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Resources for Service and Worship

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: John 11:1-2; 12:1-5; Psalm 66:9-15; Genesis 26:12-15,18-19.

These several passages are brought together in relation to one simple but helpful thought. It is the way in which we become possessed of resources for service and for worship.

In the case of the passages in the gospel of John, what comes out is Mary offering something very costly in worship, adoration, and service to the Lord. It looks very much as though Judas and those of like mind stood in the place of the Philistines, who envied and coveted. He, and they, were impressed with the wealth, the value, the preciousness of what was being expended upon the Lord, and what the Lord was receiving. They were putting the value very high. Of course, from their standpoint it was too high for its purpose, it was more than Himself; but from Mary's standpoint it was a very small thing in comparison with Him.

The thing which is quite clearly thrown up in that passage is the preciousness, the value, and the Lord's appreciation of it. The question is, what brought this about? How did it come to be? By what way did the Lord come to receive this wealth, this richness, this preciousness? The answer is seen in the history of her relationship to Him. It was a history of sorrow, suffering, discipline, some mystery in which the soul was torn and rent with perplexity. John 11 is the story of a good deal of inward suffering, perplexity, and anguish. She undoubtedly went through a deep time. Mary's life was evidently marked by more than one deep time, and it was out from those depths, out from that suffering, out from that discipline, that there came this which is marked for ever in the Divine record

as something characterised by preciousness and value, wealth and riches; something which became the envy of the carnal.

So it ever is, that it is by the way of suffering, by the way of pressure, by the way of travail, that we become possessed of the resources for the service of the Lord. That hardly needs emphasising, it is too manifest a fact, and yet it is something to meditate and reflect upon. We do not get resources which really serve the Lord by mechanical means. We never serve the Lord with the accumulations of mere study. The resources for service are not what we collect outwardly. The means for the work of the Lord are not the result of the activities of our brains. What really serves the Lord is something very costly, and the costly things are never got easily. When they are spiritual things they are only got by very much spiritual suffering. Perhaps there is need for some revision as to what it is that really serves the Lord; what the means are by which the Lord is really glorified. It is not a matter of what we have said, or do say, about the Lord as something grasped. It is what comes out of the suffering through which the Lord Himself allows us to go.

The mystery of John 11 for those concerned was that the Lord was so obviously refusing to prevent that particular sorrow coming into that life. "Lord, if Thou hadst been here, my brother had not died", and yet we know from the fuller history given us by a disciple who was there, and given us much later, that His not being there was quite a deliberate thing. He might have stepped in and prevented that sorrow, but He deliberately took the other course. That was a mystery to them, and we know that it is the mystery of God's ways with us that is a very large factor in the intensity of the suffering. He does not tell us all about it in advance. He does not just lay it all clearly before us, and say: "Now, that way leads to so-and-so; if you go this way, such-and-such will be the result". He simply begins to lead us by a way that is inexplicable, which seems to be totally contrary to Himself and to His nature, and we have to go on. The end is that we are in possession of a wealth with which to serve Him, a wealth which goes down to history in spiritual annals as something which the Lord prizes very greatly. These are the true resources of service, and, after all, the measure of real value to the Lord is the measure of what is wrung out of life's travail. Enrichment, the valuable possessions for the Lord, come that way.

The passage in Psalm 66 is given a special significance by reason of the context:

"For Thou O God, hast proved us:
Thou hast tried us, as silver is tried.
Thou broughtest us into the net;
Thou layedst a sore burden upon our loins.
Thou hast caused men to ride over our heads;
We went through fire and through water."

They are the dealings of the Lord with the life: "A sore burden... men riding over our heads... fire and... water". The Lord caused it! That is withering, paralysing unkindness! We can never believe that the Lord is Love if He will do things like that; the result of that must be a soul frozen and a life withered! The remarkable thing is the result here in this Psalm:

"I will offer unto Thee burnt-offerings of fatlings,
With the incense of rams;
I will offer bullocks with goats."

Through it all there is something for worship; that is, worship comes out of all that. It is impressive to notice David one moment is saying: "Thou hast done all this in my life, which was calculated to

destroy me". And then: "I will worship, bring an offering, the very best. As a result I am not just bringing the reticent, hesitating acknowledgment of the Lord which is grudging, and grudgingly given, because of all I have gone through. 'I will offer unto Thee burnt offerings of fatlings, with the incense of rams; I will offer bullocks with goats.'"

The large sacrifices are here. David is saying: "I am not going, because You have dealt so hardly with me, to bring You a dove," the smallest of all the offerings. The thought here is of wealth, fullness, largeness, resulting from suffering. The Lord gets something big out of the suffering through which He brings us. There are resources for service through suffering. Here it is worship given, but worship which is produced, not by some objective contemplation of God, but by reason of an inward history of suffering. There is some value in that.

We turn to the passage in Genesis again, and note what is behind this: "And Isaac sowed in that land, and found in the same year an hundredfold; and the Lord blessed him. And the man waxed great, and grew more and more until he became very great. And he had possessions of flocks, and possessions of herds, and a great household; and the Philistines envied him... And Isaac digged again the wells of water, which they had digged in the days of Abraham his father; for the Philistines had stopped them after the death of Abraham."

Isaac ever stands as a personal representation of life out of death. A young man, with his life before him, having that life brought to, shall we say, a premature close in obedience to the Lord's will, and virtually offered his life. And then all coming back in the power of resurrection. And here is the issue: the history of Isaac subsequently is just this: He "waxed great, and grew more and more until he became very great, and he had possessions...", so that the Philistines envied him. It speaks for itself. A life offered to God! Some would say: to what purpose is this waste? All the possibilities of that life sacrificed! The Lord's verdict justifies!

This man, in the power of resurrection, was found much in activity. That is, there was the energy of resurrection Life manifested in him: "And Isaac sowed... And Isaac digged...". Here is the energy of the risen Life of the Lord, which produces the riches and the resources for service to the Lord; which raises the testimony, which honours the reputation of the Lord and justifies the ways of the Lord.

Enter for a moment into Isaac's mind as he would contemplate his life before this time; as he remembers as a young man going with his father, reaching that mountain, being bound and tied on that rough altar, seeing his father raise that knife, and expecting the next instant that knife would be plunged into him. The sense of how he really had come to the place of losing everything and then of the intervention from heaven, by which he was brought back, and a new life was given to him. He might have said to himself: "Now look at these flocks and herds - possession, position, the envy of the Philistines! It is all very wonderful! It is all the Lord!" An end reached, and then a new history.

We cannot say that Isaac would have had this history but for that crisis in his life. When the Lord's blessing comes with gifts, with resources, it makes them so much more wonderful than if we had them without the crises. To have possessions without the sense that they are the blessing of the Lord, surely would be poor gain, but to come into a place of being able to serve the Lord, having spiritual means with which to serve the Lord, because you know that the Lord has done it; that is the strength of service.

This is just a story of the riches and fulness coming by way of the death, suffering, and losing. That is always the way of the real values: "In pressure hast Thou enlarged me." Mary could say that; the Psalmist could say that; Isaac could say that. This may be our history. We have known something of pressure; we are knowing something of the spiritual riches. What we have is very valuable to us, and, we believe, to the Lord, because it is not of our own producing; it is being born out of the deep way in which He has led us. And so it will continue.