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Email: info@austin-sparks.net

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The Need for a Spirit of Grace

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"And it came to pass afterward, that David's heart smote him, because he had cut off Saul's skirt" (1 Sam. 24:5).

"And the Lord turned the captivity of Job, when he prayed for his friends" (Job 42:10).

"And the people of Nineveh believed God; and they proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them. And the tidings reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and laid his robe from him, and covered him with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he made proclamation and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; let them not feed, nor drink water; but let them be covered with sackcloth, both man and beast, and let them cry mightily, unto God" (Jonah 3:5-8).

In the above three fragments of Scripture, we have examples of how much value the Lord puts upon a spirit of grace. Very great spiritual issues are shown to have hung upon the spirit which actuated each of the three men concerned. Let us look at them, each in turn.

Grace, the Way of Ascendancy

It is impressive how the Spirit of God so governs the narrating of David's life and activities as to disclose what was in his heart. Concerning him God had said that "the Lord looketh on the heart," and so it must needs be that his heart is uncovered.

This incident is very revealing. It was during that painful period when David was being hunted by Saul, as he said, 'like a flea, or a partridge.' Saul was making life as much of a burden for David as possible. David knew that he had been anointed for the throne. He knew that Saul would one day be at his mercy. But he was sorely harassed by this demon-driven man, and was constantly in deadly peril because of him. And now, the hour of opportunity had come. He had come upon Saul asleep and unguarded. One blow and his troubles would be over. One thrust of his sword and he could be free of his worries. Moreover, the man who stood in the way of his destiny would be removed, and the throne could be his. Although urged by his men to believe that it was the Lord Who had delivered Saul into his hands in order to put an end to him, David put back the suggestion, quenched the dart of temptation, and, in order to show just what he could have done if he had liked, he cut off the hem of Saul's robe and withdrew to exhibit it as evidence of - what?

It was then that "David's heart smote him." Was it just that David had a conscience, or was it the Spirit of God that smote David's heart before his heart smote him? Conscience could easily have been squared with the argument that the Lord had delivered his enemy into his hand, especially as the Lord had told him that such a day would come. No, the Spirit of God sees more and goes further. He goes right on to "the grace of the Lord Jesus." For one thing, grace takes away all merit, and if David was in danger of saying with his evidence 'What a good boy am I; see what I could have done if I had chosen, but I didn't,' then it is not grace, and he, for that much and that moment, was under condemnation and judgment. David was in the way of the throne, that is, the way of authority and government, and so he must learn that in this age it is a "throne of grace." Spiritual ascendancy is the principle wrapped up with David's life and destiny, and spiritual ascendancy in the life of one in vital relationship with Christ is through "Father, forgive them." So Christ came to the Throne. Do we want power, spiritual authority, and the support of the Lord? Then meekness, suffering wrong, "being defamed, we bless," "bless them that curse you," is the way. There must not be even a small bit in our hand which we use to prove our own goodness. What a thing it is to be sensitive to the Lord, so that the Spirit in us can tell us when we are infringing Divine principles, even when we think that we are being very generous! Pride is a very subtle and deceptive thing, and it may be behind even our good works. Kingship is not something official with God; it is a regal, noble, and transparent spirit.

Saul may represent anything in the permissive will of God that seems to stand in the way of our Divinely-appointed destiny or vocation. The principle is that we may not do anything out of personal interest. We may not be governed by ambition or self-realisation. In personal heat we may not take matters out of the Lord's hands into our own. The Lord had seemed to put Saul into David's hands, but it was only to test David's heart, his faith, his humility, his selflessness. This was necessary training to govern.

We pass to Job, and here we see

Grace, the Way of Enlargement

With Job the same point of vindication arises. The Lord turned the captivity of Job when he prayed for his friends. He was not their enemy. They had made themselves his enemies, they set

themselves against him in the main. Now the end of the story is that the Lord says to them, 'You go to My servant Job and he shall pray for you.' And they went and they brought their sacrifices, and Job saw them coming, and what was Job's reaction? Put yourselves in Job's place. After having had such a time at their hands - oh, what a time they had given him, and what wicked and cruel and malicious things they had said, how they had persecuted that man's soul, hitting a man when he was down! - now they were coming, and all their interests hung upon whether he would pray for them, on how he received them. What a chance!

You see again, what is the point here? It is not only ascendancy and vindication, it is enlargement. Afterward the Lord gave Job more than ever he had before - twice as much as he had before. It is a matter of enlargement now, it is a matter of wealth, it is a matter of increase, it is a matter of the Lord being able to say, 'I am unrestrained in my desires toward this life, toward this people; there is no need for Me to keep back; I can give twice as much; I can give here.' Ah, but it just hung upon the way Job reacted toward these people. He might have said, 'So you see I am right after all; you have had to come to see that I am right!' No, it is a matter of the graciousness of this man kneeling down in the presence of *these* after all, and saying, 'Lord, bless these men, bless them as much as you possibly can!' - and the Lord blessed Job when he did that.

Now spread that out as far as it can go. Have you got enemies, individual enemies, collective people, who are always misjudging, misrepresenting, misconstruing, condemning, saying you are wrong? What are you going to do about it? Watch for their downfall, wait for the day when they will have to admit you are right after all? No! Pray for them, for their blessing, show the spirit of grace. That is how God has dealt with us. It is the way of enlargement.

And now we pass on to Jonah, and the message in him is as to

Grace, the Way of Expansion of the Kingdom

Jonah had been a great man, but he now has a bad name and a little place among the Prophets. It goes a long way to redeem his reputation, that he wrote his own story and covered up none of its shame. Jonah was contemporary with one of the greatest of Israel's kings after the dividing of the kingdom. Jeroboam II did great work in restoring the kingdom, recovering lost territory, and building the destroyed places. He brought the kingdom to a high level of prosperity and strength. Jonah was his friend and counsellor, and doubtless had much to do with Israel's restored and prosperous condition. It was just there that the trouble arose. Steadily and powerfully there was growing up beyond Israel's frontiers another great power, the Assyrian, with its mighty capital, Nineveh. Its wickedness was very great, and its numerous inhabitants were in gross moral darkness. The Lord commanded Jonah to go and preach or proclaim to Nineveh pending judgment. Jonah was alive enough to know that God did not want to destroy Nineveh if Nineveh would repent; if He did He would not tell them what He was going to do. Jonah therefore saw the possibility of Nineveh repenting and being spared. He was so much a patriot that their being spared was the last thing that he wanted. Then he would not give them a chance by preaching. The end of his story clearly shows that this was what was in his heart.

Well, what does it all amount to? There can be such zeal for God's interests as is blind to God's grace. If Nineveh is saved, then Israel will suffer. There is only one way of really serving the Lord's interests, and that is by revealing His grace, whatever the cost. Consequences must never be taken account of. Policy must never be a governing consideration. Diplomacy must not influence. Leave

the Assyrian with God. He dealt with their presuming upon His grace later on. Ours it is to exhibit the spirit of grace, for only so does the kingdom expand and stand.