

The Sons of God -- Rank in the Scale of Being

by Daniel Steele

The sermon explores the significance of man's rank among the creatures of God and the difference between the sons of God and the sons of Adam.

Scripture: John 1:12, Romans 6:4, Romans 8:17, Romans 8:29, Galatians 2:20, Ephesians 2:6, Ephesians 5:1, 1 John 3:1, 1 John 3:9

Topics: "Human Nature", "Sanctification"

Description

Daniel Steele preaches about the significance of man's rank among God's creatures, emphasizing the practical value of understanding our greatness as exiled princes soon to be crowned, which motivates a life of moral purity. He discusses the belief that man is the highest order of being on earth, crowned by God's nature in the incarnation of His Son, making our race the most glorious and exalted order. Steele delves into the concept of a new and superior order, 'the sons of God,' evolving from the fallen race through faith in the second Adam, Jesus Christ, who leads them into glory. He highlights the deep chasm between the sons of God and the sons of Adam, emphasizing the spiritual life, love, and holiness that differentiate the two orders.

Transcript

MAN'S rank among the creatures of God is a theme of more than speculative interest. It has a practical value, for the revelation of a man's greatness, as an exiled prince soon to be crowned, is a strong motive to a life of moral purity. Professor Dana, of Yale College, raised the question whether some new and more noble being will not yet be created, and outrank man, as man now outranks the brute. Professor Agassiz partly answers this question from a scientific point of view, by observing that the spinal column of the first vertebrates, the fishes and serpents, is horizontal; that in the next higher organizations it stands in an oblique position: while in man, the perfection of the animal creation, the spinal column is perpendicular.

Hugh Miller asserts that man is the highest order of being which will ever stand on the earth; that he crowns the long series of animal creations whose fossils are imbedded in the successive geological strata as we ascend from the firerocks to the alluvium on which we dwell. The reason for this conclusion is worthy the head and heart of the great Christian scientist. Man is the most noble order which will ever walk the earth, not only because the scepter of dominion was placed in his hand in Eden, but chiefly because his Almighty Creator has taken his nature upon Himself in the incarnation of His Son. This stamps our race as the most glorious and exalted order, never to take a second rank by the creation of a superior, though

the earth should roll through its orbit for millions of years to come, since we cannot for a moment suppose that God would outrank His Son, the man Christ Jesus, by calling into being one more excellent. It is no contradiction to this splendid generalization of the devout geologist to say that a new race has already made its appearance on earth, as much above the sons of Adam as these are above the ape and gorilla. These are "the sons of God." Their origin and peculiar qualities, separating them from natural men by a gulf impassable, except with the aid of Omnipotence, constitute the theme of the present chapter.

When sin had discrowned Adam and his sons it was determined in the Council of the Trinity that a new and superior order should be constructed out of the ruined race. A second Adam appears on earth the first term of the glorious series, the new founder of the new order. He is the norm or model by which the new creation will proceed. All those sons of fallen Adam who by faith yield to the transfiguring power assume the essential attributes of the second Adam, the Lord from heaven. To adopt the phrase of modern philosophy, a new race is to be evolved. In all evolution there must first be involution. You must put into the first term all that you take out. Jesus Christ is the first term. "And it pleased the Father that in Him should all fullness dwell." "For in Him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily." There is one word in the Greek Testament that exactly describes this relation of Jesus to the development of the sons of God. The term *archegos* is unfortunately translated by three different English words in the only four passages in which it occurs. It is compounded of two Greek words, signifying, beginning and leading. The best Saxon rendering is file-leader. Thus declares Peter in his crimination of the Jews: "And killed the file-leader of life, whom God hath raised from the dead" (Acts iii. 15). Again, before the Sanhedrim he utters these sublime words: "Him hath God exalted with (or at) His right hand to be a file-leader and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins" (Acts v. 31). The office of Christ as the beginner of a glorious series is strikingly set forth in Heb. ii. 10: "For it became Him for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the file-leader of their salvation perfect through sufferings." Here we see, not with the eye of a poet's fancy, but with the anointed vision of inspiration, Jesus Christ marching at the head of a long column, "many sons," leading them into the wide open portals of heaven, till they stand at last in the blaze of its innermost glory, a circle around the throne upon which He sits down. Again, in Heb. xii. 2, we have this fact as the ground of an earnest exhortation to Christian fidelity: "Looking unto Jesus, the file-leader and finisher of our faith; who, for the joy that was Set before Him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of God." We have in these four passages the divine conception of our adorable Saviour as the head of the new order, the sons of God, evolving these from the sons of the fallen Adam. "To as many as received Him," says the evangelist, "gave he privilege to become the sons of God."

