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Not Here, and Not Now

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"...to the intent that now unto the principalities and the powers in the heavenly places might be made known through the church the manifold wisdom of God, according to the eternal purpose" (Eph. 3:10-11).

"Who is there among you that will give ear to this? that will hearken and hear for the time to come?" (Isa. 42:23).

In those two fragments we have two things which really amount to this - 'not here, and not now.' Not here - "unto the principalities and the powers in the heavenlies might be made known through the church the manifold wisdom of God." Not now - "who... will hearken and hear for a time to come?" I think those two intimations ought to be a very great help to all of us, and especially to some.

There are a good many things in the ways of God which are altogether beyond our understanding. They are out of our range altogether. God hides Himself while He is working, and seems very much to delay His actions; and from these facts many of our problems and difficulties arise, and we find ourselves thrown into a state of great perplexity and our faith sorely tried.

The Problem of Apparent Fruitlessness

I want to be quite simple and practical, because, on the face of it, these verses contain rather abstract and remote statements; they could fail to help us. I think that one of the most difficult statements in the New Testament to apprehend with any sense of comfort is that in Ephesians 3:10. Most people cannot appreciate the fact that what is happening in their lives is of interest to creatures altogether outside of this world. That does not seem of very much practical help; but there is a very practical side to it. Many of you will never go to the mission field, as it is called; you will never go out into so-called full-time spiritual service. Many of you will never go far from the homes where you are; many of you will never leave the places of business where you are working. Many will never enter upon any particular aspect of work for the Lord. You will be called upon to live just where you are, to go on with what is called 'the trivial round, the common task.' No one will ever hear very much about you. Your name will never appear in the religious press for the great work that you are doing. You will be hidden ones, and you will have plenty of opportunity and occasion for wondering whether you are doing anything for the Lord, whether your life does amount to anything worth while. You hear of others being called and going out and engaging in 'The work.' You envy them, you wish that it were you, and then you begin to reflect upon your life and your place, and you ask the question, 'Well, am I living to any account at all? Do I really matter?' Probably the majority of you will be like that.

There are others who, in all desire to serve the Lord and be wholly for Him, find themselves under arrest, shut up, restrained, as they think - limited, restive, anxious, on stretch, like animals in a cage, going round and round and finding no way out. There will be others who will go out. You will go into what is technically called 'The work.' You may go abroad, or into this or that aspect of specific service and ministry, and when you get there you will spend nine-tenths of your life without seeing anything for it. You will go on and on, labouring and being quite faithful, and yet seeing little or no result.

And yet all of you, in whichever category you may be - and there may be others not mentioned - are conscious you are in something; at least you are aware that you are in a conflict, that this life for the Lord is not an easy thing; it is full of trial, of pressure, of experiences which you would not have if you were not the Lord's. It is not just an ordinary life like that of an unbeliever - not to say that all unbelievers have an easy life - but you have the extras that result from being the Lord's, and you meet those extras from all directions. You find you have to encounter sometimes quite naked, spiritual antagonisms and oppositions and difficulties.

The Supreme Realm - 'Not Here' but the Unseen

Well, of course, the answer to any questionings largely lies there; for here is this mysterious statement in Eph. 3:10, a statement in the Word of God. (I think that we believers are seriously lacking in a practical, Divine adjustment to the things which we have in our Bible and which we know so well; we do not look at them straight in the face and say, 'That is in the Bible; it must mean something, and it must mean something where I am concerned.' We do not do that enough. We are lacking in our attitude of definiteness toward the things which we believe and accept. There is something more there than we have yet faced and taken hold of.)

Now here is a statement which is in the Word of God - "*to the intent* that now unto the principalities and powers in the heavenlies might be made known through the church the manifold (the many-sided) wisdom of God." May not that explain practically all that I have said? leaving room for this, that so far as we are concerned it may be necessary that adjustments be made before the Lord can use us: we may have to come into a position before He can do more through us. Leaving room for

that and other such considerations, there still remains this very big realm in which it is not a matter of controversy with the Lord on any point at all, nor of our having to adjust on something before the Lord can do what He would do. We may be right there with the Lord, ready for any adjustment, and yet He does not do the thing that we want Him to do. There is this delay, this arrest. In such cases this word may very well be the explanation and the application. God is doing something with us, in us, by which He is reaching the end for which this universe was created.

Look again at the context of Eph. 3:10 and see the universal and timeless setting of what is there. The universe was created for the worship and glory of God, and the thing that He is doing is somewhere bringing creatures on their knees in worship and in wonder.

