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Email: info@austin-sparks.net

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The Eternal Reward of Labour and Suffering

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: Numbers 27:1-7; Joshua 15:13-19, Romans 8:17.

I have just one thought that I want to pass to you here. It relates to inheritance. In the New Testament that word is found to compass quite a lot. In the first place, inheritance is there shown to be a matter of birthright; then it is extended to a bequest, a gift; and then still further it applies to reward for labour, for service. It is in this last connection that my word lies.

While it is fully recognized - not for a moment would we detract one iota from the grand fact - that everything is of grace: even enablement to work for reward is of grace - while that is true, this other aspect of inheritance, or heirship, as a matter of reward for service and suffering, is very fully revealed. Inheriting by labouring, entering into the fruits of labour; inheriting by warfare, entering into the spoil of battle; entering into suffering and being recompensed for suffering. It is surely inherent in labour, in suffering, that there should be some gratification, and the gratification is the wages. While we know that it has been grace that has enabled to suffer and to labour, nevertheless we *have* suffered and we *have* laboured and we *have* battled, and there is something for that, by the faithfulness of God - there are wages, there is that sense of achievement. There is no greater gratification than to know that, through labour and suffering, something has been achieved.

Inward Relationship to the Object in View

It is just there that I put my finger. The very heart of suffering, the very heart of co-heirship with Christ, is this wonderful sense of inward relationship to the object in view, inward relationship to the inheritance, inward relationship to the result, the reward. And that is the explanation of suffering, of labour, of conflict. The Lord does not just give to us without cost. He always brings us into the cost of

that which He is going to give. It will be grace all the way through, but He brings us into the cost of the reward. In the end, let us repeat, we shall acknowledge that any part we have had in it of suffering, labour, warfare, has been infinitely outweighed by what He has given - and that is where grace will always be our theme; but I do believe that mingled with our gratitude will be this sense that the Lord enabled us to achieve, that He did not act without us and apart from us. He brought us into it, and there will be this deep, inward, heart-relatedness to the result, that we share with Him the gratification. That is the very heart of suffering, I believe.

Now why am I saying this? Where was this born? how was this born? Well, in a very practical way. I have just returned from a time in the United States, and it has not by any means been an easy time - very much otherwise. But we have been profoundly grateful all the time that you dear friends were so many hours ahead of us. In the Eastern part of the States you were five hours ahead. When we got further West you were six hours ahead, and we constantly reminded ourselves that your prayer gatherings were ahead of us. They had gone before and we were just following on, in our own prayer and in the conflict and the pressure; following on, and, as we believe, being carried through. And there came to me this: Those dear friends are right in the battle, and if there is anything here that really is for the Lord, if anything results for the Lord, it belongs to them, quite as much as it belongs to us. It is theirs; in a certain sense they will own this; it will be, so to speak, their property. They have battled for it, suffered for it, endured for it, toiled for it. They have gone on ploughing the way, pioneering the way, and it is theirs.

That is the thought right at the heart of this word, that there is something that becomes ours through suffering. Yes, it is the Lord's, and it is all of His grace, but it is ours.

Suffering is a Purifying Thing

And that means surely that what we have laboured for, suffered for, travailed for, becomes something over which we are very jealous. Suffering for anything is a very purifying thing. Take the matter of the child for which there has been suffering, travail. Well, other people who have not so suffered and travailed and gone through for the child can see all the defects and pass all the criticisms and arrive at their judgments, good or bad, about that child, and just stand apart and say their say about the child. But the mother may see very little of that. There is something for the mother which transcends all that. 'Oh yes, you may say that, but that child is very precious to me. I have suffered for that child, that child is my child, the child of my heart and the child of my travail, and, while I may see its faults, there is something which covers them all, there is the jealousy of a love born of suffering'.

Now you see what I am getting at. There is nothing that is precious to the Lord, and which He would make the property of His people, but there will be suffering for it. It will only become their property - in that sense - as they suffer for it, and then woe betide who criticizes that! If you are detached from a thing, if you are detached from a testimony, from a work of God, you can do all the criticizing you like. You have no inward heart-relationship to it, and so you pass your judgments upon it. But if you are in it and you have suffered, if it has been a costly thing where you are concerned, then you are seeing more than all the failings, more than all those faults. The people who can criticize like that and judge and point out faults are the people who have not suffered.