Between these two orders there is a gulf too deep and too wide to be bridged by any creature. There is a chasm between the lowest son of God and the highest son of Adam greater than there is between the lowest man and the highest brute. Let us endeavour to gain some conception of the broadness of this chasm. First, sonship expresses life. The sons of God have spiritual life; the sons of Adam are spiritually dead. How broad the chasm between life and death! Who can build a suspension bridge across this gulf? All the atheistic philosophers stand confounded before this question. Mechanical and chemical forces, under the most skillful coordination of human science, utterly fail to transmute non-living matter into a living organism. This is the sole prerogative of the omnipotent Creator. But the production of animal life is a work far inferior to the quickening of a dead soul. How broad and deep and dark the abyss between a dead sinner and a child of God born of the Spirit! There are no words in our language and no contrasts in our thought by which to express this difference. The zenith is not more remote from the nadir than life is from death. Only God can span this chasm, and bring a soul from the grave of sin to the shore of life.

"But," says one, "there is no such contrast between the so-called regenerate and unregenerate man." Their outward manifestations may not greatly differ. Both wear clothes, eat food, earn bread by toil, suffer in sickness, are overwhelmed in the same calamities and both are under the sentence, "To dust shalt thou return." The difference is not external, but internal. The one feels the heart-throb a new life; the other lies pulseless in the sepulchre of spiritual death. The one is God-centered; gravitating upward, drawn by the magnetism of love; the other is self-centered, moving downward with the accelerating velocity of depravity. The one throbs through all the mystery of his being with the pulses of a divine life: the other is insensible to those spiritual truths which thrill the former with rapture unutterable. Though both obey the decalogue and minister their charities to the needy, the one acts with a single eye to the glory of God: the other is actuated by a highly refined selfishness. The obedience of the one is freedom: of the other, servility.

Secondly. Sonship implies likeness. The sons of depraved Adam reflect his marred image. The sons of God, in their measure, are the brightness of His glory. They are in a degree what their glorious File-leader is perfectly, the express image of the Father's person. The difference is radical, world-wide, and heaven-high. Peter, in portraying the sons of God, astonishes us with the following: "Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises, that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature." To be partaker of one's nature is to have not its identity, but its characteristics. God is love. This is the essential and distinctive attribute of the sons of God. This is the principle of their life. The first pulsation of the newborn soul is love to God, the Father: love to Christ, the Redeemer; love to the brethren, and love to all mankind. "Hope maketh not ashamed," because it has a realized basis in present experience, "the love of God shed abroad in our hearts" -- deluging the believing soul -- "by the Holy Ghost." The surprising message that God loves me awakens responsive love in my heart toward Him and all the objects of His love. This is the decisive test: "He who doeth not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother." John lays bare the very foundations of Christian character when he says: "For this is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that ye should love one another." That we may know that he is describing the gulf between natural and spiritual men, the sons of Adam and the sons of God, he goes on to say: "Not as Cain, who was of that wicked one," of the order of fallen humanity: and "slew his brother." "We know that we have passed from death unto life because we love the brethren; he that loveth not his brother abideth in death." To save transcribing the entire epistle, and to preclude all controversy on this point, we adduce John's emphatic statement of the essential distinction between the sons of Adam and the sons of God: "He that committeth sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning."

Holiness, inward and outward, is the second quality which differentiates these two orders. Holiness is the all-comprehending moral attribute of God. How reasonable that His sons should wear this robe of stainless white! Sin is not essential to sonship. It has no place in the File-leader the model of the series. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in the heavenlies in Christ; according as He hath chosen us [believers] in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love."

