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Crowning in Relation to an Ordeal

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me the Crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give to me at that day; and not to me only, but also to all them that have loved his appearing" (2 Tim. 4:7-8).

"Blessed is the man that endureth temptation; for when he hath been approved, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord promised to them that love him" (James 1:12).

"Fear not the things which thou art about to suffer: behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days. Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee the crown of life" (Rev. 2:10).

"And when the chief Shepherd shall be manifested, ye shall receive the crown of glory that fadeth not away" (1 Pet. 5:4).

"We behold him who hath been made a little lower than the angels, even Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honour" (Heb. 2:9).

The above passages bring into view and sum up practically all that we have been dealing with in our earlier meditations. Three words compass all - righteousness, life, glory. You will notice that there are said to be three crowns at the end - the crown of righteousness, the crown of life, the crown of glory. Of course, what is meant by 'crown' is the sealing of a course in triumph, with honour, with exaltation, the crown being the symbol both of victory and victorious honour.

Crowning in Relation to an Ordeal

You will notice this common feature in all the passages - in every case the relationship was to an ordeal. The Apostle Paul said, "I have fought the good fight. I have finished the course, I have kept the faith"; an ordeal expressed by three metaphors - a fight, a race, a trust - all indicating that something very serious was at issue. The other two passages, from James and from the Revelation, suggest an ordeal, a time of severe trial and testing. "Blessed is the man that endureth temptation (trial)." "Be thou faithful unto death." And similarly also with Peter. You know that Peter's writings can very largely be summed up in the words "suffering" and "glory." It is he who writes so much about the trial of faith, but he also writes much about the glory after the trial. Here it is in Peter - the crown of glory. "When the chief Shepherd shall be manifested, ye shall receive the crown of glory."

Now the point is that there is something very serious on hand; and that is, of course, the sum of all these meditations. From beginning to end, the Lord has been seeking to make us aware of the serious business that is on hand just now for the Church - no less a thing than the fulfilment of its vocation, the accomplishment of its course, the preserving intact of its trust. Expressed in other terms, that is no less a matter than proving the absolute lordship of Jesus Christ in the realm of Satanic forces - forces which are so evidently pressing in and seeking, with new, far-reaching efforts and activities, to set the kingdom of God aside and to rule out the Lord Jesus from this world. If I am not mistaken, the Lord would rally His Church at this end-time and make it aware of that for which it was eternally chosen in Christ and for which it exists as the instrument and vessel - the answering of that challenge in this universe to the sovereign rights of the Lord Jesus.

Are we really alive to the fact of the tremendous challenge to the kingdom of God that exists in the world today? We hear of many disturbing things happening. I hope you are not regarding them all simply on the earthly level and becoming more or less paralysed by the outlook. Rather we ought to look behind the events, and see the portent, the significance of them. What we see and hear is only the forefront of the situation, the earthly aspect, of something more, something other; and that other is Satan's bid - perhaps his last - for the kingdom.

We are getting very near the last days. Spiritually discerning people can surely see the drift of things today, and in the light of that the people of God must know where they stand, and it is not beside the point at all to quote words like these - "The devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days." Do not take that literally; ten is the number of responsibility. 'You are going to be put into a position where the whole responsibility for the testimony of Jesus will be worked out in whether you stand or go under, and it will become a matter of faithfulness unto death.' Now, whether there be a literal prison or not, we can see that the people of God are facing very serious prospects at this time. We may not all be feeling the full force of the antagonism just now, but such statements are very apropos to the situation of many. The evil thing is creeping on; and the Church is chosen to give the answer to it. And in our measure we are all involved. Of course, how much you really count spiritually depends entirely upon how much you are going on with the Lord, what your spiritual position is; but some of us, who have had time enough to learn, do know that spiritual pressure is a thing more intense today than ever we have known it in our lives. The enemy did at one time seem to give us a certain amount of respite, but he does not give us very much now. One thing follows another. I may be talking into the air for some of you, but sooner or later you will find that this is true.

