Children of the Most High

"I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High. But ye shall die like men, and fall like one of the princes."
—Psalm 82:6,7

THROUGHOUT MOST OF the western world today the idea of the universal fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man is being stressed. If this viewpoint were true it would mean that all human beings are children of God. In Luke 3:38, Adam is declared to be the "son of God," but because he transgressed Divine law he forfeited his inheritance as a son, was rejected by God, and sentenced to death. Legally, his children also were born outside of the Creator's parental jurisdiction, not being considered by God to be his children.

However, God has continued to love his disinherited children. Through the redemptive work of Christ he made provision for them to return to his family and again share in the joys of the restored relationship as human sons. This restoration to the family fold, so far as the world in general is concerned, will be fully realized at the end of the Millennial Age when, to those who qualify for eter-

nal life under the judgment and kingdom regulations of the thousand years of restoration, Jesus will say "Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."—Matt. 25:34

Meanwhile, the world in general, alienated from God through wicked works, are not the children of God in the truest sense. However, man was originally created in the image of God, and varying traces of that image still remain in the hearts of the people. It manifests itself in conscience, and in all noble traits of justice and benevolence that we so often see unselfishly displayed by those with whom we are surrounded. These remaining remnants of the Divine image, which still exercise such a power of good in an otherwise evil and selfish world, are but reminders of the grandeur and nobility of character which Adam must have possessed before he sinned and thereby began his journey over the "broad" road, which leads to "destruction." (Matt. 7:13) It helps us to realize also, to some extent, the superb qualities that will be possessed by the human race when restored to perfection and reinstated as human sons of God at the end of the millennium.

The broad view entertained today—that all human beings are the sons of God—was not held by the people in Jesus' day, especially by those of the Jewish nation. Divine sonship was considered very sacred, and beyond the reach of any member of the fallen race. To claim the status of sonship with God was construed within the religious circles of Israel to be blasphemy, and, according to the Law, made one worthy of death. It was this viewpoint that helped to bring about Jesus' crucifixion.

IGNORANT OF THE PROPHECIES

Had the religious leaders of Jesus' day not been so ignorant of the prophecies they would have known that in the Divine plan for human salvation God had made provision for some to become his sons, his children. Our text is one of these prophecies. In it, God addresses those whom he calls 'children of the most High,' referring to them as 'gods.' True, the scribes and Pharisees, even if they knew of this prophecy, would have no idea to whom it might apply.

Jesus gives us this information. It was on one of the occasions when his own sonship was called in question, and he was being charged with blasphemy. In his reply to his accusers, Jesus quoted this prophecy and explained that it applied to those "unto whom the word of God came," meaning, of course, his disciples, and those who believed on him through their teachings. (John 10:34-36) There are many texts of scripture to show that the Word of God was designed for, and came to, the church of the Gospel Age. Jesus said to his Father concerning his disciples, "I have given them thy word." (John 17:14) Peter explains that the Old Testament scriptures were written, not particularly for the benefit of the people during the Jewish Age, but "unto us."—I Pet. 1:12

It is, then, to the followers of Christ during the present Gospel Age that our text applies. It is these who, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, are made spiritual children of God. John, who reported Jesus' application of our text, seemed particularly impressed with this sonship viewpoint. In his first epistle, he writes, "Now are we the sons of God,

and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is."—I John 3:2

Just as the truth of his sonship helped to lead Jesus to his death, those who then espoused his cause and, like him, professed to be sons of the Creator, thereby placed themselves in jeopardy, especially among the people of Israel. But sacrifice and suffering are one of the present heritages of the sons of God. This is indicated in the verse of our text, in which the LORD says, 'Ye shall die like men, and fall like one of the princes.'

This does not mean that the great God—Creator of the universe—is incapable of protecting his children from harm. It is unthinkable to suppose that they die like men because he is disinterested in them, or is unable to prevent them from being overwhelmed by their enemies. The only conclusion to be reached is that these sons of God, these children of the Most High, die like men because it is the Divine will for them to die.

The full meaning of the text is more readily understood when we consider the further expression explaining that these 'fall [in death] like one of the princes.' The word princes is translated from a Hebrew word meaning a 'tribal or family head.' Since the Divine plan of salvation pertains to the human race, we can properly think of one of the princes referred to in this text as Adam, the head of the entire human family.