Divine Wisdom Manifested Through Believers

"The manifold wisdom of God." What is wisdom for? Why does anybody want wisdom? - to answer questions, and solve problems, to know how. We might illustrate by the story of an American firm who had a big engineering job done. When it had been completed the engineers sent in their account - simply a statement of a lump sum. When the firm looked at the account they were startled at the greatness of the charge, and sent it back with a request for details. So the engineers sent it back - Materials, so much (which was very small compared with the total cost); labour, so much (which again, put together with the material, did not come to half the total); knowing how - the balance. That is just the point - knowing how. Let us put it like this. Have you ever had a friend in whom you had absolute confidence? You had no question but that he knew how to get out of difficult situations or to solve problems. You have been with him when he has been put into the biggest situation you could imagine. It might be a debate, an argument. The opposition has piled up its case, argument upon argument, problem upon problem, and all the time you have been watching your friend and having no question but that he was going to get out of the difficulty. You have been tense with expectation but completely confident of the result. You have been saying to yourself, 'I know he will get out of it: but how? How will he face this, how will he answer that?'

That is exactly what is here. On the one hand there are the principalities and powers, the celestial kingdom, angels and archangels of light, heavenly beings having absolute and unreserved confidence in God and knowing quite well that He has the key to everything. On the other hand there is this immense situation built up by Satan's interference, by all that has come in through sin - the whole state of things in God's universe, and man's helplessness and inability to contribute anything towards extricating himself. The situation requires something tremendous in order that eventually the universe shall be filled with the glory of God. All these angelic beings are watching, almost holding their breath, as if asking, 'How will He do it?' And they watch what God is doing in you and in me and find their answer there. They watch grace at work; for it is written that we should be "to the praise of the glory of his grace" (Eph. 1:6).

How will He solve the problem of an individual life? The very constitution of the one concerned is contrary to God, and yet something is happening in that life that is making it contrary to itself, not according to nature at all. There is the most impatient person that ever you could touch; but look! Grace is making a most impatient person patient and gentle, forbearing and long-suffering. There is one naturally hot-tempered, who would flare up at the least word; grace is making him quiet and calm. I sat by a brother in Minneapolis who was dealing with a bit of intricate apparatus, a recording instrument, and all his wires had got into a terrible tangle, requiring hours of unravelling. I sat by him while he went to work quietly, just as though he had all eternity for his task. He said, 'You know,

brother, before I was converted I would have lost my temper.' Grace! And the heavenly beings are looking on, seeing the wonder of the grace of God, what He is doing in this life, and in that life, making them altogether other than what they are naturally. "Manifold" - yes, 'many-sided'; the wisdom of God has to find a solution to many problems, as many as there are persons concerned, and the grace of God is sufficient for it all; and so there is worship. The Lord may be more concerned to get glory to Himself in His universe by the expression of His grace in us, than by the number of things we are doing for Him. So we have to wait, see no fruit, and find all kinds of frustration and disappointment. 'Not here, but there.' But, mark you, the manifestation is not only in some distant time - "*now* unto the principalities and powers." It is going on now.

The Supreme Age - 'Not Now' but the Ages to Come

We come to the other aspect - 'not now, but then.' "Who... will hearken and hear for the time to come?" We cannot stay with the context to indicate what it refers to, but there is the point - "for the time to come." This is where one of the things that we believe needs to be brought much nearer. After all, do we believe there is a time to come? Do we believe that the time to come is a bigger time than now, that the afterward is much greater than the present, that there are ages of ages, and that our whole lifetime on earth, however long it may be, is only a mere fragment of a dispensation? Do we believe that our service "in the ages to come" is far more important than in this age? We do not thereby rule out the importance of this life and of buying up opportunities and redeeming the time; but, nevertheless, when we have done all that is possible and used every moment fully, our life is but a span which is gone; and just as we are getting to the place where we might have something to give, when we have learned something that might be of value to people here, we depart. What an enigma life is, what a problem! "For the time to come." You notice the Apostles - they always had their eye upon that. "I will give diligence that... ye may be able after my decease..." said one of them (2 Pet. 1:15). That is the real test - whether we want to be always in view, and unless we do something, and do it in our lifetime, we have no interest in that thing at all. Yet you will be prepared tomorrow to go to China or India and serve the Lord for a few weeks and lay down your life, either in martyrdom or in sickness. The question arises, Will it be worth it? Many a young man has volunteered in the hour of crisis and national need, facing what was probably inevitable - a few days on the battlefield, and then life's end. He thought it worth while, he was prepared for it. You are prepared for that. Why? - "for the time to come," for the afterward. Is that it? If we did not believe really in some afterward, that the cost was worth the afterward, we would not do what we do. You believe it will be worth while in the afterward to go out just for a month to India and die, do you? If you do not, you have no right to go.

The Inspiration of an 'Afterward'

"For the time to come." Let us have "the time to come" as a real motive in living. The fruit will not all be immediate; only a mere fragment of the meaning of things can be in our day. The whole mass of value is to appear again afterward. We have to live not only for this time, because, though we live right up to the hilt for our own time, we cannot do or be much, and I doubt whether the outcome here is worth the cost. All this cost just for a lifetime? No, for a time to come; and it may be that the Lord is dealing with us as He is, not chiefly for now - though perhaps there may be much even in this present age. This present is the seed plot out of which there is to come much more later on. He has in view "the ages of the ages." Eph 3:10 says, "now unto principalities... the manifold wisdom of God." Yes, but Eph. 2:7 says, "in the ages to come... the exceeding riches of His grace..."