



The Online Library of T. Austin-Sparks

Published as a PDF by Austin-Sparks.net
Email: info@austin-sparks.net

In keeping with T. Austin-Sparks' wishes that what was freely received should be freely given and not sold for profit, and that his messages be reproduced word for word, we ask if you choose to share these messages with others, to please respect his wishes and offer them freely - free of any changes, free of any charge (except necessary distribution costs) and with this statement included.

God's Sovereign Activities

by T. Austin-Sparks

First published in "A Witness and A Testimony" magazine, Mar-Apr 1956, Vol. 34-2.

"And it came to pass, when the ark set forward, that Moses said, Rise up, O Lord, and let thine enemies be scattered; and let them that hate thee flee before thee. And when it rested, he said, Return, O Lord, unto the ten thousands of the thousands of Israel" (Numbers 10:35,36).

The book of Numbers is concerned with a militant movement on the part of God, in the midst of His ordered people, in relation to His testimony. The ark is called 'the ark of the testimony', and the place in which it was resident or deposited was the 'tabernacle of testimony'; and everything centred in, circled round and was governed by that testimony - the testimony of God concerning His Son, Jesus Christ. That has an abiding message for the Lord's people at all times and at all stages of spiritual progress.

I would point out that this is not some peculiar testimony belonging to any one particular company of God's people. It is *the* testimony of Jesus. We will not stay to explain what it is, but we do know that, in the book of consummations - the book of the Revelation - where everything is brought out to its final fulness and dealt with in finality, "the testimony of Jesus" is the dominant factor from beginning to end. In the first chapter the testimony of Jesus is presented by Himself in His own Person. Then everything - the churches and the Church comprehensively, the nations, and ultimately the kingdom of darkness - is all dealt with and settled in the light of the testimony of Jesus; and finally that testimony of Jesus is brought out in glorious fulness in the symbol of the City, and everything about that City speaks of Him, and speaks of Him in glory in the saints.

That is just by the way, lest we should think, when we use the phrase 'a testimony', that we are talking about something other than the testimony of Jesus in its fullest sense as in the Word of God. I do want to deliver minds from the idea that, shall I say, 'Honor Oak' has a 'testimony' of its own.

'This testimony' - how I hear that all over the world from people who are associated with the company and the Lord's work here in this place. Please strip your mind and your tongue of that phraseology. It is not some private testimony we are talking about. It is the testimony of Jesus in its fulness, and it is, as I have said, God's movements in connection with that that the whole of the Scriptures reveal.

1. Sovereign Selectiveness

We start with Genesis. God's creative activity was there; we may deal with that more fully later. It brings us back to the whole outline of God's goings. But when things departed from the Divine intention, and that so early, God reacted in relation to His testimony, and we find that the whole book of Genesis is occupied with the *sovereign selectiveness of God* in this very connection. And here I am going to pass again to the key - to the whole Word of God, His Divine principle. If you get the Divine principle, you will understand the Scriptures. If you have not, you will do what has been done and is being done, that is, you will make theories and interpretations without number and without end. Take, for instance, all that has been produced on the book of Revelation. It is perfectly hopeless. Of all the multitudes who have sought to interpret it, you find hardly two that agree. The only sure key to the Scriptures as a whole or in any part is a Divine principle. When you have that, the whole thing opens up.

I suggest that the Divine principle with which God reacted to the fall was this sovereign selectiveness. It begins with the seed of the woman, and then it moves on along a thin line of witnesses, reaching to Abraham, and then, through Abraham, to Isaac and Jacob and then through them to the nation. There is a movement of God within the world of men, sovereignly laying hold of people in relation to that testimony which He in His eternal counsels had determined to realise. The testimony of Jesus began before this world began. It has been taken up along this line by the sovereign act of God, and it is there that we must find our strength. There are, of course, always the two sides to any Divine movement - the Divine initiative, and man's responsibility - but the Divine initiative always comes first - and that is our comfort, consolation and strength. "Ye did not choose me, but I chose you." (John 15:16). "He chose us in him before the foundation of the world". (Eph. 1:4). That word 'chose' is a marvellous key to God's goings right down through the ages.

The goings of God are seen along this line of sovereign selectiveness - and how much we owe to that! The very holding on our way, our very being kept by the power of God to the end, is simply because in the first place God chose us; God, if I may use the word, selected us. God looked and saw us and laid His hand upon us, and that, we are told in this marvellous revelation of the eternal goings of God, happened before ever we had a being. We were foreknown. All sorts of difficulties are gathered into that, but let me say here that it is not so much the individual, as that elect company for a Divine purpose, which is the occasion of this sovereign selectiveness.