Adam, the perfect human son of God, was created not to die, but to live. He went into death because he transgressed Divine law. He died as a sinner, condemned to death, losing both his sonship

and his right to live. His children, likewise born in sin, have continued to die as condemned sinners.

But surely the 'children of the most High' do not die as sinners under condemnation to death! These to whom the Word of God has come during the Gospel Age, and who have accepted that Word, are given eternal life. (John 5:24) They are no longer under condemnation, but have passed from death unto life. Yet they die, as the psalmist says, 'like men.'

How true this is! All the faithful followers of the Master, from Pentecost on, have died like men. From the human standpoint there has seemed to be no difference between the death of a saint and the death of a sinner. The vast majority of both classes die of sickness or of old age. Some sinners die by accident and, likewise, some saints. Many true Christians earlier in the age died as martyrs for the cause of Christ, and many non-Christians also died as martyrs for one cause or another.

LIKE 'ONE' OF THE PRINCES

God has a different viewpoint. While seemingly, and to all outward appearance, these children of the Most High die like men, actually they fall in death 'like one of the princes.' We have seen that one of the princes referred to in this statement is Adam. He died because condemned to death. But the children of the Most High have, through faith, been released from the condemnation of sin and death that is upon the human race through its princely head, Adam. They do not, therefore, die as he died.

But there is another prince—that is, Prince Jesus. As the "last Adam," he is the new Head of the

human race. (I Cor. 15:45) Through regeneration he will become the father who will give everlasting life to those who lost life through Prince Adam. In order to accomplish this Divine plan for the restoration of Adam's children to life, Jesus also died. But, unlike Prince Adam, he did not die as a condemned sinner, but as a sacrifice for sinners.

Jesus did not forfeit his life through disobedience to Divine law, as did Prince Adam, but voluntarily gave up his life in order to take the sinner's place in death. Thus his was a sacrificial death. Writing to the church at Rome, to the children of the Most High in that congregation, and to us as well, Paul spoke of being "planted together in the likeness" of Jesus' death. (Rom. 6:5) So it is that we die like 'one' of the princes, that is, like Prince Jesus, who voluntarily poured out his soul unto death that the world might have an opportunity to live.

Jesus and the apostles had much to say about our privilege of dying with him, and like him. Jesus asked two of his disciples, who requested special places with him in his kingdom, if they were able to be baptized with his baptism. (Mark 10:38) Paul referred to this as being "baptized" into Jesus' death.—Rom. 6:3

Peter wrote, "Even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps." (I Pet. 2:21) In Revelation 14:4, John identifies those on Mt. Sion with the Lamb as the ones who had followed the Lamb—followed Jesus, that is, into sacrificial death. They are described as those who are "beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God."—Rev. 20:4

A TYPE OF CHRISTIAN DYING

In Hebrews 13:13, Paul speaks of the children of the Most High of this age as going forth unto Christ "without the camp, bearing his reproach." This is a reference to a part of the ceremony that occurred on Israel's typical Day of Atonement. On that day two animals were sacrificed, and their blood was taken into the Most Holy of the Tabernacle and sprinkled on the mercy seat to make atonement for Israel's sins—first a bullock and then a goat. The goat was treated exactly like the bullock in every way.

These animals were slain by the high priest. Their fat and life-producing organs were burned on a brazen altar in the court surrounding the Tabernacle proper. The carcasses of the animals were taken out of the court, 'without the camp,' and burned. The priest took coals of fire from the brazen altar in the court, together with his hands full of incense, went into the first Holy of the Tabernacle, put the coals of fire on a golden altar which was situated there, and sprinkled the incense upon the fire. The sweet odor of the burning incense penetrated into the Most Holy, preparing the way for the priest's entry to sprinkle the blood upon the mercy seat.—Lev. 16:1-19

Since Paul admonishes us to go to Jesus without the camp it is clear that, in his mind, the two animals sacrificed on the typical Day of Atonement represented first Jesus (the bullock), and then the church (the goat). To go to Jesus without the camp means that we have the opportunity of suffering and dying with him, and under similar circumstances. We have the privilege of sharing in his ignominy, and of being outcasts from the world.

