

Chapter 8

THE MEANING OF PSALM 2:7

“I will declare the decree: the Lord hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee” (Psalm 2:7). Jesus Christ was “declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead” (Romans 1:4).

Psalm 2 begins on a tumultuous note. Verses 1-3 describe world conditions when the Messiah returns to earth to establish the millennial kingdom and administer God’s rule worldwide. With grim determination Gentile rulers and their armies will unite to try to prevent the establishment of divine Messianic rule (cf. Revelation 16:12-16; 19:11-21). God will laugh at the punitiveness of this stubborn rebellious opposition to His omnipotent power, will pour out His wrath on the rebels, and will establish His Messiah as King in spite of the Gentiles’ resistance (Psalm 2:4-6).

Verse 7 begins to relate what the Messiah will say when He returns in His second coming. At the time Messiah takes over the rule of the earth He will declare what God had already decreed concerning Him: “Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee.” How does this Psalm 2:7 statement relate to the eternal Sonship of Jesus Christ? Does the statement indicate that Christ *became* the Son of God at some point in history (on the day that God begot Him) and therefore is not eternally the Son of God? To answer these questions we must examine Paul’s use of the Psalm 2:7 statement in Acts 13:33.

Having talked about God's promise to give Israel a Savior from David's lineage, Paul made the following declaration in Acts 13:33: "God hath fulfilled the same unto us their children, in that he hath raised up Jesus again; as it is also written in the second psalm, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee." This verse indicates that God's raising up of Jesus fulfilled His Psalm 2:7 decree concerning the Messiah. Paul seemed to be saying that God begot the Messiah as His Son when He raised up Jesus. What did Paul mean when he said that God "hath raised up Jesus"?

Two interpretations of Paul's declaration

Many interpreters believe that Paul had the following meaning in mind: God raised up Jesus to deliver Israel from its oppressors in the same sense that He raised up Moses to deliver Israel from its Egyptian oppressors. God raised up Jesus by sending Him into the world incarnated in human flesh to be the deliverer. The raising up took place at Christ's incarnation, the day that God begot His humanity. Some who believe this interpretation conclude that since the raising up of Jesus fulfilled God's Psalm 2:7 decree concerning the Messiah and took place at Christ's incarnation, Christ *became* the Son of God at the time of His incarnation.

There is a major problem with this conclusion. In chapter 7 we noted that the expression *the Son of God* indicates absolute deity for Jesus Christ and the expression *the Son of man* indicates His humanity. Since God begot Christ's humanity, not His deity, at the time of the incarnation, it follows that Christ became the Son of man, not the Son of God, at the time of His incarnation.

Other scholars propose a different interpretation of Paul's statement concerning the raising up of Jesus. They believe that Paul was referring to the bodily resurrection of Christ. According to this interpretation God's Psalm 2:7 decree concerning the Messiah was fulfilled when Jesus

rose from the dead. This would mean that Paul was linking Christ's resurrection, His being the promised deliverer, and His being the Son of God.

The reason for favoring the resurrection interpretation

I favor the resurrection interpretation for the following reason: The context (Acts 13:23,32) of Paul's statement indicates that in Acts 13:33 he was saying that the raising up of Jesus fulfilled God's promise to give Israel a deliverer from David's lineage, and a parallel passage (Paul's defense before Agrippa in Acts 26) makes it clear that hope for the fulfillment of God's promise was dependent on resurrection from the dead—specifically Christ's resurrection from the dead.

And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made of God unto our fathers: Unto which promise our twelve tribes, instantly serving God day and night, hope to come. For which hope's sake, king Agrippa, I am accused of the Jews. Why should it be thought a thing incredible with you, that God should raise the dead? (Acts 26:6-8)

Having therefore obtained help of God, I continue unto this day, witnessing both to small and great, saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come: That Christ should suffer, and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should shew light unto the people, and to the Gentiles (Acts 26:22-23).