You can see God moving in this way right through the Word. You cannot explain it. We shall come on to the mystery of God's ways sooner or later, but there is no ground of explanation outside of God Himself. The Lord Jesus chose His twelve disciples. There is no ground of explanation, none whatever, outside of Himself. "Did not I choose you the twelve?" (John 6:70) - and that is all there is to it. 'I chose you'. He never explained why; none of us could explain why. But He has done it; and what we know, immediately we come under the government, the control, of the Holy Spirit, is that we have come into line with something which is not incidental in life, something which has a very long history; we have become a part of something that reaches beyond time, both backward and forward, something beyond the limits of this world and this life. We are conscious of being related to some immense purpose.

I say again, we are not always able to explain or define it; but a consciousness comes to us that after all, whatever we may have felt or thought about it before, our birth is not just an incident, we have not come on the scene by chance - there is something more in it than that. No one knows that until they become linked with the Lord Jesus and thus become a part of God's testimony concerning His Son, which is the ground of all God's movements from eternity to eternity. We have come into something that is very near to the heart of God, and the more utterly you come into line with that, the more God stands by you, the more God is going to vindicate Himself and His wisdom. It is a tremendous thing to be wholly and fully in the mid-thoroughfare of those eternal goings of God.

So Genesis sees the beginning of this principle, which continues all the way through the Old Testament and New Testament - the principle of sovereign selectiveness in relation to God's testimony concerning His Son, the testimony of Jesus.

2. Sovereign Separation

We come to Exodus for the next phase in the goings of God, and here it is a matter of sovereign separation. There is the elect people, but the elect has got rather entangled in things, mixed up in things; the elect is in bondage, the elect, is in the world; and God must move sovereignly again. And God retains that sovereignty in His own hands. Moses tried to assume the sovereignty of God in separating the people from Egypt, and it was a terrible disaster. God retains the sovereignty in relation to His purpose. When God's time came, when the hour came for God to move, He did it from Himself, on His own account, right out from Heaven. You find God saying all the time, in relation to that emancipation: "I...", "I...", "I...", "Now, thou shalt see what I will do..." (Ex. 6:1). "Come now therefore, and I will send thee..." (Ex. 3:10). "Thus shalt thou say... I AM hath sent me unto you" (Ex. 3:14). God in sovereignty, the great I, is taking charge of this matter.

The second principle, then, in the goings of God, is God acting to get His people separated unto Himself: and separated, in the first place, as the first stage, from the world. No one who is really vitally related to the Lord, who has a life with God, who is under the hand of God, will ever fail to recognise those activities of His in separating them from the world. They will never have a happy time in the world. The most miserable people on this earth are Christians who are still 'in with' the world. Far better be an out-and-out worldling - they are so much happier than Christians who are in the world. Yes: for the Christian it is one thing or the other. The alternative is a miserable 'half and half' existence, which just is not worthwhile.

Look at Israel in Egypt, and see God at work with His own to make them inwardly know that they cannot be mixed up or entangled in this world. God's sovereignty will not allow it, and He makes that sovereignty known in the heart of His own people.

Then comes the next phase of separation. Once they are out of Egypt, there has to be an inward separation from *themselves*, which seems to be an even more complicated thing than getting them out of Egypt. That extrication had called for very great power on the part of God, and God was equal to it when it came to the matter of power; but in the wilderness it called for infinite patience. God Himself was, of course, again equal to it; but if God knows any comparatives in His activities - if one thing can be said to be easier or harder for Him than another, it seems that His task with Israel in the wilderness was much more difficult than His task in getting them out of the world. The inward work of God calls for infinite patience.

But here you see the goings of God. God is not just going to have a theoretical, doctrinal position; He is not just going to have a positional truth; He is going to have an actual *condition* corresponding to

the truth. In relation to the ultimate object toward which He is moving in all His goings - that Christ in all things shall have the pre-eminence - it is necessary that self shall have no pre-eminence, that the natural life shall not be lord in any sense or in any way. And so His goings must be through the wilderness, in which He is ever at work to divide inwardly as well as outwardly. Exodus sees those two phases of God's goings with His chosen - outward separation, inwards separation; the outward from the world and its overlord, the inward from the self, the flesh, the natural life and its dominion - so that eventually the Lord has a people who have no other lords, outwardly or inwardly, but in whom His lordship is absolutely established. It was only for a bright, glorious but brief period in Israel's history that that was realised; by far the greater part of their history on both sides of that glorious period was of other lords having dominion. But what is in the Lord's view, toward which He is moving in all His goings, is to have a people unreservedly for His own. That is His testimony.

3. Sovereign Service

We come next to Leviticus, and here it is a matter of sovereign service: it is priestly ministry. I cannot stay to take out even fragments by way of reminding you of the contents of that book. We can sum it all up in this way: Everything here is "holiness unto the Lord" (Ex. 28:36, etc., A.V.). That is, ministering to Divine satisfaction, to Divine pleasure. All the feasts and the offerings speak of that which brings pleasure and satisfaction to God. It is all so highly symbolic of the perfections of His Son in Deity and in humanity. It is bringing Him for God's satisfaction; the priestly office and the priestly array all speaking of the glories of Christ in the presence of God.

