

First-born from the Dead

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The responsibilities and privileges of the first-born in Israel is a very marked feature in the scriptures. They are singled out for our attention in many places and given significant prominence as an important type. These duties, which in the fulfillment of the type involve the generations that will be raised in the coming age, are quite considerable and suggest that we who are called to qualify as the antitype of this first-born figure take our responsibilities very seriously.

According to the law, the first-born had the right of being priest and king, that is of interceding for and ruling over their younger brethren; on him devolved the duty of *Goel* or Kinsman-redeemer, to redeem a brother who had become poor and sold himself to a stranger; to avenge his blood, to raise up seed to the dead, and to redeem the inheritance. To sustain these duties God gave the first-born a double portion. These facts can be collectively gleaned from Exod. 13:2; 24:5; Num. 3:12,13; 8:16; Deut. 21:17; and 1 Chron. 5:1,2.

Moreover an unusual transaction took place respecting the first-born. We find it in Numbers 3:45 where the Levites were taken in their place. By so instituting the whole of the complex sacred service in this unusual way into the sole charge of the first-born, the Lord made this one of the most important figures in the Old Testament.

The understanding, then, of all the particular features of the type should be a matter of the greatest interest to the antitypical first-born. Most especially of course as to how we may be properly fitted for this important role in the purposes of our Heavenly Father. Of course our dear Lord fulfills this purpose completely in himself. After all he is the true first-born, being the "first-born of every creature." (Col. 1:15)

However a most important and fundamental factor in the first-born figure has to be understood before any one may enter into it. Christ does **not** fulfill the role of the first-born as first-born of every creature, but as "first-born from the dead." (Col. 1:18) "He is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead."

This quotation establishes the fact precisely. No less importantly it also shows that all who would enter into Christ as first-born, must likewise be born from the dead. It also implies that the nature of the first-born portion would have its own particular significance.

This is an important matter. We have seen that first-borns in Israel had important responsibilities to

carry out, which was the point of the double portion. There was just no use in being invested with this responsibility and not being provided with the wherewithal to fulfill the duty. It therefore follows that the particular nature of this inheritance, and the assurance that it is a present possession, must be a matter of the greatest importance to the whole "Household of Faith." In the words of the apostle Peter,

"Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure."--2 Pet. 1:10

The apostle John assures us of our standing as first-borns.

"Now are we the sons of God and . . . we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is."--1 John 3:2

Glorious as this promise is, nowhere does the apostle suggest that the inheritance will be conferred irrespective of our faithfulness. Rather he warns, "little children keep yourself from idols."

The plain fact is that even when baptized into Christ and being led by the spirit we still remain first-born of the creature. Our status as first-born from the dead can only be realized when we become **truly** baptized into his death. Only when our consecration death into Christ is realized, do our present actions constitute a **resurrected** walk in Christ of the first-born from the dead, with the assurance that we are in possession of the double portion.

I don't want to over-stress the negative aspect of what is a most beautiful figure, but we cannot pass over those unhappy examples of failure in the scripture that illustrate the importance of this matter to our calling as first-born. They are numerous and of a most salutary nature:

Adam, although a direct creation and not born in the usual sense of the word was certainly the head of his family. His was a signal failure.

Cain failed as the line for the promised seed.

Ishmael, being the son of the bondwoman, failed as the child of promise.

Esau failed as the inheritor of the blessing.

Reuben failed as the [progenitor] to the royal line.

Saul failed as the anointed of God.

Israel failed as the first born nation.

The elder brother of the prodigal failed in love.

They illustrate the fundamental difference between the first-born of the creature and the first-born from the dead. Adam as the first-born of every creature to his posterity ever fails in all his children. Christ, the second Adam, first-born out of death, succeeds gloriously at every step of his work.

The comparison in this light is quite remarkable and absolutely fundamental to our understanding of the first-born type. The first-born of the creature never entertains the idea of dying. However noble he might be, there will always be a strong element of self-serving. His service as first-born to his brother in need will always be partial, at best. On the other hand those born from the dead have made a total surrender of self and will always give unreservedly and at full cost for the needs of others.

Our walk then in this present life as first-borns is initially prospective, dependent for its success on total immersion into Christ's death, consciously looking to him that he may raise us to live the first-born life in him. The apostle Paul's words are precise:

"Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life."--Rom. 6:4

The sole objective of our present walk is to make the transfer from our earnest desire and sincere efforts, to fulfill the first-born duties with their in-grained tendency to serve the self that causes us to fail, and pass into that perfectly submissive will of our Lord who never thought of the cost but continually gave and gave of himself. Happily the apostle's words not only tell us what we have to do, but also provide the key as to its successful accomplishment.