There is a more comprehensive picture for us in Israel's Atonement Day sacrifices than merely the opportunity it points out to us of sharing in the suffering and death of Jesus. As we have seen, three sacrificial fires burned on that day—one without the camp, another on the brazen altar in the court, and the third on the golden altar in the first Holy. These seem designed to picture three viewpoints of Jesus' life of sacrifice, and ours as his followers.

Obviously, the burning of the carcasses of the animals without the camp in view of all Israel pictured the manner in which the unbelieving world, views the sacrifice of true believers. Their minds being blinded by the "god of this world" (II Cor. 4:4); to them true Christian sacrifice is more or less obnoxious. They look upon zealous Christians as foolish, and wasting their time and effort. Because these sacrifices manifest themselves largely in bearing witness to the Truth, and because the darkness of the world hateth the light of the Gospel, they become a stench in their nostrils, leading ofttimes to persecution.

This is merely the viewpoint of the unbelieving world. The burning of the fat and life-producing organs on the brazen altar in the court represents the viewpoint of fellow sacrificers, the household of faith. If we, as individuals, are falling (in death) like one of the princes—that is, like Prince Jesus—we will appreciate the position of those who are likewise presenting their bodies a living sacrifice. Instead of hindering them, we will do all we can to help them. Instead of adding to their burdens, we will endeavor by kind words of encouragement to help them bear their trials.

Fat burns furiously, so the fire upon the brazen altar would also represent the consuming zeal of our Master, and a like zeal on the part of his true followers. Of Jesus it was written, that the zeal of God's house consumed him. (Ps. 69:9; John 2:17) His example of self-sacrificing devotion to the will of the Heavenly Father is a pattern for us; and, like him, we too will want to be consumed in serving our Heavenly Father's cause, cooperating zealously with him in whatever share of his work he gives us to do.

If we are not as zealous ourselves as we should be, we might be tempted to be critical of those who are laying down their lives faithfully in the service of the LORD, instead of our being inspired by their faithfulness to greater diligence and zeal. When Paul was in prison in Rome, the church at Philippi sent a gift to him by Epaphroditus. (Phil. 4:18) It was a hazardous undertaking and Epaphroditus became "sick nigh unto death." (Phil. 2:25-30) Paul then wrote to the Philippian brethren instructing them that they should hold this faithful servant "in reputation." Instead of suggesting that Epaphroditus did not have the spirit of a sound mind, Paul indicated that he greatly appreciated his self-sacrificing zeal. This is the viewpoint of all fellow sacrificers, as antitypically we note the burning 'fat' of our brethren in Christ who, together with us, are falling in death like Prince Jesus.

There is still another viewpoint of Christian sacrifice—namely, that which was represented by the burning incense on the golden altar in the Holy. This is primarily God's viewpoint, although as New Creatures in the Holy we should also be aware of, and appreciate, the sweet odor of praise pictured by the

burning incense. Paul speaks of this as the "sacrifice of praise to God," which all who are faithful to their covenant of sacrifice offer to God "continually." (Heb. 13:15) This is not a different sacrifice from that which is pictured by the burning carcasses outside of the camp. It is merely another viewpoint of that sacrifice, and another viewpoint also of the same sacrifice pictured by the burning fat in the court. It indicates that what is misunderstood by the world, and obnoxious to them, is a sweet-smelling savor to God.

It is true, of course, that the LORD also sees the burning carcasses without the camp. He is aware of the reproaches that this brings upon his people. He knows of the shame and ignominy which is often heaped upon them, and it is only by his sustaining grace that the sacrificers are able to continue thus to lay down their lives as Jesus did. We can always rely upon him to encourage and strengthen us, and when the trials become too severe, to provide a way of escape.

The LORD also appreciates the zeal of his people, as pictured by the burning fat on the brazen altar in the court. Through Christ, he has called us to be a "peculiar people, zealous of good works." (Titus 2:14) In this text, the Greek word translated 'peculiar' means special, or extraordinary. Those who are truly zealous for the LORD, and for the cause in which he has invited them to participate, are a very special people to him. He loves them, treasures them, and protects them.