There is another side to it. God ordains His service so sovereignly that there are many things connected with it which are exceedingly dangerous if they are not observed. If there is false incense, if there is man-made as distinct from Divinely-prescribed incense; if the requisite garments are not worn, the garments of glory and beauty; if there is a breach at any point in these laws of God concerning His Son, the consequences are fatal. So that He ordains this service, and He says, 'This is not optional, this is not a thing that you can take or leave; it is a thing upon which everything, so far as My ultimate purpose is concerned, depends.' It is a matter of life and death - holiness unto the Lord.

What is service to the Lord? It may take many forms, it may move along many lines, but the essence and true nature of the service of God is bringing to Him that which is for His pleasure and satisfaction, that in which He can have the glories of His Son, the perfections of His Son displayed.

That is His object with every convert. God's object in getting people saved is not *just* to get them saved. The proclamation of the Gospel is not merely a matter of 'rescuing the perishing' from Hell and getting them to Heaven *as though it were all centred in them*, as though they - or we - were the beginning and end of the Gospel. That is not it. Every newly born-again child of God, in the thought of God, is a vessel in which those perfections and glories of His Son are to be manifested, and each one is then to be related to all the others, to make the one glorious vessel which will eventually be seen "coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God". The object of winning souls is the ultimate satisfaction and pleasure of God. It is not only for the sake of the convert and the convert's eternal well-being; we have concentrated far too much on that.

If only we can see and grasp the fuller thought of God, what a motive it is! God can then commit Himself. Surely that is the main point, after all - that God should be able to come alongside and say: 'Yes, I am in this: this has something more in view than personal gratification; this has My glory in view, this has My Son in view.' That is sovereign service.

4. Sovereign Warfare

When you come to Numbers, you find the Lord's people in a position or condition of being constituted a warring instrument concerning the Testimony. This is something tremendous - for, so far as the ages down here are concerned, the testimony of Jesus is an outstanding thing, the most outstanding thing in God's universe. All the conflict, all the trial, all the suffering of the Church and the saints, is related to that testimony. If you will have nothing to do with the testimony of Jesus you will escape nine-tenths of your troubles, difficulties and sufferings. Touch that, come into relation to that, and your troubles begin. Indeed, we know that, on one side, your troubles begin as soon as you become a Christian! Praise God, that is not the whole story; but it is one side, and the Lord Jesus did not hide that. He made it perfectly clear that that would be the immediate consequence of relationship to Himself.

There is a great kingdom of antagonism to this testimony of Jesus - fierce and violent antagonism. It is a mighty spite against God. We have suggestions as to how and why it arose. There was one who aspired to the kingdom, to the inheritance, to a certain place next to God, to be equal with God. But that place was reserved for God's Son, and so the Son has for ever, in Heaven and on earth, been the object of that one's fiercest jealousy and hatred; and so because God is working all things in the interests of His Son, the one thing to which the Devil has committed himself, throughout all the ages, is to spoil everything that is of God - just to spoil it. Anything that God does, the Devil will immediately try to spoil, because it is related to God's Son. So we find ourselves precipitated into a realm of animosity. It is in the very atmosphere - you cannot avoid it. It is there all the time.

This conflict is a part of the testimony. The book of Numbers brings us there: we find the testimony in the centre and the people ordered for battle in relation to the testimony. But, blessed be God, the testimony is seen as completely victorious. "Rise up, O Lord, and let thine enemies be scattered".

Personal Applications

These few thoughts are just hints and pointers, rather than anything else, but if you take them up you will see their operation, not only in the Old Testament, but in the New, and also in our own lives. Firstly, God laid His hand upon us sovereignly: He made us know that it had to be Himself. We may have longed for Him, we may have craved for Him, we may have yearned for Him, but the Lord chose His own moment for clinching the matter. He did not allow any activities of ours to bring it about -

'It is not thy tears of repentance, or prayers...'

There is a side, of course, where we have to show that we mean business with God; but God chooses His own moment for doing this thing, so that we have to say, 'It was the Lord! I could not have got through of myself; I could not have brought this about myself. The Lord kept it in His own hands - I know He did it.'

That is so in every matter, not only in our conversion. We see the sovereignty of God dealing with us, His sovereign activities for our separation, outwardly and inwardly. God is working in that way. And until we let go of the world and of personal interests in this life as objectives, let go the government of any life of our own, let go any claim to direct and order our own paths, and come into the goings of God, we are not in rest, the testimony does not rest. "Return unto thy rest" (Ps. 116:7). As you are in the activities of God 'going', you come into the rest of God resting.

And then it is a matter of everything for God's pleasure. That is the meaning of holiness. Holiness sums it all up: everything to God's pleasure and satisfaction, everything concerning the Lord Jesus, He in all things having pre-eminence.

Finally, God's dealings with us do bring us into the realm of conflict: but it is conflict with tremendous issues and glorious assurances - the certainty of victory.