The doctrine of predestination always has reference to holiness. God, by an immutable decree, has made entire sanctification the goal attainable by all believers; from eternity He has determined that those who, by a free compliance with the conditions, are adopted into His family, "should be conformed to the image of His Son," not only in the distant future, but now, in the present life. "As He is, so are we in this world." The broad line of demarkation between the children of God and the children of the devil lies in this one word, sin.

"Whosoever has been born of God [and so continues] is not sinning, because His seed, the new principle of love, remaineth in him, and he is not able to be sinning, [as a habit,] because he has been born of God" [and so remains]. The significance of the Greek tenses is shown in the parenthetic words, the perfect tense denoting an act whose effect remains to the present time, and the present tense indicating an habitual or oft-recurring act. A God-born soul is not in a sinning state, because he has admitted a new and dominant motive, antagonistic to sin, to take up its permanent abode behind his will.

Its attitude cannot be hostile to the law so long as it is swayed by love to the lawgiver. He may in an unwary moment be surprised by some single act of sin, for which there is a merciful resort to the High-priest above. "If any man sin [aorist tense denoting a single act] we have a Paraclete with the Father, Jesus Christ the just." A perfectly holy soul, whether an angel in his first estate, or Adam in Eden, or a blood-washed believer, may fall away from his order by a decisive and permanent wrong choice, a choice which is the inexplicable mystery discussed for ages, the origin of sin.

But John stoutly affirms that permanent sonship and continual sinning are contradictions which cannot be combined in one character. A man cannot be sober and drunken, honest and thieving, chaste and licentious, at the same time. But the temperate man may become an inebriate and die in the gutter; and the honest man become a thief and die in a prison. How this stupendous perversion of the gospel of purity, that the sons of God are constantly sinning, became so widespread can be explained only on the theory that Satan himself has turned Bible expositor, teaching that "no man since the fall of Adam, even by the aid of divine grace, can perfectly keep God's law, but daily breaks it in thought, word, and deed."

This fallacy of the Westminster Catechism still imposes upon intelligent minds, because they fail to see that the Adamic law has been replaced by the evangelical requirement of love as the fulfilling of the law. There is no sin where perfect love reigns. This may consist with innumerable defects, infirmities, and theoretical and practical errors. To a superficial observer these may look like sins, but a deeper inspection shows that they lack the essential characteristic, namely, the voluntary element. In ethics it is an axiomatic truth that volition is an attribute of sin as an act, or sin which entails guilt. Yet even involuntary deviations from rectitude need the atonement. [See Chapter IV]

There are other striking points of resemblance between the sons of God and their great Exemplar and Model. Jesus was begotten of the Holy Ghost; the sons of God are born of the Spirit. Jesus was circumcised the eighth day: the real, spiritual seed of Abraham have their circumcision not in the flesh, but in the spirit, being cleansed from all filthiness of the flesh and of the spirit. Jesus, after a period of religious development, was baptized with the Holy Spirit; so are all those children of God who tarry in Jerusalem with persevering faith. Jesus had the certificate of His sonship in the repeated utterance of His Father, "This is My beloved Son;" so does the child of God hear the attestation of his divine adoption prompting the joyful shout, Abba, Father:--

"The Spirit answers to the blood,
And tells me I am born of God."

Jesus was tempted in all points; so are we. He was victorious: "Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world;" so are we victors: "This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith." Jesus was crucified; so are all those sons of God who count not the self-life dear unto them. "I have been crucified with Christ [and so remain]: it is no longer I that live, but Christ that liveth in me." [Alford's Version.] The primal son of God was buried. Thus was his death solemnly certified. So does the child of God die unto

sin, and the water poured in holy baptism, symbolizing the outpoured Spirit, seals and ratifies his death unto sin. Jesus arose from the dead; the sons of God arise to newness of life by a spiritual resurrection, soon to be followed by a quickening of their mortal bodies because the Spirit has dwelt within them. [Rom. viii. 14, margin.] Jesus ascended; so shall we be caught up to meet the Lord in the air. Our File-leader has been glorified; so shall we, who have borne the image of the earthly, bear the image of the heavenly. Our elder Brother has sat down on His Father's throne as a foregleam of our wonderful enthronement as kings and priests: "Unto him that overcometh will I give to sit with Me in My throne." Once more, Jesus Christ will judge the universe, and at His side will sit His brethren as associate judges: "Know ye not that we shall judge angels?"