The Crown of Righteousness

Now, you see these three things. First of all, righteousness - the crown of righteousness. What we have been saying in earlier meditations is that righteousness is the battleground of this great cosmic conflict between the two kingdoms. And what is righteousness? Well, after all, it is a matter of God

having His rights. Those rights of God to absolute lordship were disputed or challenged long ago - before this present world creation was brought about. Failing in heaven, the challenge followed in the earth. A great betrayal of God by Adam put this world and this race into the hands of Satan. Self in all its forms of pride - self-interest, self-realisation, the Satanic 'Iwill' - reared itself up in Adam against God; and that is unrighteousness. And righteousness, we have been seeing, is just the reverse of that - no longer 'I' but the Lord, the changing of the centre of things, from the self-centre to the God-centre. That is the battleground, and we know that that is not outside of ourselves but inside; and when we are told that He was made sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him (2 Cor. 5:21), we know that provision was thereby made for us to enjoy a change of disposition. Righteousness is a disposition that God shall be all in all, that everything shall be centred in God and be unto Him. Unrighteousness is a disposition that we shall be the centre, and everything unto us; and that is Satanic.

Now if you look at it, you will see that that is just what Paul was referring to. He is the great Apostle of righteousness. That goes without saying. When we look to see what Paul meant by righteousness, and what it meant to him, how constantly are we confronted with the Cross, and the Cross in relation to the man! We are so familiar with those chapters in his letter to the Romans, notably chapter 6. We know Gal. 2:20, and many other passages like it, such as 2 Cor. 5:14 - "One died for all, therefore all died." He did not regard righteousness as something abstract. Righteousness with him was a matter of one man being displaced by another - of Adam altogether put out of court and Christ put in his place. That is what the Apostle meant by righteousness. It was focused and centred in the Cross, where not only the secondary effects of the fall - sins - are dealt with, but also the primary effect - sin. Sin is the dethroning of God from His true place. Righteousness is the bringing of God back into His place, His rights and His rightful position; and the Cross did that. Paul was the great champion of the righteousness which is established by the death and burial and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and it is to that fight he refers. In effect, he is saying, 'I became committed to the great fight that God should have His place utterly and absolutely. I became involved in a course, the end of which was that God should be all in all. That was the trust deposited with me - to secure for God His rights through the Cross of the Lord Jesus. My life has been poured out for that; that has been the fight.'

And that fight was very often an inward one with Paul as well as an outward one. He could speak of fighting with wild beasts at Ephesus; he knew about the objective aspect of that fight. But oh, how much he tells about his own fight, about what is going on inside! And it was for Paul no easy thing to maintain that position of utter self-denial, self-refusal, and maintain a course with and for God. 'That,' he would say in effect, 'is the way in which answer is given to this challenge to God's place in this universe. It is centred, it is fought out, on this battlefield of righteousness, and that is a personal and inward matter.' And he is so personal. You remember these words written to the Philippians - "That I may... be found in him, not having a righteousness of mine own... but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith: that I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings" (3:8-10). He is thinking of the battle on this matter of righteousness, which in the end is the dethroning of the enemy.

So far as we are concerned, the first aspect of this thing comes right home to us as a challenge; how far are we going to let go our personal interests - all that is personal in our lives here in this world - that God should have His place? That is very simple in words, but a tremendous thing in experience; it is a real battle. It comes to this; is the Lord, at all costs, really going to have His place? Paul said, "...for whom I suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but refuse...", and that is how it must be. In so far as we have any self-ward direction, any personal interests to serve, and are not utterly abandoned to the Lord's having His way, to that extent the kingdom of Satan is upheld, is intact. It

has always been by means of the people who had no interest in life or in death but that the Lord should have His place and His end, that the kingdom of Satan has been broken into and overthrown. And that is righteousness; there is the battleground. That is the thing which draws us out and is the test of our real interest in life.

The Apostle says there is a crown of righteousness at the end of that course. He is not saying that it is the crown called righteousness. It is the battle of righteousness fought through, the course of righteousness completed, the deposit of righteousness preserved intact, and God crowns that at the end; He gives the seal and the mark of approval, the crown of righteousness.

The Crown of Life

The crown of life. Of course, this is also in the setting of difficulty, suffering and adversity. "The man that endureth temptation." But life is not the battleground; life is the object at stake. From the beginning it has been that - the battle for life. Satan at the beginning schemed and worked in order that he should capture the race for himself and defeat God's ends in the race. Wherever he has succeeded, he has done so in this way - that he has hindered men from having Divine life: because Divine life is not only continuity of life, it is a nature, a kind of life. It is the issue over which all the battle is raging. Life is the mark of victory now as well as afterward. Whenever we triumph on this battlefield of God having His place, His rights, there is a new release of life. Whenever in some controversy with the Lord as to His place, as to His will, there is victory gained and He is given what is His right, we know life rises up at once. Until that is settled, there is arrest. When we get to the Lord and face the matter out and get through about it with Him, then the hold-up goes and life springs up again and we are released. It is just that thing which is the object of all the activities of the enemy - to try to quench that life. Life is the issue.

