adam ever had. It has made us partakers of the very life of God Himself.

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