As pictured by the burning incense, their sacrifice is as a sweet odor to him which penetrates beyond the veil, into heaven itself, as pictured by the Most Holy of the Tabernacle. It was this odor of the burning incense, penetrating beyond the veil, that pre-

pared the way for the priest to enter with blood to sprinkle upon the mercy seat. Had he not carried out every detail of the Atonement Day service exactly as he had been instructed by the LORD, including the burning of the incense on the golden altar, he would have died as he passed under the second veil.

This was true, antitypically, of Jesus, and it is also true of us who, like him, are falling sacrificially in death. Paul tells us that God "hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him [Jesus] from the dead." (Acts 17:31) This 'assurance' is in the fact that Jesus' resurrection by his Father proves that his sacrifice was acceptable, and that he has now entered into the "holiest" of all, there "to appear in the presence of God for us," and later, for all mankind.—Heb. 10:19; 9:24

In entering into the antitypical Most Holy, Jesus was our "forerunner." (chap. 6:20) This means that we follow him into death, and thus also pass under the antitypical second veil. This is one of the special privileges of the Gospel Age sons of God. Paul explains that in "bringing many sons unto glory" it was the Father's plan to make the "captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings." (Heb. 2:10) This suffering was typified by the three fires which were used on the typical Day of Atonement in completely consuming those typical sacrifices, and it is our privilege, as part of the 'many sons,' to present our bodies "a living sacrifice" to be consumed by those fires.—Rom. 12:1

It is essential for us, as it was for Jesus, to be faithful to our covenant of sacrifice, faithful even unto death, if we are to hear the "Well done" on the other side of the veil. (Matt. 25:21) "Be thou faithful unto death," Jesus said, "and I will give thee a

crown of life." (Rev. 2:10) If, in being planted together in the likeness of Jesus' death, we are faithful until the sacrifice is wholly consumed, then we will share in his resurrection.

This glorious hope of resurrection—to live and reign with Christ—seems clearly shown in the verse following our text, although the thought is obscured by an inappropriate translation. The sequence of thought seems obvious. 'I have said, Ye are gods,' the LORD declares, 'but ye shall die like men, and fall like one of the princes.' This traces the experience of these children of the Most High into sacrificial death with Prince Jesus.

Then comes the statement, "Arise, O God, judge the earth: for thou shalt inherit all nations." (Ps. 82:8) As this translation reads, it would seem to have no relationship at all to the preceding verses. The fact is, however, that the Hebrew word here translated 'God' is the same one that is translated 'gods' in the statement, I have said, Ye are gods. It is the plural form of the Hebrew word meaning 'mighty ones.'

These whom the LORD himself declares to be gods, and who are the children of the Most High God, go down into death sacrificially—they fall in death like Prince Jesus. Having fallen in death, in the next verse these same gods are bidden to 'arise.' It seems reasonable that this is a prophetic summons to the church to arise in the first resurrection that they might live and reign "with Christ a thousand years."—Rev. 20:4

These children of the Most High are promised that, if they are faithful, they will, together with Jesus, judge the world. (I Cor. 6:2,3) They are also promised, upon the condition of faithfulness that,

together with Jesus, they will 'inherit all nations.' How much in keeping with this glorious prospect is the statement, 'Arise, O gods, judge the earth: for thou shalt inherit all nations.'

Jesus assures us that it is God's plan that his faithful followers shall enter into this inheritance with him. He said, "He that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations: And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father."—Rev. 2:26,27

It was this honored position in the Divine plan that Jesus 'received' of his Father in a wonderful promise recorded in the second Psalm, and upon the basis of the fact that he was the faithful Son of God. The promise reads, "I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee. Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession. Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel."—Ps. 2:7-9

Just as the Heavenly Father said to Jesus, 'Thou art my Son,' to us, his footstep followers, who are being planted together in the likeness of his death, he also affirms this precious relationship—'I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High.' When we begin to realize the implications of this marvelous declaration, we can understand John's feelings when he wrote, "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God." (I John 3:1-3) May we ever keep in mind the conditions upon which this may be true of us—that we fall like one of the princes. ■