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"In the Spirit"

by T. Austin-Sparks

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The Way of Escape from the Temporal

The phrase "in the Spirit" occurs several times in the book of the Revelation. "In the Spirit" represents the way of escape from the tyranny and overwhelming of the actual earthly conditions which surround and beset the Lord's people. John being in Patmos, a prisoner, with every earthly limitation imposed upon him, escaped from Patmos and all those limitations, by way of the Spirit, and found himself out in a very much larger, wider realm of things as they are seen and as they exist in heaven. This book of the Revelation shows, as perhaps few other books of the Bible show, how heaven really does govern everything. It is a book of the domination of Heaven. Heaven came in on Patmos and simply turned what would have been the end of the life of a great servant of God in limitation and suffering and martyrdom, into something tremendously fruitful for the church throughout many generations and unto eternity.

There is no doubt but that John's written ministry has been of untold value to the people of God ever since it was fulfilled, and that is because heaven came in and asserted itself over the other conditions which, by the interference of Satan, were intended to bring an end to the testimony, to cripple it and entirely restrict it.

The Government of the Heavens

So, right through this book you are able to see that in the different and various connections - the churches and the whole church as suggested by the sevenfold church, and then beyond to the nations, the kingdoms of this world, and ever on into the heavenlies where that great battle takes place between the great dragon and the man-child company, into the systems of this world as

represented ecclesiastically by Babylon the Great, and industrially by the man of sin. In all these realms, and finally to the very person of Satan himself, you see a tremendous manifestation of how eventually, ultimately (I do not mean ultimately in some future sense, but after all, when all is said and done) the heavens are governing. That, of course, is something to recognise as a great fact in God's universe - that the heavens do rule. It is something which we have to learn amongst our many lessons here in our life with the Lord, in our walk with God, that after all, the heavens are ruling, they do govern, they do dominate.

The Culmination of the Lord's Activities

The one thing which issues from that government and that domination of the heavens is this, that the Lord is, through the adversities and the sufferings and the afflictions and the trials of His people, moving toward spiritual enlargement, spiritual gain, spiritual fulness and wealth with a view to ministering that. It is vocation in view.

The book begins with that, illustrated in the case of John. You notice how it begins - "*The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him*" - a remarkable statement - "to show unto His servants" - His bondservants, it is throughout - "even the things which must shortly come to pass; and He sent and signified it by His angel unto His servant John". His servants; His servant. That signifying, that revealing (very comprehensive in this case) was given to John with all, for ministering firstly to the churches and then for the saints right down the age in relation to all the vicissitudes and events of world history. The point is that out of this man's trial and affliction and suffering, the Lord brought such revelation as constituted him a wealthy minister to the church, and that runs on until we find the whole thing brought to fulness and consummation in the church, in that as represented in the city. The culmination of God's activities by His Spirit and the government of His heavens is that here God has a great vessel of ministry with the outgoings to the nations, as we have already seen.

That is of very practical account. Please do not set it in merely or only an objective realm, as something to be looked at there. The personal and immediate application must be grasped and it boils down to this. We are in God's view individually, through trial, adversity, suffering, affliction and sorrow and all that comes to us by the enemy's activities, we are individually and personally in view under the government of heaven with a view to having spiritual measure and resource for others. That is the governing thing in the Lord's mind.

He had determined before times eternal to sum up all things in Christ (Eph. 1:10), but the imparting of these 'all things' is through the church. You will notice that those two things run in parallel lines. The one - all things in Christ - and then all things given to us in Christ. They are not just for our own personal ends and use, we would not know what to do with them, we could never spend that wealth, but demand, far-reaching and immense demand, lies beyond; in this life in measure, but afterward in fulness. So that you look from the beginning to the end of this book, and you see the principle firstly indicated in John himself: a man suffering banishment, exile and loneliness and, for all he knew, death at any time, and, to say the least of it, a great deal more of inconvenience and limitation and being cut off from fellowship and from ministry down here.

If you have any little experience at all of being shut up, just being limited, being unable to do anything for the Lord, you know just perhaps a little of what John was going through, when you remember how wide and full a ministry he had and what a knowledge of the Lord he had and how great were his riches. For he was a very old man at this time, he outlived all the other apostles, he had a great wealth. And here is this man with such a life, a long and full life, a life of tremendous riches and resources, shut up, just banished and cut off from all opportunity, alone. Well, that is a

very hard way for the flesh, but in that and over that, the heavens ruled to see that that was made the very occasion of the giving of the wealth that he had, to the church for all time.

