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Email: info@austin-sparks.net

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The Cross and the God of Hope (Transcript)

by T. Austin-Sparks

Transcript of a message given in November 1958.

In the letter to the Romans, chapter 15. Chapter 15 of the letter to the Romans and at verse 13: "Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may *abound* in hope, in the power of the Holy Spirit".

'The God of hope fill you... that ye may abound in hope!'

As you know, the apostle has worked his way up to that point through a very great mass of things the whole course from Adam's first sin, tracing all its consequences and its outworkings, through all the generations up to Christ. Then, placing at the end of all that, the Cross of the Lord Jesus; and then, from that point, opening up an entirely new prospect and future. The Cross being the terminal point up to which everything led, and from which everything takes a new rise. Through all that history, explanation and teaching, the apostle comes at length to this all-comprehending and all-governing title: 'The God of Hope'.

And as we view this great situation represented or presented in this book and in the New Testament, we find ourselves faced with a strange thing, which looks like a paradox. It is this: that God has written over the whole course of history the meaning of the Cross in this way, that the answer of God to sin, to evil, to disobedience, and to all the fruit and results thereof, He has written that the only answer that He can give is travail, despair and death. And, withal, He is the God of Hope; that travail, passion, despair and death are *the only way of hope*.

The Only Way of Hope

That is written deeply in the whole history of God's dealings with men. Ever since Adam's sin, and (in him) the race's fall, God has had to work on the basis of the Cross of Christ. The Cross has been implicit in all God's dealings with men and, not only in general, but with His own people in particular.

I will repeat: the Cross has been implicit in all God's dealings. The Cross *means* suffering; it is the very symbol of suffering - we know that. The Cross *means* travail and anguish - we know that. The Cross *means* passion. The Cross means despair. The great cry at the end of that ordeal was the cry of despair: "My God, My God, Thou hast forsaken Me - why?" The Cross *is* death. It's death, but, with all, with all that, in God's desire and God's intention it is unto joy; it is unto sheer thankfulness; it is unto *hope*, a new hope! It is unto life - all the things which are exactly the opposite to what the Cross *seems* to say.

God is the God of Hope, even when you look at Calvary, and look at the One there, and hear His bitter cry. To see all that is going on there, if you understand it, and if you look at history - Adam's sin, and fall, and all that in which the race was involved thereby, all the tragedy and the anguish and the passion and the evil of the generations - you see why God, not only *allowed* it, but had to establish that regime, issuing in despair. The answer is: He's the God of Hope - a strange thing to say, that's His way of hope, and His *only* way of hope.

The Cross has *always* been God's way of *salvation* - God's way of salvation, God's remedy. It's a very drastic remedy, a very terrible remedy, but it's God's remedy. And if it is an effective remedy, then it produces hope; it's something with hope as its issue, a new hope. The Cross is not a symbol; the Cross is not an object. The Cross is a mighty power. A mighty power, a perpetual power; an enactment once in history, but a power running through all the ages - we have said *implicit* in the old dispensation, *explicit* in this dispensation. But from the first sin to the last, the Cross is a *power* at work.

Now there is one thing with many aspects, of course, against which the Cross stands: that is, a state which is other than God *intended* there should be. The Cross always stands over and against a state other than God fully *intended* to be. I say that has many aspects. We are going to just look at one or two of them this morning, they are perfectly apparent in the Bible.

Firstly, the Cross stands over the *nature* of things when that nature has become different. Whenever the *nature* of things has changed from what God either made it at the beginning, or intended it to be, God has brought in the Cross in some way or another; at once He has introduced the Cross.

The nature of man was *changed* at the beginning; his nature was changed. He became something different from what God intended, in nature. We all know that by our inheritance. And immediately God introduced the Cross in the law of travail, of passion, of adversity and wrote *immediately* over that state: Despair and Death. The Cross stood over against a *changed state*. The only hope for recovering the Divinely intended state or condition, or nature of things, lay in the Cross.

The Cross is the great *purifying* thing - and purifying simply means getting rid of mixture - things which do not correspond and tally. They're of two natures, two realms: impurity, adulteration, two opposing elements. The Cross stands four-square against anything like that, to purify.

Dear friends, the very first thing with God in the individual, in any company of His people locally meeting, and in the Church universal, the very first thing with God is its purity, its cleanness, its separation from all iniquity and all mixture.

Our Christian life is based upon the Cross, individually, locally, and universally. It's based upon the Cross in the *first* instance, in this very way, that the Cross sees God's terrible, mighty, eternal declaration *against* impurity - the contamination and corruption that has come in to make a state in man, and in this world, which He never intended to be.

The only way of purification is by making very effective and real the hopelessness, from God's standpoint, of that which is not pure. How true that is, as we look out in a general way, the hopelessness of an impure, unclean, mixed state of things.

The God of Hope demands, therefore, complete cleansing in that realm, and the constituting of something *pure*, something clean, something unmixed, untainted. If you look into the Bible, with all its wonderful symbolism of what God's thought is, you will find It is that: transparency, crystal-clearness. The end of God's work in this creation, as we have it at the end of the book of the Revelation, is a jasper stone - something pure, clear as crystal. And it's the Cross and the Blood of the Lamb that leads to that.