These points of similarity of the Son of God to His brethren, the sons of God, are strikingly summarized in

THE SEVEN "TOGETHERS"

in the Scripture, which show the wondrous identification of the Lord Jesus Christ with believers, in all the experiences of the spiritual life and its rewards. They indicate the benevolent purpose of God in our redemption, and His plan in effecting that purpose. It is affirmed of us by the Spirit, in the Word, that we are --

1. Crucified together with Christ (Gal. ii. 20).
2. Quickened together with Christ (Col. ii. 13).
3. Raised together with Christ (Eph. ii. 6).
4. Seated together with Christ in heavenly places (Eph. ii. 6).
5. Sufferers together with Christ (Rom. viii. 17).
6. Heirs together with Christ (Rom. viii. 17).

And that we are to be--

7. Glorified together with Christ (Rom. viii. 17).

"Together with the Lord --

What bursts of light I see!

Light, life, and joy are in that word;

'As He is, so are we.'

"Together with the Lord --

Nor curse, nor death to see;

But 'seated' -- O, that glorious word! --

Where 'heavenly places' be. (Eph. ii. 6.)

"And 'heirs' we are with Him (Rom. viii. 17.)

Of God -- O, wondrous love!

'Joint heirs with Christ,' in bliss supreme

To reign with Him above.

"And with Him 'glorified' (Rom. viii. 17.)

We shall for ever be,

One with the Head, in whom we died,

We all His love shall see.

"Ah! heavenly portion this!

With sins and sufferings o'er, (Rom. viii. 18.)

To know and share His wondrous bliss,

As none e'er knew before.

"Meanwhile this glorious state,

It forms our mind within,

To know the self that's dead -- its hate --

To purify from sin.

"In newness, now, of life,

We would our powers employ;

Save sin, to know no other strife;

Save Christ, no other joy."

This discussion throws intense light on a subject much misunderstood -- the Fatherhood of God. He is the Creator of all men, but the Father only of those who receive His Son and believe on His name. This declaration cuts off at a stroke that soft and shallow sentimentalism which applies the Fatherhood of God to men steeped in sin and defiant in rebellion, and rears upon this sandy foundation the hope of universal salvation. God nowhere styles Himself the Father of the unregenerate, but only of penitent believers in His Son Jesus Christ. If any one is expecting to be saved by the divine Fatherhood, let him make his salvation sure by becoming a son by the Spirit of adoption, crying in the depths of his soul, "Abba, Father."

This discussion also unfolds the real brotherhood of man, All the descendants of Adam should constitute a sacred and inviolable fraternity. But, alas! Adamic lineage is a feeble barrier against gigantic wrongs. For six thousand years the sons of Adam have warred, slaughtered, pillaged, robbed, and enslaved their brethren. This bond is too weak to restrain from the most flagrant violations of the law of love. But the Son of God came to found a better fraternity, a real brotherhood. "Go tell my brethren," said the risen Jesus. Strong indeed is that tie of brotherhood which passes from heart to heart -- through the heart of the

God-man. He who truly loves God loves every one that is begotten of Him. Love can work no ill to our brother. Love divine infused into human souls surpasses all the bonds of nature. This explains the seemingly harsh declaration of Jesus, in which He appears to reveal a heart without human affections: "He that doeth the will of My Father in heaven, the same is My mother and sister and brother." Nearer to Jesus are the Hottentot and Kamschatkan who believe in Him than were His brothers, James and Joses, before they had such evangelical faith. Ye who are endeavouring to fortify yourselves against the ills of life by membership in human fraternities which may stand up for you while living, cast a sprig of evergreen into your grave, and afford a pittance to your widow, remember that there is a nobler fraternity of the sons of God, that, after bearing your body with devout hands to the tomb, and hanging the lamp of the resurrection thereon, will accompany your soul into the unseen holy beyond, and afford a genial and delightful companionship through the ceaseless ages of eternity. Unite your fortunes with this fraternity while it is called today. Regeneration is initiation. "For He that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one; for which cause He is not ashamed to call them brethren.

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