The verse we have quoted contain a most unusual expression. It tells us that Christ was raised by "the **glory** of God." Why not the power of God? That would be more exact. Of course the apostle has chosen his words precisely for he wants us to understand that he is talking of divine life. Now that is fine until we come back to the words "**even so we also** should walk in newness of life."

Does the apostle **really** mean a resurrection life lived by **this** power? This is very difficult to accept, and our experience of failure confirms our doubts. Paul however understands the nature of this problem, and gives us his insight into it in his epistle to the Philippians. Writing to this church

after a life-time of the deepest consecration and self-sacrifice, he calmly and candidly tells them that he is still not dead to self. His words on this matter are found in Philippians 3:7-17 but we particularly quote from verse 10 onwards:

"That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead. Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended."

One could not find a more comprehensive admission of coming short. But Paul continues:

"This one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."

So what then is the apostle's advice? Verse 17: "Brethren, be followers together of me, and mark them which walk so as ye have us for an ensample." Paul, and others walking in the same way, had found the key and we are told to "mark" or pay attention to their course of action and to follow it. So let's do so. Let us go carefully over this passage and mark every step of Paul's progress in Christ that led him to the key to the problem. Paul has shown how in the past he had learned to count all the things of this life as worthless and even to accept their loss. But now in verses 12 and 13 he shows that even this does not constitute being conformed to Christ's death. He must press on from this, forgetting these gains in self-denial, to "those things that which are before."

What crucial difference can attend future events that can bring the desired attainment in Christ? Is Paul simply saying that we just have to keep on in the same way faithful to the end? Surely there must be some new factor. There certainly is, but not in the experiences. It is in the resurrection work of Christ, for Paul has turned the whole concept of death and resurrection on its head. In verse 10 the apostle does not say that he wishes to be conformed to Christ's death so that he may know or possess the resurrection power, which is the logical order. Just the opposite. Realizing that he has failed to "apprehend that for which he was apprehended of Christ" he has come to see that this true death and burial into Christ can only be realized by the resurrection power itself, can only be attained if brought under the potent overshadowing of the same mighty **divine creative spirit** that raised up Christ on that resurrection morning, not just to life, but to divine life.

We know that Paul after realizing his need of this final divine aid received its ultimate seal, the seal that belongs to the overcomer of Revelation 7:3. In 2 Timothy 4:6,7 he writes to Timothy:

"For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand . . . Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: **and not to me only**, but unto **ALL them also that love his appearing.**"

This is the consummation of the work of the Spirit. But it is given first only as an earnest, a seal, but only a seal that we have been "apprehended of Christ" not that we have "apprehended." Gradually it opens up the word and gives us opportunities to enter into the fullness of Christ. If we are faithful to its leading, it will even bring us to **accept** the loss of all things, which is the best that the first born creature will ever attain. At this point we are ready to accept with the great apostle, our complete inability to enter any further into the baptism of Christ's death. It is here that we know our need of **his** resurrection power.

Sealed with the knowledge of the mighty working of the spirit, Paul was led into that final submission that knows nothing of self-pleasing and into the inheritance of the true first-born of the spirit.

This wonderful inheritance of the first-born is illustrated in many types and examples for it is fundamental to the work of the new creation. Milk of the word precedes strong meat. The leading of the spirit is followed with the filling of the spirit. The baptism of John is superseded by that of Christ. The small rain and the great rain of Job 37:6, and the early and latter rains mentioned several times in scripture, likewise all show this. And of course the many first-born types center on this truth.

Ruth and Boaz

Now of all the figures of the first-born from the dead that the scriptures afford us, the most perfect of all is found in the Book of Ruth. It is with the delightful imagery of this book that we will close. In this beautiful little book we are instructed in the law of first-born in all its detail. Its chief character is Boaz through whom our dear Lord himself is perfectly portrayed as the true first-born kinsman-redeemer. Ruth the Moabitess fills every particular of the true believer, faithfully demonstrating for us every step that the believer needs to take in the first-born walk.

In returning with Naomi, Ruth demonstrates the Gentile's faith in the covenant relationship that God had established through Abraham. She also marks the first step of faith of every believer, and from then on as she enters into the land of Israel, she marks out the steps that we must take if we

are to enter into the first-born privileges. At the same time by this walk of faith in the God of Israel and love towards Naomi, she makes it possible for Boaz to find her and fulfill his kinsman's duties.