If the Lord therefore sees any state that He never intended to be, and that contradicts His mind in this matter, He'll bring in the Cross as a working power and, where that is found, there will begin to arise a situation. We've come to a standstill, God is not going on. We are in distress; we are in travail; we are in anguish; we are in despair; we are coming to death. You see the Cross is working in that way in order to produce a situation full of hope, full of prospect! I think the law is very clear.

The first thing, then, is that of a state that is not according to God's intention which has got to be cleared up by the application of the great principles of the Cross. That is hopeless, that is hopeless, there is no hope for anything that is not pure in His eyes.

Next, when things have become *less* than God intended they should be. They have become smaller. God intended something full, great, and things have become smaller than He intended. And the history of things is the history of that tendency - more than a tendency, a real working - in man's *reducing* both God and God's things to his own human measure; bringing everything of God, and God Himself, within the compass of man; reducing God to man in measure; making God less than He is, and the things of God less than they really are. We can see how that has gone on and is all the time going on, as a trend, as a tendency, as some working. And always, always we're near that peril of things becoming *less than God meant them to be*. God intended something great, something very great and here is loss, or the peril of loss, reduction; things becoming smaller, *losing* something.

And whenever the Lord sees that working, or that peril becoming very real, He introduces the Cross. And travail begins, and distress, and suffering. Everything comes into a realm of uncertainty and weakness and question. The Cross is introduced and a sense of failure and despair is written, "We are not going on, we are not going through". God intended something great, and it has lost something of that greatness, or failed to go through to that greatness; it's become something smaller than He intended. He's not going to allow that. I repeat, He reacts. And oh, what tremendous reactions in this very connection history shows.

You take just the illustrative case of Israel. See, while Israel was a chosen people, taken out of the nations for God, God never, *never* intended Israel to become something in themselves! He *never* intended that Israel should be the beginning and the end of all His work. He *intended* Israel to be a 'light to the Gentiles'; to *be* a testimony to all the nations to God; to be a *ministry*, a missionary instrument, to *all* peoples, that *all* nations should walk in their light, or come into the light of God as amongst them. They were raised up, not for *themselves* as an end, but for the whole world; God's apostolic nation, to evangelise the nations with the knowledge of God.

What did Israel come to? To despise the nations, to call them 'dogs', to shut them out, and shut themselves *in* from the nations, and have nothing whatever to do with them; to look upon them as something to be *despised*, to be rejected, to be cut off. "*We* are the people; everything begins and ends with us..." - something smaller than God intended, and there's no hope in that direction. The end of *that* story is Israel, while of *that* mind, must be put aside, broken, smashed, brought to despair, to hopelessness. And how true it was! How true it was. Something *less* than God intended, and becoming something in themselves.

There's a large lesson for us to learn, and ever bear in mind, dear friends, that with all that God *gave* to Israel, and all that God is willing to lavish upon us, it is *not* for ourselves, it is *not* to end in ourselves. And it is *not* to be allowed to make us just something in ourselves, that '*We are* the people'. It's a trust - a trust for *all* men.

The apostle Paul recognised that; and what a tremendous thing his recognition of that meant in his own case, when you think of him as a typical Israelite. *His* vision and ministry was: '*all* men' - "that we may present *every man*" - not, every Jew, but "*every man* perfect in Christ". He is the man who brings in the immensity of things, isn't he? The *immensity* of Christ; the *immensity* of the Church. If there is one thing about the Church that is so evident in the New Testament, it is its greatness. How *great* it is, taking its character and its dimensions from the Lord Jesus. Any who have seen the greatness of Christ can never tolerate a 'little' church, a 'little' fellowship, a little exclusive thing that is an end in itself. It must have a universal vision and a *universal heart*. Get that! Any tendency to become something less will be met by the Cross, and there will come in hopelessness, despair, arrest, a sense of no way through, and a great deal of inward suffering and trouble and perplexity.

The Cross is the way of salvation: it is the way of salvation from something being smaller than God intended; but it's a *painful way*; it's a painful way, the way of travail.

The Cross *releases* from all smallness. The Lord Jesus made that clear in His own words: "I came to scatter fire on the earth... how am I straitened till the baptism with which I must be baptised is accomplished; how am I straitened!" But the baptism of the Cross, the passion being accomplished, He is *released* from all His straitness. This is no national movement now; this is no limited thing either to Palestine, or to any other spot. He is released into the universal by the Cross from the smallness of Judaism, Israelitishism, Palestinianism! He is released by the Cross. But it's a painful way, that release, it's a breaking and a rending.

So the Lord would ever have us remember that He *does* react, and react very painfully, if anything that He intended to represent His greatness and His fulness becomes *less* than that.

Once more, when anything becomes governed by *human wisdom*, by the mind of men, brought into bondage of the 'scribes', the Lord has always brought in the Cross over against that. You see it.