Of course, the same thing is so clearly seen in Paul's life. What a wealth the church has had through all these generations, these centuries, because Paul went to prison and wrote those final letters. After all, how great would be the loss to the New Testament if you had to cut out Paul's prison letters; an accumulation of wealth within and then a cutting off of opportunity without, in order to make possible a larger ministry. It is difficult, of course, to accept that practically, although we see it so clearly here in the case of others.

Well now, here is John at the beginning, representing this government of the heavens, and then you come out at the end with the city and out of the sufferings of the church, all that the church has passed through. She is seen as a church of such measure, such fulness. If you take these measurements literally you have something immense. Twelve thousand furlongs; well, what is the size of the city in miles? You are not to take it literally, of course. The idea again, is size. These figures are symbolic. You take the measurement of the wall, for instance: a hundred and forty-four cubits, a cubit being about seventeen inches, and then do your mental arithmetic again, and see how many feet the wall is in breadth and in height, and you never confronted a wall like that! Then you go further and it becomes ridiculous viewed from literal standpoints that the city is as high as it is wide, as it is square. It is a cube. Well, it is a ridiculous idea to have a city like that literally, but the whole force of it is that here you have something immense, something great, here is measure, here is fulness, here is comprehensiveness. And it is out of that fulness and that measure, to use Paul's word: that *stature*, that ministry goes, and it is all the fruit of the government of the heavens over the works of the enemy and the sufferings of the saints.

We go through sufferings in our relationship with Him, things through which we would not go but for our relationship with Him. A very large proportion of the experiences of believers are simply due to their relationship with the Lord and the Lord's things. If they were in the world, they would get a very great deal they do not get: if they were in the world they would not get a very great deal that they do. The Lord does not allow us to go this way without definitely, positively, having in view wealth to be ministered, and I cannot see that the Lord would take any life through deep discipline and suffering and then put that life into some limited sphere, shut that life up where its values are lost, relate that life to something that is not an outlay for what He has put within. Therefore as I look at one and another and see them going through it, I am compelled to say that the sovereignty of God has something in view as to ministration through that life, and I can never accept anything small there. It is a heavenly law written through the whole Word of God and in the experience of His people, and if the Lord sees fit to allow us to be limited in many earthly ways and to have our liberties here curtailed, it is unto heavenly measure, for heavenly ministry.

If you like to look into the Word of God, you will find that that is just how it has worked out all the way along and here in this book there is no mistaking it. The principles underlying God's Word are very strong and established principles, and for me that is the key to the Word of God.

I may just say this here. Time was when one was trying to do what everybody else tries to do: sort out such a thing as the book of Revelation and fit it into history and get it altogether satisfactorily interpreted. Some people seem to do it to their own satisfaction, but there are thousands of others who do not agree and can upset it very easily. There is no finality in the interpretation of this book. There are scores, hundreds, of interpretations of the book of Revelation. You get nowhere along that line. The key to the Scriptures and to this book is its *spiritual principles*, and it is the only heart-satisfying way. So that, whether this and that *is* this and that, let us cease to be troubled very much

about it. The thing is, what lies behind this of Divine thought? What is the principle that is at work through this? And so I ceased to worry exactly where the isle of Patmos was, although it can be identified, and in whose reign it took place, and so on and so on - the merely earthly aspects of things.

Now, what is behind this? What I see is the devil, through a ruler on this earth, set upon destroying the testimony of Jesus and bringing it to an end, and thus banishing those who stand for it on the earth, and the heavens coming in and taking hold of the very work of the devil and making it serve the end that the devil tried to frustrate. That is what I see as a principle all the way through.

You must not be too literal in your mentality when you come to Revelation 12 and a great dragon and a man-child caught up, and you get mental pictures of these things literally happening. Well, banish your mental pictures, and what you will see is that there is a company of the Lord's people on the earth, going through all that hell can put upon them, and then hell being vanquished and that company of the Lord's people brought to a place of absolute spiritual ascendancy in the throne (not a literal throne), a place of spiritual ascendancy, and so much so that that ascendancy which Satan and his kingdom held in the heavenlies is taken from him. He has lost it, and the Lord has done it through a company of people who suffered.