This gives us exactly the information we need. We see every duty we must perform, and, much more importantly, we see where these duties should end and, for our fuller instruction in spiritual things, that part which is exclusively the Lord's.

By chance the record tells us Ruth comes to the field of Boaz and seeks permission to glean. At the end of the day when the other gleaners depart, she "tarried a little in the house." (Ruth 2:7) We might think that she would have been glad to return home to Naomi after a long day's toil, but not so. This one simple action is the turning point in her life.

Boaz was not in the field that day but came to his house from Bethlehem. If Ruth had gone home and not "tarried a little in the house," he would not have seen her. Hearing of her kindness to Naomi, the wife of his kinsman, he determines to bless her. This is a crucial point also in our walk before the Lord as we glean in his harvest field. As we study his word and put into practice those covenant principles, what is it that catches his attention and marks us out for his special care?

It is not sacrifice. It is the spirit of sacrifice that carries us beyond its letter. This is not always easy for us to detect, but there are simple tests that we may apply which will reveal to us our true standing in this matter.

How do we react when we find that we have been treated unfairly? Do we stifle the complaint? Yes, one hopes so. For instance, when waiting in line, do we find we resent someone pushing in before us but contain the impulse to retaliate? This is certainly sacrifice, but is it the spirit of the Lord? Or do we go a little bit further and make the incident an opportunity to witness to that true spirit of sacrifice that was the Lord's, blessing those who curse, suggesting, for instance, that if their need is so urgent that we would be **glad** to let them go before us. This is just a trivial example, of course, but exactly what would mark us out as a "Moabitess."

Noting then the "damsel," Boaz makes inquiry of all the good that she had done to Naomi and begins to specially bless her. That first day gleaning in the field of Boaz she had been blessed in an "earnest" or foretaste of the riches of Boaz. Now this blessing is added to. She may now drink from the supply of water set aside for the reapers, she may eat with them at their table, and Boaz himself reaches out a "morsel of parched corn" with his own hand. But more especially he ensures that the reapers let fall handfuls from the sheaves as they reap.

This is the witness of the spirit. When Ruth returns to Naomi that next night, Naomi recognizes that something extraordinary is taking place. So too if we, while being blessed in sharing the work of our Lord's field, just take that little extra step into the spirit of true sacrifice, we will be led with Paul and those others he holds out as examples to "mark," into the deeper apprehension of the working of the spirit. As the writer to the Hebrews had to point out to those he wrote, "There **remaineth** therefore a rest to the people of God." (Heb. 4:9)

This deeper aspect of the first-born life is also perfectly mirrored in this beautiful little type. Ruth had really shown in all that she had done for Naomi that true spirit of sacrifice, but we have to note that this had not, **and never could**, restore the heritage of Elimelech, Naomi's husband. They were still poor, the inheritance was not theirs. This is a fundamental truth of the utmost importance to the prospective first-born. It did not lie within Ruth's power to obtain the blessed rest.

But there is a way in which we may be led to this rest and it is revealed to us in this wonderful Word, our antitypical Naomi: "Then Naomi her mother-in-law said unto her, My daughter, shall I not seek rest for thee." (Ruth 3:1-11) And then Naomi gives us exact and precise instructions as to how our rest in Christ can be achieved.

"Now is not Boaz of our kindred . . . Behold, he winnoweth barley tonight in the threshingfloor. Wash thyself therefore, and anoint thee, and put thy raiment upon thee, and get thee down to the floor: but make not thyself known unto the man, until he shall have done eating and drinking. And it shall be, when he lieth down, that thou shalt mark the place where he shall lie, and thou shalt go in, and uncover his feet, and lay thee down; and he will tell thee what thou shalt do . . . And she went down unto the floor, and did according to all that her mother-in-law bade her. And when Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of corn: and she came softly, and uncovered his feet, and laid her down. And it came to pass at midnight, that the man was afraid, and turned himself: and, behold, a woman lay at his feet. And he said, Who art thou? And she answered, I am Ruth thine handmaid: spread therefore thy skirt over thine handmaid; for thou art a near kinsman. And he said . . . my daughter fear not I will do to thee all that thou requirest."