F. F. Bruce made the following comments concerning Paul's statements in Acts 26:

That a faithful Pharisee believed in the resurrection of the dead, and saw no fulfillment of Israel's

ancient hope apart from the resurrection, went without saying. But the amazing and indeed absurd feature of the present dispute was that he was being prosecuted for his proclamation of this very hope—and prosecuted by Jews, of all people! But this hope was the hope that God would keep the promise which He made to the fathers of the nation long ago; it was the hope which gave life and meaning and purpose to the ordinance of divine worship, faithfully maintained by all twelve tribes of Israel generation after generation—the hope that God would one day come down to deliver His people as He had done when they were slaves in Egypt, that He would raise up a horn of salvation for them “in the house of His servant David, as He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old” (cf. Luke 1:69f.). Why should they think it incredible that God should raise the dead? The Pharisees would answer that they did not think it incredible; they ardently believed in God as the raiser of the dead. But Paul’s point was that this belief had now been validated in that God had already raised up one man from the dead, and had by that very fact demonstrated that man to be Israel’s long-expected Messiah and Deliverer, the one in whom the age-old hope was realized. Why should those who believed in the resurrection of the dead refuse to believe that God had in fact raised up Jesus, and so declared Him to be the Son of God?¹

Since Paul’s statements in Acts 26 are parallel to his Acts 13 statement and make it clear that the fulfillment of God’s promise to the Israelite fathers was dependent on Christ’s resurrection from the dead, it would appear that the Acts 13:33 reference to God’s raising up of Jesus concerns His bodily resurrection from the dead.

The resurrection interpretation leads to the following conclusions: God's Psalm 2:7 decree concerning the Messiah was fulfilled when Jesus rose from the dead; there is a sense in which God begot Christ on His resurrection day; and there is a sense in which Christ's being the Son of God is related to His resurrection.

In what sense did God beget Christ on His resurrection day?

It should be noted that the Hebrew word that is translated "begotten" in Psalm 2:7 does not always mean "beget" in the sense of conception. Its more frequent meaning is to "bear, bring forth" in the sense of giving birth (1 Kings 3:17-18; 2 Kings 19:3).² Just as a baby is hidden from sight in his mother's womb until he is brought forth on the day of his birth, so Christ after His death was hidden from sight in the womb of the earth until God brought Him forth on the day of His resurrection. Thus on Christ's resurrection day God begot Him in the sense of bringing Him forth alive from the grave.

We should note that the Hebrew Old Testament presented the concept of Hades as being a womb.³ The Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) also used verbs "which describe how the womb of death or Hades gives up those who are kept in it . . . The pangs of death and Hades are the presupposition of birth from death and its kingdom."⁴ Ancient Judaism associated the idea of birth with resurrection from the dead. In 4 Esdras 4:42 "the comparison with a woman in childbirth serves to represent new birth in the resurrection. Sheol and the chambers of souls are like the womb which after a certain time can no longer hold the child."⁵ In the rabbinic tradition "most Rabb. adopt the metaphor of the womb of the earth and hence of labour and its pangs."⁶

Peter in his Pentecost message associated the idea of birth with Christ's resurrection when he declared, "Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains [literally, birth

pangs] of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it” (Acts 2:24). Concerning Peter’s declaration Georg Bertram wrote:

In Acts 2:24 the ref. is to the birth of Messiah or rather to new birth through the resurrection . . . God Himself has relieved the pangs of birth out of death. The abyss can no more hold the Redeemer than a pregnant woman can hold the child in her body. Under severe labour pains the womb of the underworld must release the Redeemer. God Himself helps it to end the pains.⁷

In what sense is Christ’s being the Son of God related to His resurrection?

Historical background sheds light on this issue. In the ancient Roman empire crucifixion was regarded as the most cruel, disgusting, and shameful form of death ever devised.⁸ Cicero, Roman orator and writer (106-43 B.C.), described it as “that most cruel and disgusting penalty.”⁹ On another occasion he said that “the very word ‘cross’ should be far removed not only from the person of a Roman citizen but from his thoughts, his eyes and his ears.”¹⁰ Josephus, famous Jewish historian (A.D. 37-95), called crucifixion “the most wretched of deaths.”¹¹ Ancients classified death on a cross as the supreme Roman penalty, even worse than burning and decapitation.¹²