The heavens ruled. That is the principle all the way through, so do believe that. If you really are going through a testing, trying time, or if you do go through such a time and it looks as though there is curtailment and limitation, do believe that this holds good. The Lord is getting spiritual measure in some inward way. He is enlarging, if outwardly He is narrowing, and it is that there shall be wealth to be distributed. That is the first thing that comes out of this company in the Spirit, that is, not just walking according to the natural mind about things, but being where we have God's interpretation.

What it Means to be "In the Spirit"

Perhaps it might be helpful and advisable for the sake of some, just to stop upon a matter of simplicity, because that phrase "in the Spirit" may not be grasped, or there may be some mentality of something mysterious, mystical and occult. It simply means this, that if we are the Lord's people, we have the Holy Spirit. If we have come to the Lord, we have been born of the Spirit and being born of the Spirit, inwardly, deep down in the innermost part of our being, the Spirit of the Lord resides. Now He sets up an altogether new system of things, a new system of ideas and values by which we shall be governed, a different system of thoughts and values from our own.

Our great lesson here as Christians is to learn what the Spirit thinks about things, and submit our judgments and our thoughts and ideas to the Holy Spirit; not even when we think a thing is true, taking it that it necessarily is, not even if we believe that such and such a course is the right one to take, without going to the Lord and submitting it to Him. "Lord, I feel that this is the right thing to do, but do You think the same?" We should bring things to the Lord, defer to the Lord on all things because His mind is so different from ours, even on things that we may think to be right.

Paul said about his former life: "I verily thought with myself that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus. It was a matter of conscience with me; no one would have convinced me that I was wrong; I believed I was right in what I did." The fact was that he could not have been more wrong. When he was most convinced that as a matter of conscience towards God he ought to do this, he really was doing the greatest wrong that any man could do. That is a case, of course, carried out to great length, but the same thing operates in us. We may think the thing is perfectly right, and yet the Lord may not agree with us at all, and herein lies the need for going to the Lord and

submitting everything to Him and giving the Lord an opportunity to show us that, after all, that is not His thought, and certainly not his full thought.

Our whole life is that sort of thing, just challenging our minds. "Be ye transformed by the renewing (or making anew) of your mind" (Rom. 12:2), as Paul says. That is life in the Spirit. A man or woman who keeps close to the Lord and submits everything to the Lord, will live a life in the Spirit and will therefore get heavenly conceptions, judgments and values, and will find that the way in which they would naturally look at things is not the way at all; the Lord sees the things quite differently. That is, simply, life in the Spirit. If the Spirit is in us, we are all called to live a life like that. Not one of us lives that life to anything like perfection, but we are learning to walk after the Spirit.

Well, then, when that happens, as we said, we find the way of escape from the tyranny of earthliness and we see things as they are seen in heaven, as this book shows. The churches are seen from an altogether different point of view, and the nations also, and the heavens are seen to be dominating the whole situation here. And where the Lord's true servants are concerned, it is a matter of bringing to a position to minister those spiritual things: spiritual understanding, spiritual knowledge, spiritual interpretation, for the sake, in the first place, of the Lord's people themselves.

Philip as a Man in the Spirit

This matter of being in the Spirit is one (and here I am only going to make a suggestion) is one which would be very profitably followed through the New Testament, and not just taking it on the surface, but taking an instance here and there and concentrating prayerful attention upon that instance to get inside of it.

You might take, for instance, the case of Philip. Philip was in Samaria; there was a great work going on in Samaria, and Philip was being instrumental in that great work, there was quite a revival. Now the Spirit spoke to Philip and told him to leave that scene of tremendous activity and of very fruitful ministry, where he had a large place and things were happening, and told him to go to the desert.

Well, you can see at once how the natural mind might conflict with the spiritual mind, and all arguments from the earthly standpoint would say, "Well, that cannot be God's mind!" However, Philip is a man governed by the Spirit, he is in the Spirit, and so he just puts aside natural reasonings. And you know, natural reasonings are most difficult to deal with when they come into the realm of real spiritual happenings. It is so easy to 'spiritualise' the natural mind. Perhaps that is too fine a point. If you do not get it, do not worry about it. But being in the Spirit, Philip went, apparently walked about the desert and then espied that chariot coming, and noticed that the man was reading. And the Spirit said, "Go near, and join thyself to this chariot". Then he heard the man reading the prophet Isaiah. The upshot of it was that the man was soundly saved and, on his own request, there and then baptized, (Acts 8:26-40).

