

PEOPLE CONNECTIONS, PART 10: NOBLE REBIRTH

1 Peter 2:9-16, James 2:1-8 (NASB)

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The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe tells the story of four normal children named Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy who find themselves elevated to nobility in the magical land of Narnia as author C. S. Lewis writes: "For then, in the Great Hall of Cair Paravel--that wonderful hall with the ivory roof and west door all hung with peacock's feathers and the eastern door which opens right into the sea, in the presence of all their friends and to the sound of trumpets, Aslan solemnly crowned them and led them onto the four thrones amid deafening shouts of, 'Long Live King Peter! Long Live Queen Susan! Long Live King Edmund! Long Live Queen Lucy!'"

"Once a king or queen in Narnia, always a king or queen. Bear it well, Sons of Adam! Bear it well, Daughters of Eve!" said Aslan."

...."These two Kings and two Queens governed Narnia well and long and happy was their reign. At first much of their time was spent in seeking out the remnants of the White Witch's army and destroying them, and indeed for a long time there would be news of evil things lurking in the wilder parts of the forest--a haunting here, and a killing there, a glimpse of a werewolf one month and a rumour of a hag the next. But in the end all that foul brood was stamped out. And they made good laws and kept the peace and saved good trees from being unnecessarily cut down..."

...."And they entered into friendship and alliance with countries beyond the sea and paid them visits of state and received visits of state from them. And Peter became a tall and deep chested man and a great warrior, and he was called King Peter the Magnificent. And Susan grew into a tall and gracious woman with black hair that fell almost to her feet and the Kings of the countries beyond the sea began to send ambassadors asking for her hand in marriage. And she was called Queen Susan the Gentle. Edmund was a graver and quieter man than Peter, and great in counsel and judgment. He was called King Edmund the Just. But as for Lucy, she was always gay and golden haired, and all princes in those parts desired her to be their Queen, and her own people called her Queen Lucy the Valiant." [pp. 178-181, conflated]

A NEW STATION IN LIFE

In the non-magical world as we know it most kings, queens, lords, and ladies acquire their station in life through noble birth. In extraordinary cases, someone may be elevated to royalty like the children in C. S. Lewis's story or the boy who drew the sword from the stone in the legend of King Arthur. In the megastory of Christ's kingdom royalty is gained through a people connection with the King of Kings by faith. In fact, royalty is conferred by adoption into his royal family. There is no birth so noble as being born again.

We all start life as bickering children, like Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy, condemned to live and die with nothing more than the reality of a sinful birth. But those who receive new life in Jesus Christ by faith gain a new station in life, as the Apostle Peter describes: "**But you are A CHOSEN**

RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God's OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were NOT A PEOPLE, but now you are THE PEOPLE OF GOD; you had NOT RECEIVED MERCY, but now you have RECEIVED MERCY" (1 Peter 2:9-10). From laymen and women to priests, from people in the dark to people in the light, from a merciless life in a ruined world to divine mercy, from separation from God to connection, and, most relevant to our study, from commoners to royalty.

That transformation of status is solely because of our connection to Christ, as Paul wrote to the Galatians: **"But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God. However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods"** (Galatians 4:4-8). When we believe in Christ the Holy Spirit takes residence in our hearts making us a part of the royal family and so we can cry out: "Abba! Father!"

Sonship in first century Israel signified the full rights of a member of the family. Full heirs may act freely in Christ Jesus whether male or female, old or young, and whatever race or color. Sanctified freedom of action is a key element of membership in the royal family of Christ. The question is: Free to do what?

NEW STATION IN LIFE, NEW BEHAVIOR

A new station in life brings with it the expectation of a new way of behaving. We expect royalty to act nobly. They may fail to do so, but that does not remove the expectation. According to the American Heritage Dictionary the word "noble" means not only station, but "showing qualities of high moral character, such as courage, generosity, or honor." A synonym for noble is "magnanimous," embodying kindness, generosity, and forgiveness.

