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Subjected... In Hope

by T. Austin-Sparks

First published in "A Witness and A Testimony" magazine, May-June 1961, Vol. 39-3.

"For the creation was subjected to vanity, not of its own will, but by reason of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the liberty of the glory of the children of God" (Romans 8:20,21).

'The creation was subjected to vanity... in hope...' It is impressive that, although the writer of this letter set out, in the first instance, to reveal a state of utter hopelessness, which he very thoroughly does in the first chapters, the letter itself is strewn with this word *hope*. Beginning with Abraham, it says: 'Who... against hope, hopefully believed' (4:18); again, 'we rejoice in hope of the glory of God' (5:2); 'patience worketh experience, and experience hope; and hope maketh not ashamed' (5:4,5) 'the creation was subjected... in hope...' (8:20); 'rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer' (12:12); 'that through patience... we might have hope...' (15:4); 'Now, the God of hope fill you... that ye may abound in hope...' (15:13). The letter abounds with this word *hope*, although it set out to show how hopeless everything really was.

Now here is this statement: 'The creation was subjected to vanity'. If you like to change the word there, you would be quite right in changing it to 'hopelessness' - 'the creation was subjected to hopelessness'. A later version puts the word 'futility' there, which I think is a very good translation: 'the creation was subjected to futility... in hope...'; 'to hopelessness... in hope'; 'to vanity... in hope'. A deliberate act of God is this. We will gather it all up in this way: The Law of Vanity, or Futility; the Law of Hope; the Way and the End of Hope.

The Law of Futility

Why did God deliberately act - for it says '*...by reason of Him who subjected it...*' - why did God deliberately act to bring the whole creation under this law and reign of futility? I am not staying to enlarge upon the fact of futility or vanity; we may say something about it as we go on. But it is the fact that it is an established law; it is something in the very constitution of things, this something called 'vanity' or 'futility'. Why did God establish that law?

(a) God's Purpose for Himself

Well, His act related to three things. Firstly, it related to God's purpose for Himself: for He created all things for Himself, and, in creating all things, He had a personal object in view. All things were to derive their value and benefit from His having what His heart was set upon - it is always like that. God, then, had in view something for Himself, and that something was to have a place for Himself in honour, in pleasure, and in complete satisfaction. The Bible gathers itself entirely around that one, primary, supreme thought - God having a place for Himself in His creation, amongst men: a place where He can come; where He can walk; where He can talk; where He can be received with pleasure, and acknowledged with the heart; where, without grief, without restraint, without reserve, He can just be free to dwell with men. He made all things for that. And when He had made all things, and pronounced them very good, God walked in the garden, in the cool of the day, and we are led to believe that He came to converse, to have fellowship, to enjoy Himself, to find His pleasure there. 'The Lord God planted a garden...', and did not leave it, but came to it, to the man in it, for fellowship. That runs through the whole Bible.

But, you see what happened. God's place was given to another - a rival and a rebel. Man gave God's place to another, and God withdrew. And because that thought of God, that purpose of God, that He should have a place for Himself, as the all-governing thing in this whole creation and universe, was set aside, God said: The very object of the creation has been removed, has been ruled out, has been violated; the whole creation must be subjected to futility. It is the natural, the logical outworking: when purpose ceases, that is futility; when governing purpose is set aside, what is it but vanity? God moves in purpose, firstly for Himself, to have a place. When He no longer finds His pleasure and His satisfaction, a state of vanity and futility enters in; nothing goes right, nothing realises its destiny and its calling.

(b) God's Purpose for Man

When God created man, He had a great purpose for him. That purpose was not realised when the man first came from the hand of God: that was only setting him on a course, in the way of Divine purpose. If you ask what that was - and still is - it can be summarised from what we have now in the Bible, and particularly in the New Testament, like this. God intended that the man should graduate from the stage and the state in which he was made, into something else, into something more. God made him what the New Testament calls 'the natural man'. Paul says: '*...first that which is natural*' (1 Cor. 15:46), and there is nothing wrong about that. The word, as you know, in the original, is 'soulish', 'soulical', 'of the soul' - he was made like that.