Now, I venture to suggest that the natural mind might have jumped in there and said, "Is this an open door for me into Ethiopia? Seeing that this man is so great a man in Ethiopia, I will get right into headquarters, the very palace itself - a great opportunity! I will take hold of this!" That is how the natural mind becomes 'spiritualised' so often. And so he might have followed that out and fished for an invitation and probably would have got it and a great welcome: "You come back with me to my country and I will make you chaplain at the Queen's Court!" No, the Spirit caught Philip away. The Spirit does extraordinary things. The point is that he is a man in the Spirit.

When you get inside of things, you can see how the natural mind might project itself into spiritual things and give interpretations to things and say, "Well, this is evidently the Lord's way for me!" But a Spirit-governed mind, a Spirit-governed life, does not do that sort of thing. If you follow the sequel - where Philip went and where Philip was found - it will not be long before you come upon another instance of the same thing.

Peter as a Man in the Spirit

Peter is at Joppa, and Peter is in the Spirit and the Spirit shows Peter something about this man Cornelius away up there, across and up country. The Spirit begins to speak to Peter. Well, Peter's natural mind does come in and begin to argue over that let-down sheet and those unclean creatures. But a man who is in the Spirit will get over his difficulties, his arguments, and will subdue his natural reasonings. The Spirit will master if that man really is seeking to walk in the Spirit. It does not mean that a life in the Spirit never comes up against problems, perplexities or difficulties, that we do not have moments when we stand still and say, "Not so, Lord, nothing like this has ever happened to me, and therefore it cannot happen now". But here is a man who really was at prayer on the housetop, which means he is really reaching out to the Lord for the government of his life, and while the difficulties arise, because he is a man really abandoned to the Lord and living his life in the Spirit, these other things are got over and the Spirit has His way. And Peter and Cornelius are brought together, and we have that tremendous counterpart of Pentecost in the house of Cornelius, and amazingly enough, Peter is the very man who opens the door of the kingdom to the Gentiles. The great further movement of the Spirit of God to bring into being the relationship of Jew and Gentile in one church begins through Peter. It has happened in Jerusalem, the Jewish headquarters; now it is happening in Caesarea among the Gentiles (Acts 10). But this is what happens in a life in the Spirit.

So you go through the Acts and see movements of the Spirit, and you get inside of them and you can see what it means to be in the Spirit, how natural judgments, natural arguing, natural thoughts, even in the realm of spiritual things, are steadily overcome and set aside and ruled out by the Holy Spirit, and the Lord along that line gets so much for others.

And the book of the Revelation is what the Lord is eventually going to get for the others by this operation of the Spirit.

A People in Perfect Harmony with the Spirit

So you have this repeated phrase: "I was in the Spirit". And what is the culmination? What is the last thing in the Bible and the last thing in the book of the Revelation? "And the Spirit and the bride say, Come." That, of course, has been interpreted by most expositors as the response of the church to the announcement by the Lord, "Behold, I come quickly... And the Spirit and the bride say, Come." I am not sure that that is quite right, there are reasons for questioning that which we will not discuss at the moment. I think it is more this: that the Spirit and the bride are now saying, "Come", to him that hears and him that is thirsty. It is this ministry of a vessel perfectly harmonised with the Spirit.

You see, it is all so true to the principle running right through. The bride represents that which is utterly abandoned to the Lord, to the master, to the head, to the husband - the utterness of abandonment - and the Holy Spirit has been working all through the centuries to get a perfect harmony between the Lord's people and the Lord Himself, so that there is a complete blending of them with the Spirit in His purpose.

Referring again to the Old Testament story which we have already mentioned previously, Abraham's servant going for the bride Rebecca for Isaac, you remember the point came when Eleazar asked Rebecca, challenged her, as to where she was going. And then her father put the question to her deliberately: "Wilt thou go with this man?" And she said, "I will go" (Gen. 24:58). If Eleazar represents the Holy Spirit coming from the Father's house to find and bring back a bride for the Son, there has to come a time when a decision is made, out of which decision there is a going with the Spirit which is a progressive oneness and harmonising with the thoughts and purposes of the Spirit concerning the Son. That is a process, it is a long-drawn-out process usually. It is a long journey spiritually. This harmonising of us with the Spirit does not take place all at once. It did not with the apostles, even with Peter, it was a lifelong thing. It is a process, bringing about a perfect accord and harmony between the child of God, the children of God, and the Holy Spirit as to His thoughts for the satisfaction of the Father in the Son. When that perfect accord is secured, then the instrumentality is so one with the Spirit that a very fruitful ministry takes place. The Spirit and the bride say, "Come."