By contrast a person with the status of nobility may actually be ignoble in character: unkind, selfish, and unforgiving. King Saul of Israel is an example of a man who became the first royal personage in the nation but never finally rose to nobility of spirit. It is ignoble for a king to throw a spear at his son-in-law in the royal hall, to collect women in a harem, to seek out a medium, and finally to take his own life out of pride.

So if there is a presumption of good behavior on the part of those of noble birth, how much more of those of noble rebirth. Even the lost world expects the God-people to act with the noble characteristics of God. Back in our passage in 1 Peter we can now see why the next verse, after telling of our status as a royal priesthood, immediately starts to lay upon us the burden of behavior befitting our new station: **"Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul"** (1 Peter 2:11). Good behavior is worthy of its own sake. Even if no one else is watching, you and I determine who we really are by our choices. Are we adopted sons and daughters of the Heavenly Father? If so, we will act like it and give people a reason to wonder why.

Nothing is more obvious from history than that persons of privilege and wealth often fall prey to fleshly lusts. The mere expectation of good behavior is not enough to create it. For example, the recent history of the British monarchy is rife with lust and infidelity. The church of Christ has its own form of petty royalty and list of sad moral failures. The next verse explains that eternal matters turn on our behavior: "**Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation**" (1 Peter 2:12). The very glory of God is at stake! Every time we, as royal children, fall prey to fleshly lusts we besmirch the name of God on earth. Instead, our good behavior should be giving people cause to honor him. Our adoption as heirs has this explicit purpose: "**...that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.**"

The requirements of good behavior continue to unfold in this passage: "**Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men**" (1 Peter 2:13-15). Members of Christ's family are expected to honor those in authority. This is among the most difficult behaviors for modern and postmodern people. We have been trained by a century of depictions of antiheroes in life and entertainment. The hero used to be the guy or gal who follows the rules and sacrifices for honor's sake to help others. The antihero is the guy or gal who breaks all the rules in order to win the game--and then usually sleeps with someone not his or her spouse.

So Western culture has infected us with a powerful strain of disrespect and rebellion toward even those authorities which God has raised for the benefit of everyone. If we want to be members of Christ's royal family then we must fight this corrosive tendency and choose to be cooperative and respectful for the glory of God.

FREEDOM TO FOLLOW THE ROYAL LAW

If we are of noble rebirth then we have been delivered from spiritual slavery and set free. We now come to the explanation of what we are supposed to do with our freedom. Peter's teaching continues: "**Act as free men [and women], and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bondslaves of God**" (1 Peter 2:16). Wait a minute! How can freedom and nobility be reconciled with slavery to God? It seems like we just got out of bondage and now Peter is throwing us right back into the toxic pool of legalistic guilt and punishments.

No, those of noble rebirth are commanded to follow something called the "royal law" by which the laws of God in the Bible are not done away but are followed according to the pattern of Christ. The Apostle James wrote to believers urging us to "**...fulfill...the royal law according to the Scripture, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF'**" (James 2:8).

Jesus taught that love was the mark above all marks which would identify us to a lost world as members of his royal family. And obviously, love for God entails our caring obedience to our heavenly Father. Love is the royal law which integrates all of the teaching of God about how members of his family should act. That grants to us tremendous freedom to live according to our new status of nobility.

We do not have to spend all our days trying to implement a legalistic reading of the Bible, but we can live according to the new impulses of love which the Holy Spirit plants in our hearts.

BEYOND *NOBLESSE OBLIGE*

Though it may seem alien to most of us there is a powerful impulse in Western culture for those of noble status to help others. *Noblesse oblige* is from the French and is defined as "the belief that the wealthy and privileged are obliged to help those less fortunate" (Am. Her. Dict.). Often this has descended to little more than those of noble birth donating small amounts which are meaningless to them in order to gain a good reputation. And if you think that democratic America does not have a class structure, think again. The nobles of the ages have ridden around in glorious chariots with a retinue of servants, interacting primarily with one another, wearing absurd finery, living in lavish mansions, eating the finest food, and exploiting working people without much thought. We have those people!