Of the washing, anointing, and changing of garment we have no need to speak. These are familiar figures. But the instruction to us not to make ourselves known to our antitypical Boaz until he had finished the harvesting of the barley is a little obscure even though we are aware of the significances of the barley and wheat harvests.

The understanding of this most significant figure lies with the more familiar type of the first-fruits of the harvests. Christ is the first-fruit from the dead, as we read in 1 Corinthians 15:20. "But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept." Christ's offering was symbolized by the first-fruit offering of the barley harvest at Passover time, the Church's offering by the wheat harvest at the time of Pentecost.

The account in Ruth has already confirmed that both harvests were reaped, so the fact that we see Boaz still winnowing barley indicates that this was the final work of bringing in the first harvest. Naomi's instructions were quite plain: Ruth was to wait until this was done and that Boaz had both eaten and drunk and had lain down to rest. When she so does, she finds him "at the end of the heap of corn," the work all done.

In all of this, so far, it is clear that Ruth's love toward Naomi and her God, her giving up of all things because of this love, her industrious labors in the harvest field, and especially her sweet character in respect to the house of Boaz, had been instrumental in bringing her to this point. But this was as far as she could go. The real source of blessing lay with the silent figure of Boaz.

This figure of Boaz at rest after the completion of his work is the entire basis of the first-born inheritance. We have drawn it specifically to notice already but with the evidence of the type before us, we can now mark it out with certainty. We know, of course, that the Lord as the *Logos* in his office of first-born of every creature with all the power invested in him, could not effect our change to new creatures. What is less obvious but implicit in the figures of scripture is that as first-born of every creature he could not effect our prospective death to self either.

He could become flesh and die for us and purchase the lost possession, but without the winnowing experiences by which even his faith was tested, he could not have been heir of the "first-born from the dead" inheritance.

"For it became him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation **perfect through sufferings.**"--Heb. 2:10

The imagery of the "threshingfloor" wonderfully depicts the completion of the Lord's perfect ministry and his joy and satisfaction in its completion. "Jesus saith unto them, My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work" (John 4:34) and "for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God." (Heb. 12:2) "Set down at the right hand of the throne of God," our Boaz has "eaten and drunk" and has entered into the "joy that was set before him," seated at rest in his Father's throne. This is

were Ruth found Boaz, "at the **end** of the heap of corn."

From the day she had made the momentous decision to leave all and follow Naomi, Ruth had listened to and carefully followed all the instructions of her mother-in-law. May the Lord grant that we have been as diligent. If we are serious about entering the "rest" that remains to the "people of God," Naomi's final instructions to Ruth should be of the utmost interest to us:

"And it shall be, when he lieth down, that thou shalt mark the place where he shall lie, and thou shalt go in, and uncover his feet, and lay thee down; and **he will tell thee what thou shalt do.**"

We have marked the place where he waits to bless us, at the end of the heap of barley. We wait to be blessed with Ruth when Boaz fills her "vail" with a measure of his harvest. But first we have the enigmatic instructions of our antitypical Naomi, to uncover the feet of the sleeping Boaz and lie quietly down.

It goes without saying that we need to understand the figure if we are to fulfill the reality. Happily the understanding comes easily to hand, for we have an abundance of scriptures--our Naomi of course--which brings this to us.

A concordance quickly reveals that the feet of Jesus is the place of blessing. References too numerous to mention here show supplicants at his feet make petition for help. This should not particularly surprise us. This was undoubtedly a customary form of supplication where the petitioner was in great need. The great difference with the petitioners at Jesus' feet of course was that they were the recipients of miracles.

This uncovering of the feet of Jesus reveals a wealth of spiritual teaching but we only need the one, of the many citations, which brings out the significance of Boaz lying "at the **end** of the heap of corn." This is found in Matthew 28:9, the occasion where the women who had been to the tomb were hurrying back to tell the disciples that the body of Jesus had been removed:

"And as they went to tell his disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, All hail. **And they came and held him by the feet,** and worshipped him."

I have no certain idea why the women acted so. We have seen that kneeling at the feet of Jesus would not be an extraordinary thing in itself and it would be feasible to understand them grasping him by the feet while so doing. The thing that is really unique about this incident is that of all the many people that fell, knelt and worshipped at, or washed, anointed or kissed our dear Lord's

feet, these were the only ones who touched the feet of the **risen** Lord. This incident stands entirely on its own. All before had certainly received of the power of the spirit, miracles of health in mind and body. More than this: even life from the dead. But all this work passed away. Lazarus returned eventually to the dust. All that they had received was by the first-born of every creature. The women kneeling and worshipping had taken hold of the feet of the first-born from the dead.