I think there is something in that in the way of principle for present service. Do you not feel that if the Lord's servant individually, personally, and if the Lord's church were so harmonised with the Holy Spirit as to God's thoughts about His Son, there would be a very much more effective bringing of the unsaved, the needy, those that hear and those that are athirst? Putting it the other way, may it not be that there is such disparity between the ideas of the Lord's servants and the church today in Christian work, and the Holy Spirit's mind and object, that there is ineffectiveness? Well, inasmuch as you and I desire to be the Lord's servants, that is to be of value in ministering spiritual good to others, let us see that that is founded finally and ultimately upon a perfect harmony between us and the Spirit so that the agreement is complete: "The Spirit and the bride say, Come." To whom they say it does not matter at the moment, whether to the Lord or whether to him that hears that is athirst.

The point is that that harmony and agreement between those represented by the bride and the Spirit is essential to bring something about. It is something tremendous in the way of effective principle in fulfilling the purpose of God, and that is where we arrive at the end of everything in the Bible - a harmonising between the Spirit and those whom the Spirit has called, in a great ministry of bringing into the fulnesses of Christ which are going to be ministered even after this dispensation. And, as we have been saying all along, they are going to be ministered by this church, out of this City, but the necessity is for this complete oneness.

We are probably up against this very law of perfect agreement with the Holy Spirit in some form almost every day of our life. It may bring about those little battles such as Peter had over Cornelius and the Gentiles, those little controversies with the Lord, "Not so, Lord. There has been nothing like this ever before!" And the Lord may have to get over a lot of tradition, a lot of established things, a lot of things that have always been and therefore must always be, over a lot of things that have never been before and therefore ought never to be now. We get fixed, we have so many precedents in our lives, such a lot of background, and it forms a background of controversies. But we come to a place where we are so much in the Spirit that it does not matter. If everything has been like this, the Lord can have it altogether different if He wants to in the future. If nothing has been like this before, the Lord can have all that He wants in the future - a perfectly clear place.

You can see in the case of Samuel a most beautiful illustration of this very thing. There was a state of things in which people had no ear to hear what the Spirit was saying or wanting to say. Poor old Eli, the representative of the whole nation, was blind and deaf, he was past it, and so the people were neither hearing nor seeing, and the Lord took a little child, one right from childhood, unspoiled by this tradition. Samuel and David are the only two in the Bible not of the priestly family who wore an ephod. While Samuel was of Levitical family, he was not of priestly family, but it says, "But Samuel

ministered before the Lord, being a child, girded with a linen ephod" (1 Sam. 2:18). And you remember the occasion when David wore an ephod (2 Sam. 6:14). David was not of priestly nor Levitical family. But here is one, Samuel, completely out of tradition, and the Lord takes him up. He has nothing to unlearn, he has not a lot of background to be got rid of, the Lord is starting in a very clear place and this one hears what the Spirit says, hears the Lord.

It has to be like that: that we have nothing in the background that argues with the Lord, that says, "This is how it always has been done and this is the established, recognised thing." The Lord will not have it. He will say, "However true that may be, I am going to do a new thing. Will you let Me do something that has never been done before? Will you stand alone with Me right over against all that?" And then you find the Lord gets a perfectly clear place where, as through a child without a history to get in the way, He gets that way, that channel, where He can come in, and so establish that: "The Lord... let none of his (Samuel's) words fall to the ground" (1 Sam. 3:19). Here is effectiveness right to the letter, every word was effective.

Well, we will not dwell upon that more at the moment. I trust that we are able to see in our hearts that there is a life in the Spirit, and that life in the Spirit has as its object the bringing about of perfection, harmony, between us and the Holy Spirit in His thoughts of the Father concerning the Son. And when that harmony is brought about, ministry is very effectual and very fruitful; nothing falls to the ground. The Spirit and the bride are blended, they have one voice together.