But God's intention for that man was that he should become a 'spiritual' man. The New Testament draws that great distinction between the 'natural' and the 'spiritual'. The 'natural' is that in which we are born; the 'spiritual' is that into which we are born again. And God intended that there should be

this graduation from the 'natural' to the 'spiritual', that the man should become a 'spiritual' being (with all that we understand from the New Testament that that means): beginning in his own spirit, growing up into spiritual maturity, and consummated with a spiritual body, 'like unto the body of His glory' (Phil. 3:21). 'Not that which is spiritual is first', says Paul, 'but that which is natural, then that which is spiritual'. That is the order. But man cut short his own intended way, and he remained just a 'soul' man, a 'natural' man - that is how we find him, and ourselves - and did not go on to full growth, to become a spiritual being. And so God says: 'Man has defeated the very purpose for which I have created him. He has turned aside' (there are many ways in which the Bible speaks of this arrest); 'he is less than I intended him to be.' God said therefore: 'Therefore, futility!'

Looking away from the story, is it not true in experience, right up to date, that if you and I, as the Lord's people, live on the natural basis, there is frustration and futility? It is only as we emerge (if I may put it that way), and become more and more spiritual, that the seal of God is upon us, that the pleasure of God is found in us. He is saying, It is very good; I can accompany that; I can associate Myself with that; I can go on with that. Spiritual men, spiritual women, are those to whom the Lord can commit Himself, with whom He can speak, commune, and have fellowship. The purpose of God lies *there*, and if *it* is in any way arrested, or diverted, or violated, it is futility. It is the tragic story of much in Christianity, in what is called the Church, and in Christian lives - futility, vanity, confusion, not arriving, held up, waiting for something. And there is a good deal of groaning in this creation, for something that is not, that we know ought to be.

(c) God's Purpose in Creation

In the next place, this law of futility related to God's purpose in the creation. He created it for Himself, as His own dwelling; He created man, to be a man after His own heart - a spiritual man; for 'God is Spirit, and they that worship must worship in spirit.' God created the creation with an object in view. What was it? It was for the fulness of His Son, in whom, through whom, and unto whom He created all things. And we are told, through the apostle, that the end, the goal, in view is that He should 'gather together all things in one' in Christ, and that He 'whom He appointed heir of all things' should fill all things - Christ, the heir of the creation, in which He was to find His fulness, and express His fulness. Well, the rival knew something about that, apparently, and stole the place of God's Son, and tried to steal God's Son's inheritance. He has become the 'Prince of this world', the 'god of this age', taking what belongs to the Lord Jesus. There is much about this in the New Testament. But God has not let go His intention. He holds to it, and the time will come when 'the kingdoms of this world shall become the Kingdom of our God and of His Christ', and He shall fill all things. But, until then, everything is in chaos, in confusion, in futility, in vanity; and it is only as Christ comes into His place that the law of vanity is removed, and there is release and liberty - the liberty of sons.

The Law of Hope

As the law of Vanity, of Futility, is in the very constitution of things, it is equally true that there is in the constitution of things the Law of Hope. 'The whole creation groaneth and travaileth' - in despair? No, waiting; waiting! And the word there is a strong word; it is a picture word of someone stretched out eagerly in anticipation, for 'the creation itself shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption.' 'The whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain until now', waiting, stretched out, eagerly anticipating. The creation has a consciousness - it may be a dull consciousness - but it has a consciousness, in every part, that something is wrong; this is not what it exists for; there is

something better than this! God is blamed, of course, by many. Nevertheless, there is this sense that things ought to be different. And it looks for that difference; it waits for that difference.

This law of hope is in the constitution, everywhere. No one is naturally ready to surrender to the situation. Whenever a person gets to the point where they surrender to the situation absolutely, they take their own lives; it is an end of all things; they cut themselves off. But, normally, no one is prepared to accept this state of things; they will strive against it, work against it, groan against it. There is something of hope in the very nature of things.