Because crucifixion was so horrible the ancient world believed that only rebellious foreigners, violent criminals and robbers, and slaves deserved to die that form of death.¹³ Therefore any person who died on a cross was automatically classified as a rebel, criminal, or slave. Thus both Jews and Gentiles were convinced that it would be impossible for the Son of God to be crucified.¹⁴

To the Gentile way of thinking, since the gods of Greece and Rome were immortal (in contrast to mortal

men), it would be impossible for them to die on a cross.¹⁵ Celsus, a vocal pagan opponent of early Christianity, said, "But if he [Jesus] was really so great he ought, in order to display his divinity, to have disappeared suddenly from the cross."¹⁶ Thus the Greeks and Romans automatically rejected any claim to divine Sonship by anyone who died on a cross. Martin Hengel wrote:

To believe that the one pre-existent Son of the one true God, the mediator at creation and the redeemer of the world, had appeared in very recent times in out-of-the-way Galilee as a member of the obscure people of the Jews, and even worse, had died the death of a common criminal on the cross, could only be regarded as a sign of madness.¹⁷

On the basis of Deuteronomy 21:23 ("He that is hanged is accursed of God") the Jews concluded that to be hanged on a cross is to be cursed of God, and certainly God, if He had a Son, would never curse His own Son.¹⁸ The fact that the Jews were convinced that no Son of God could die by crucifixion is evidenced by the abuse they hurled at Jesus while He was on the cross:

And they that passed by reviled him, wagging their heads, And saying, Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself. If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross. Likewise also the chief priests mocking him, with the scribes and elders, said, He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him. He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him: for he said, I am the Son of God. The thieves also, which were crucified with him, cast the same in his teeth (Matthew 27:39-44).

Israel rejected Jesus' claim to be the Son of God and the Messiah (Matthew 26:63-66; Acts 13:27-29). His death by crucifixion convinced the Jews that their rejection of Him was correct.

How does this historical background shed light on the sense in which Christ's being the Son of God is related to His resurrection? God's resurrecting of Jesus was His way of decreeing to the world that in spite of His crucifixion Jesus is the Son of God, the One uniquely qualified to be God's representative ruler for the millennium. In Acts 17:31 Paul declared that by raising Jesus from the dead God gave proof to all men that Jesus is the man whom He has ordained to have authority over the world. After pointing out that Jesus Christ, God's Son, "was made of the seed of David according to the flesh" Paul asserted that He was "declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead" (Romans 1:3-4; cf. Acts 13:22-23,30-33). In other words, on the day of Jesus' resurrection God showed Israel to be wrong in their conclusion that Jesus Christ was not the Son of God, the One uniquely qualified to be the Messiah, the nation's deliverer.

The results of our examination of the relationship of Psalm 2:7 to Acts 13:33 lead us to the following understanding: In Acts 13:33 Paul indicated that God's resurrecting of Jesus fulfilled His Psalm 2:7 decree concerning the Messiah. The day that God raised Jesus from the dead He begot Him as His Son in the sense that He brought Jesus forth from the womb of the earth by resurrection and thereby publicly decreed Him to be His Son. God did not beget Jesus in the sense of conceiving or making Him the divine Son on His resurrection day. (Jesus was already the Son of God before His resurrection, as recorded in Matthew 3:16-17; 17:1-5.)

This understanding of the Psalm 2:7 decree has great significance for the rest of Psalm 2. As noted earlier, Psalm 2

foretells world conditions when Messiah returns to earth to establish the millennial kingdom and administer God's rule worldwide. Gentile rulers and armies will unite to try to prevent the establishment of divine Messianic rule. Psalm 2:7 foretells that at that time Messiah will declare what God decreed concerning Him by resurrecting Him from the dead (He is the Son of God, the One having the same divine nature as the Father, and therefore the One uniquely qualified to be God's representative ruler). This declaring of God's decree will be Jesus' way of asserting that He is the legitimate ruler of the world who has the right and authority to take over the earth.

To summarize, Psalm 2:7 does not militate against the eternal Sonship of Jesus Christ. It does not refer to a time when Christ *became* the Son of God through a begetting act of God. Instead it refers to the day of Jesus' resurrection when God brought Him forth from the womb of the earth and thereby publicly decreed that He is who He always was—the Son of God.