Jesus commanded us not to act like such earthly nobles. In fact, as his royal children he sends us far beyond the boundaries of *noblesse oblige*. Listen to Paul encouraging the Corinthian believers with the story of the noble character of the Macedonian Christians: "**Now, brethren, we wish to make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, they gave of their own accord, begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints, and this, not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God**" (2 Corinthians 8:1-5).

What can explain the behavior of these Macedonians? They were in deep poverty themselves, yet they gave even beyond their ability to help care for starving believers in Jerusalem during a famine. These members of the royal family of God must have reasoned on their heavenly riches. They must have concluded that earthly goods do not define the wealth of the children of the King. They chose to live by grace in the real world, rejoicing to express their new inward love for others planted there by the Holy Spirit. Paul writes that "**they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God.**" In other words, after total commitment to Christ and one another in Christ, there is nothing that will be withheld in the expression of love, the royal law.

Paul went on to explain what was happening in the next chapter: "**Now this I say, he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed; as it is written, 'HE SCATTERED ABROAD, HE GAVE TO THE POOR, HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS ENDURES FOREVER.'** Now He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness; you will be enriched in everything for all liberality, which through us is producing thanksgiving to God" (2 Corinthians 9:6-11).

Paul writes that the law of sowing and reaping applies to our generosity of spirit as well as our gardens. The royal law of love is within us, so all giving must be according to that inward desire to

express the love of Christ. And how do we reckon ourselves as those who, in God's kingdom, not only give according to *noblesse oblige* but far beyond? The explanation is that "**...God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed.**" The strange peacefulness which royals have is a result of an abundance of earthly goods. We can have a better peacefulness out of which we give to others by the grace of God. He himself is our sufficiency in all things, and so even earthly lack cannot shut down the inward impulse of generosity of the royal family of God. What freedom! What privilege!

The result of such giving is a life of joy, as Erwin McManus tells in his book *Uprising: A Revolution of the Soul*: "While the greedy see the world with limited resources, the generous always operate from an abundance mentality. The greedy take to ensure that they will never be without; the generous give without fear....The generous invest their lives in the prosperity of others. It isn't simply that the generous are unconcerned for their own lives and well-being; it is that they have discovered an unexpected secret: Life is most enjoyed when we give ourselves away. In that sense the generous could be described as hedonistic. They experience indescribable pleasure in serving the good of others and knowing that someone else's life was enriched as a secret indulgence" (p. 157).

We desperately need to embrace our royal status! Our noble rebirth should totally transform our way of relating to the world. We do not need anything from anyone. We give instead. That is true freedom! And as for *noblesse oblige*? Everyone on earth is less fortunate than the most recent believer. The good news of Jesus Christ is the best we can give!

Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy were raised to royal status by Aslan the lion who is the equivalent of Christ in our opening story. Instead of fighting and bickering as normal children any longer, as kings and queens in their new kingdom Narnia they acted with the greatest nobility. How much more should we! We also have been raised out of the petty concerns and conflicts of normal life by our people connection to Jesus Christ, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Are you a member of the royal family of God by faith in Christ? Nothing I have said will matter unless you confess your sins, receive his forgiveness, and invite the Holy Spirit to dwell within you. By that seemingly simple means you can experience a noble rebirth.

If you are in Christ today I urge you to check the way you relate to reality. Do you remember who you are? Are you living by your old thoughts of earthly lack, or has the total sufficiency of Christ gripped your soul? We who believe ought to walk around this earth as royal children of God Almighty. Christ gave all, and as we learn to give by grace according to his ultimate generosity of spirit we will taste the sweetness of his glory. There simply is nothing better.

But there is only one way to taste this. You must give something away. What free investment of yourself or your resources has the Lord already planted in your heart? You have the opportunity to find out what it means to be a son or daughter of the King of Heaven. Don't miss it!