Now, what this passage says is that this law of hope, by the ordaining of God, governs the very judgments of God. He subjected it *in hope*. It was a judgment, a pronouncement; it was a terrible thing that the whole creation should come into this state of futility: 'thorns and briars shall it bring forth' everything to make life hard and difficult. Yet it says, He did it *in hope*. All the judgments of God upon the creation were in hope, and are in hope. If the Lord has to pronounce futility upon something - that is, to say, Now, we are not going on; I am not going on with you; bringing in confusion and arrest and frustration - is it because He is making a full end? No, there is something there which is out of line with the purpose for which He brought that into being. It is not in a straight line with that. Therefore we must be brought to realise that there has to be a fundamental adjustment to God's intention. And therein lies the hope. God has done it in order, not to destroy and finalise, but to secure the thing which He ever had in mind. God is working on positive lines always, with hope. 'Subjected... in hope!'

The supreme example and demonstration of this, of course, is the Cross of the Lord Jesus. It includes the whole thing. Yes, see Him, and hear Him. It is a picture and a cry of utter hopelessness: 'My God... Thou hast forsaken Me. Why?' There is no hope, because He gathered up this whole hopelessness in the creation into His own Person; took it to the Cross, received God's full and final judgment: No way through for that creation; no way through for that kind of man. The door is closed. But - 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a living hope, by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead' (1 Pet. 1:3). Yes, it is a picture of despair, and a cry of despair, but it is *in hope, in hope*.

The Lord Jesus, before He went to the Cross, knew what it was going to mean - that is the meaning of the broken heart; that is the meaning of the terrible cry, and the sweat like drops of blood - He knew what He had got to face of forsakenness on the part of the Father; He knew. But while He was moving toward that, and fighting His way into and through that, He was always speaking about the beyond. 'I will come again'; 'the third day He shall rise again'. Terrible despair, but *in hope*; terrible judgment, but *in hope!* The resurrection of the Lord Jesus is the great proof that the very worst judgment that God can bring to man, in this life, is intended to be with hope, and not to annihilate him and destroy him.

The Way and the End of Hope

We close this brief survey with a reminder of the Way and the End of Hope. You see the immediate context of our verses: "I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed to us-ward" (Rom. 8:18). Suffering - what is it for? It is just to dispose of this false thing that has come in. Suffering is to dispose of a false state, a false condition, a false position, that has come in. Everything is false, you see; it is not what God intended. It was a lie, an untruth, a falsehood, that brought about all the vanity and the judgment. It is a false

world, a false creation now. The suffering that the Lord brings into our lives has this one object - to dispose of that which is false in us, and to make way for that which is true in Christ, who is the Truth. We are not the truth, and this creation is not the truth, but Christ is the Truth, and the false has to be disposed of, removed, and it is only done by suffering.

This selfhood is the root and spring of all the trouble, is it not? By the suffering or the discipline under the Lord's hand, the selfhood is set aside, and the way is made for Christ. Through suffering, the virtues of the Lord Jesus are inculcated in the believer and in the Church. It is the only way. We only learn patience through demand for it - and what demand! We only learn faith by having to have faith. And all the virtues of the Lord Jesus - meekness, and all the others - are only inculcated in us through suffering. The sufferings of this present time - what is the goal? Well, the original purpose is still the goal. It is a humanity conformed to the image of God's Son, a world cleansed and purged by fire from all this falsehood, and ground of vanity and futility, and then peopled and filled with those who are an expression of the Son of God - conformed to His image.

The Lord has to pronounce vanity upon all else, or there would be no going for His object at all. And as we go on with the Lord, the one thing that we become more and more aware of is that there is *nothing else but the Lord*. We are losing all hope in every other direction, all expectation; it must be the Lord, just the Lord! And our hearts, through disillusionment, through disappointment in many directions, through much that we shall just have to call 'vanity', futility - our hearts are being drawn to the Lord as our only object, our only goal, our only hope. So it becomes true: "He is thy life, and the length of thy days" (Deut. 30:20). Towards that the law of vanity works, and therefore it is 'in hope'.