Now, says the Word here, you are in the battle for life. Satan is out to quench you, to destroy you. As the Lord's child, the issue is with you. Just how much you will lay hold on the Lord's life, how much you will stand upon that Divine ground, how much in faith you will resist that working of death, in that degree you will know life. Oh, how that works out in so many ways, in so many details! Almost any day in our lives that issue arises - whether we are going to let death have its way. You know what I mean by death. I am not talking about being put in your coffin, but about spiritual death - those stifling, numbing, darkening forces that come upon your body, mind and spirit, and wrap you around. You get up in the morning wondering what is the matter with you. For no apparent reason you feel depressed, 'dead.' What are you going to do about it? Are you going to give in and say, 'Well, I am not feeling too good, I think I will give up for a bit'? Are you going to yield to it? Well, if you do, you will not be able to get yourself free again until there is a real fight put up in prayer. You will find that there is something more than just a passing bad feeling, it is the battle for life that you are in. We are all in that, and from those simple, personal forms the battle is intensifying and enlarging just now, and it is becoming the battle *of the Church* - that is the point - in an inward way. Is the Church really going to rise up and overcome this terrible wave of death that is spreading over the earth? It is a matter that is left with us; but that is the issue. Why do we not more quickly recognize what the issue is? We look at the secondary causes, we think at once that the explanation is this or that, but the real trouble has come from somewhere else, from behind; and that sort of thing is increasing. We are in the battle for life; it is the great issue from the beginning to the end.

Now then, in the presence of it, what are we going to do? "Blessed is the man that endureth trial; for when he hath been approved, he shall receive the crown of life." How are we going to be approved? You have never seen a scholar approved who threw aside his test paper and said, 'I can never do anything with that! No use trying!'; or who got so far, and said, 'I cannot do any more, I give it up!'

"Be thou faithful unto death"; go right through to the end with this thing. That is what the Apostle is saying. Is it a battle? Well, do not give in. Is it a course? Do not drop out. Is it a trust? Do not surrender it. Go through with it, and you shall receive a crown of life.

The Crown of Glory

"When the chief Shepherd shall be manifested, ye shall receive the crown of glory." What is the crown of glory? Well, it is simply the nature of righteousness and life manifesting itself; for righteousness is glory hidden, glory is righteousness manifested. Glory? It may be that somehow or other it will be perceivable glory in the sense of some radiance about us personally. Sometimes you can almost see that in people - those in whom there is such an utterness of devotion to the Lord and such a complete selflessness of life. In such people you sometimes see something of a radiance about them, even physically. At any rate, looking at it the other way round, it is true to say that in people who are always occupied with themselves, and taken up with their own troubles and the difficulties of their way, you do not see very much that is other than a dark shadow, even over their faces. They bring nothing of light and brightness and glory with them. Well, it may be that actual, literal glory will break out through these glorified bodies at last; but I believe the source of it and the seat of it is spiritual. It is that life of the Lord manifesting itself in fulness. It is that nature of the Lord - righteousness - breaking out and showing exactly what it is. It is the outbreking of the triumph over sin and death that is glory.

It is very significant to notice the setting of Peter's words. He has just been talking to the under-shepherds, and telling them to feed the flock - not for filthy lucre, not for praise, not that they should get something for themselves, and not because they are under an obligation to do it; but to do it selflessly, disinterestedly, abandoned to the Lord's interests, denying themselves. It may be costly to do this work for the Lord, but if you do it like that, with no other motive or object than the satisfaction of the Lord, "when the chief Shepherd shall be manifested, ye shall receive the crown of glory." Well, it is, in the end, the result of this self-life having been completely set aside and of the Lord alone filling our vision and governing our hearts and being our motive.

Righteousness - God having His place; and because of that there is release, there is life, there is victory; and when God has His place and the life of God is regnant in us, then there is glory at the end. These three crowns, these three seals, these three marks that we have triumphed, that the Lord has got what He set His heart upon - with these He attests in the end those who have been with Him in the battle. The battleground, righteousness; the object of the battle, life; the outcome of the battle, glory.

May the Lord find us all in the running for the three crowns; but it is a battle, a deadly battle, and an inward battle. I sometimes think it would be so much easier if we were only in an outward battle; if only we could strike out against something objective. When the thing to be overcome is inside, when it is myself that must be slain, it is not so easy. May we be faithful unto death.