Thanks to the wonderful typical teaching of the Word, we have been able to mark the place where our Lord rested after entering into the blessing of his finished work. Today as we have meditated together on the instructions of Naomi, we have found the place where he lies at the end of the heap of barley. We have uncovered his feet, and here we are now resting quietly like Ruth in the silence of the midnight darkness at the feet of the true first-born from the dead. We wait for him to wake for we know that Naomi has told us that when he does, he will tell us what we must do to obtain our inheritance.

What he will say to you, dear brethren, in the silence of your heart, I cannot say. This is as far as the written word can take us.

The Lesson for Us

We have shared together the passing inheritance of the first-born creature. We pass on from "those things which are behind," as did Paul, and now "reaching forth unto those things which are before" as the apostle also directed, we can note his words elsewhere spoken on this matter to the Ephesian church: "If so be that ye **have heard him**, and have been **taught by him** as the truth is in Jesus." (Eph. 4:21)

What we have here then is a most wonderful and detailed description of the step that we should take as prospective first-borns. By it we may discern exactly at what stage of the race for the prize we have attained and see before us every step that still needs to be taken.

Have we left all to come into the covenant relationship of the people of God? Yes, but even here there will have been some like Orpah who first said yes and then went back. Have we gleaned in the field of the Word? Why yes, certainly, and undoubtedly returned to our Naomi to learn that it is the field of Boaz and to learn something of our first-born inheritance. More difficult to affirm unequivocally is that we have continued a little in the house of Boaz, doing good to those who spitefully use us, returning good for evil, and even more, actually overcoming evil with good-- not just learning the Word of the Lord, but putting it into practice and living his life, abiding in

his house.

This is what brings the "Moabite damsel" to the attention of Boaz who then sees how really serious she is in her care of Naomi. We know this is an important part in our walk in Christ. Only as he sees us putting his Word into practice is he able to bless us further. But perhaps this is so also, and we find new refreshing insights into his will for us, portions of his Word guiding us in difficult experiences. Perhaps we can see very special providences in some trial, his hand, as it were, putting forth the "morsel of parched corn," bread of life touched by the fire of experience.

All this, and the deepening understanding of the Word thrown down by the reapers at his command, is the growing witness of the spirit, but it is still only an earnest, not the final sealing. This is not measured out to us until we come down to the threshingfloor to see through the eyes of a "Moabitish damsel" her beloved, winnowing through the night.

"Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; despised, rejected, acquainted with grief: bearing griefs, carrying our sorrows yet ignored, dis-esteemed, stricken, smitten of God, afflicted."

Boaz never rests, the flail falls relentlessly, the golden store of grains fills the threshingfloor.

"Wounded, bruised for iniquities: chastised for our peace, beaten," falsely accused, "spat upon, mocked." Never murmuring Boaz toils until, as the last grain falls to the threshingfloor, we hear his words, "It is finished."

Still the Moabite waits. The words of Naomi are clear. Boaz, his strength renewed, his heart rejoicing, lies down at the end of the harvest store. The Moabite walks quietly along the heap of barley towards her Lord marveling at it, "able to comprehend with all saints the breadth, and length, and depth, and height" . . . of the love of Christ. (Eph. 3:18)

We must wait patiently in "hope" with her if we are to receive a measure of the divine store of the love of Christ.

"Patience brings experience; and experience, hope: And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which is given unto us."--Rom. 5:4,5

Christ speaks to us as we lie in supplication at his feet. "Fear not I will do to thee all that thou requirest." (Ruth 3:11)

"Then he said, Bring the vail that thou hast upon thee, and hold it. And when she held it, he measured six measures of barley. And when she came to her mother-in-law, she told her all that the man had done to her. And she said, these six measures of barley gave he me; for he said to me, Go not empty unto thy mother-in-law."--Ruth 3:15-17

Naomi recognizes the sign. It is the seal of the overcomer, the second sealing, if you like, of the spirit. It is still an earnest of the reality in heaven, but a complete sealing, given to us while still in the flesh, a complete confirmation which all those who "love his appearing" recognize. But we are still in the flesh for the store in our veil of faith is just **six** measures. We must attend still to the voice of Naomi. Verse 18: "Sit still, my daughter, until thou know how the matter will fall." But Naomi recognizes the seal, "for the man will not be in rest, until he have finished the thing this day."