On the other side, we may know all the terms, all the phraseology, all the doctrine, all the truth, and it may be just objective, something we have heard; we have lived in the midst of it, it is familiar to us. But what the Lord will do if that is to become ours is to take us into travail over the matter. He will relate that thing to our hearts in a deep, inward way, so that none of us will be able to say, 'I know all

about that, I have heard all about that, I could tell you all that you could tell me about that'. The Lord would so work in a costly, deep and painful way in relation to that, to make it ours through travail, that we are brought into a new position. We are not spectators, looking on, criticizing; we are on the inside, looking out, defending. We are jealous over it. Suffering is a great purifying thing. It destroys selfishness. It destroys that self-interest that is the cause of so much of the trouble. It makes us in a disinterested way jealous for what is of God. Yes, suffering purifies, and suffering makes this deep, inward link.

It gives an extra feature to things. That extra feature where we cannot just be occupied with faults and be people of a criticizing attitude, the extra feature with a love which covers a multitude of sins. We have suffered together. When we suffer together, what a lot we get over! We have gone through it together, perhaps through the years. We have been in the fire together, and there is a love, there is a jealousy which, let people say what they will about the other persons, simply rises up in us because we have suffered.

Joint-Heirs with Christ Through Suffering

"Heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified with him" (Rom. 8:17). This is not just an official thing, something that is a gratuitous gift in a mechanical way, as much as to say, 'Well, you have done a bit of work; here are your wages'. That thing has been wrought in us through the suffering and the cost and the warfare and the labour, and there is this sense of an inward co-heirship with Christ, if we suffer. It will be a very blessed thing, to us who know how much we are dependent upon the grace of God, how little we can even bear without the support of His grace; it will be a wonderful thing when at last He says, 'This is the reward of your suffering'. We shall say, 'Well, after all, it was our *light* affliction - in the light of the far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory. How have we earned this?' But there will be some gratification in recognizing that the Lord has taken account of what we have gone through, and has brought us into a sense of His own gratification, and given us to feel - 'Well, it was not in vain, it was not for nought'.

Why did I read those passages in the Old Testament from Numbers and Joshua? They both have to do with inheritance. I read them for this reason, that here were people who, in the first place, were concerned, were jealous, for the inheritance. And then they were people who were prepared to enter into the cost of the inheritance, after which, when they had got it, it was theirs. Yes, it was the Lord's, but it was theirs. Do you see what I mean? It is theirs. And many of us have gone through the years in toil, in suffering, in labour and warfare in the Lord's interests, and if there is anything that comes out of that at all, it is ours, in this sense - that we are jealous over it with a right kind of jealousy. It belongs to us in the Lord. Yes, it is the Lord's, but it belongs to us in the Lord, the fruit of suffering and of travail and of cost. Your faithfulness in prayer, and in prayer-gatherings - it is not without cost that you continue like that. Your faithfulness in the upholding of those who go out - it costs. Taking the years over, it is not without price if there is anything. The Lord has given it to you as your inheritance; that is yours. All that eternal spiritual value is yours in Christ. Now look after it, cherish it, watch jealously over it, and from all attacks defend it. If only we had this inward sense of relatedness to everything that costs, what a difference it would make, how less ready we should be to see the defects and the faults!

The Lord bring us to understand that the meaning of the conflict and of the suffering, from His standpoint, is not only - and I say this quite reverently - not only in order to get something for Him. It is because He wants us in an inward relatedness to it, as a very part of ourselves. I believe that is the very essence of this joint-heirship with Jesus Christ. What does it mean to inherit if we suffer? Surely

it means - 'This is what you have earned through the grace of God. Here it is: you have paid for this in fellowship with Christ'. I do not understand all this in the New Testament about 'suffering together with Him', 'filling up that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ for His Body's sake, which is the Church' - I do not understand unless it is this, that the Lord wants us not just as bits of a machine to work out some piece of work for Him. He wants a real heart-relatedness: so that, as we suffer with Him - and we are suffering with Him, there is no doubt about that - as we suffer with Him, we shall be gratified with Him. Glorified - yes, but gratified; the deep sense of gratification that we had a share in this. The Lord give us a right attitude toward all the cost.