You see it again in Israel. The Cross has been introduced over against that situation where the scribes and the rulers of Israel gave to Divine things their own human interpretation, and imposed upon the things of God their own minds, created this great and intolerable burden to which Christ referred - simply the mind of man imposed upon Divine things. And it always means *bondage*. *Always* means bondage! The Lord is not going to allow that. And so He acts again, and there comes an *impasse*. An *impasse*, and what is the nature of this new crisis? Absolute bewilderment! A situation where you *do not know* what to do, where to look, in what direction to move; how the situation can be *resolved*. No, it's beyond, altogether beyond human wisdom. It's an *impasse* of confounding, confusion, and despair. What can we do? What shall we do? How is this situation to be met? And at every effort you're defeated.

The Lord has got to rescue out into the realm of *Divine revelation from merely human, mental, holding of Divine things*. It's a tremendous thing that the Lord must have, you know, this realm where He is perfectly free to give new light if He wants to. Perfectly free to give new light that may seem to upset all our interpretations - *all* the mental power of the scribes and the Pharisees - to upset the whole thing!

That is what you find in the New Testament, in the book of the Acts. Here is Peter, a representative of Israel. Here is Paul, one of those interpreters of the law, who held everything within the limit of their own minds, and said, "Our word is final! Our interpretation is the authority! You have to bow to it!" Here they are. What is the Lord *doing* with men like Peter and Paul, and others in that book? He is bringing them up against situations where, if God does not now come in with some new light and some new revelation, they're at a standstill. But He was doing that, taking them altogether beyond their *best* traditions, their *strongest* convictions, and their *settled* interpretations, and making them see that the Bible meant far more than ever, with all their learning and knowledge, they had realised it to mean.

Yes, Leviticus 11 stands true about unclean creatures and reptiles not to be eaten. Does the Holy Spirit contradict that when He tells Peter to, "Arise, kill and eat"? Not at all. But Leviticus 11 had a meaning that Peter had never seen. Now he is up against something that *seems* to contradict his knowledge of the Scripture; but in principle it doesn't - it just doesn't. And one can only hint at that because, you see, we *bind* the Word of God, and we do not leave God free to enlarge the revelation, that He is meaning, to give new light. And if that is a peril, or if that is where we've come to, that our interpretations are made binding and limiting, He will bring in the Cross, and bring us to utter confusion, where we, now if God doesn't give us some new light, we're finished; we haven't got the wisdom for the situation. What's He doing? The God of Hope is getting rid of a hopeless situation. And it is *always* hopeless when man is the last word in anything! Always hopeless.

Finally, when things become, or have become, a legal system. Bringing anything of God into bondage, God has reacted with the Cross, and it has been a terribly devastating reaction. The whole matter of the law, legalism, the breaking of that was a terrible business, a *terrible business*, and it always is. The Lord is not going to tolerate anything like that - making His things of the Spirit a tyranny of law. Not a bit. He will react for the Spirit's complete liberty in all things.

Now you see what this situation is. The Cross stands between a pure, unadulterated state, and a mixed, and therefore an impure, condition. The Cross stands between those two. The Cross stands between the *full* intention of God and something less than He intended.

Yes, the Cross demands fulness, not imperfection, not something less, even in degree. Believe me, dear friends, that if the Cross really is a working power anywhere, it will never allow a *standstill*. It will always demand a going on, and ever on, because it opens the way for that.

The Cross stands between a knowledge or a wisdom that is without Life, and spiritual knowledge which is Life. Adam made his choice, his bid for knowledge, and he got it without Life. The "Tree of Life" was shut off - knowledge without Life. God doesn't stand for that. Knowledge. Oh, yes, how even religious knowledge can be lifeless and dead! It may be true of us, we have a lot of knowledge - but where is the commensurate Life, the commensurate Life? The Lord's against that, and says: "I can't go on; we must have some trouble about this; we must have some anguish, some pain about this...".

All the knowledge must have a corresponding Life. The knowledge must be *living*, must be linked with Life. You can eat of the "Tree of Knowledge", but, but, remember now, the Tree of Knowledge, (now I mean that *other* Tree of Knowledge, the knowledge of the Lord, of heavenly things) you can eat of that, but even so, you must have the "Tree of Life" to keep the balance. Knowledge and Life correspond, go together. The Lord is against any state other than that.

Again, form, exact form, perfect form, in teaching and in practice, without power, is something that God will not allow. Yes, perfectly right in teaching and in practice, but what about the power? What about the power? You see, Israel had the oracles, had the Law, had all the truth, but where's the spiritual power? None at all. The Cross will act to put that right. There is nothing to be said against 'correct' procedure and accurate and sound teaching; they must be; but the Lord will see to it that by keeping things on the move, in exercise, in travail, in trouble, the whole question of *power* becomes a very, very real one. We have got so much teaching, but we have so little power - and that must become an anguish, a real anguish. All that we have, and all our way of doing things which we think to be so right, in a New Testament order it has a corresponding power and impact. And so the Lord will not allow rest in that.

In all these ways, you see, He is the God of Hope: by travail there's hope, by despair there's hope. It's His way. May He give us understanding.