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The Saving Power of Divine Vision

by T. Austin-Sparks

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(A Message as Spoken)

"Where there is no vision, the people perish" ("the people cast off restraint" - R.V.). (Proverbs 29:18).

That verse might be translated, "Where there is no vision, the people disintegrate" or "fall apart" or "go to pieces".

Whether that be the right translation or not, it is quite true in fact. Where there is no vision, the people go to pieces, and that is borne out very clearly in the Word of God in quite a number of places. A very clear instance is that which is shown in the days of Samuel at the beginning of his course, where the statement is clearly made, "The word of God was rare in those days; there was no widely spread vision" (1 Sam. 3:1): no widely spread vision; and we know how things were at that time. I am quite sure that there are many of the Lord's people who are feeling keenly the truth of these words. Though we may not have used them or applied them to the present situation, we are in the experience where these words are proving to be true. We are finding it necessary to adjust ourselves a good deal; to get our ideas adjusted, our outlook adjusted, our attitude adjusted. A great many things are passing from our horizon as possibilities. There is a very great deal of closing in and closing down, stricture and limitation of movement and activity. Many things that we have been able to do we can no longer do, and the question that is in the heart of many a child of God and a servant of God is, What is possible? What is going to be possible? Where are we going to find ourselves? All

this can have a paralysing effect. It can bring us to a complete standstill, so that we stand and know not what to do. We can see nothing, no way.

It is a very sifting time that we are entering into. The one thing which perhaps more than anything else that is being tested is our vision. Is our vision already suffering? Have we begun to lose our vision, or to lose vision? Are we already disintegrating, going to pieces, finding ourselves with no strength of cohesion, no definiteness and positiveness of purpose? Are we all over the place as to our work, as to our calling? Of course, I am speaking now of spiritual things, of our relationship to the Kingdom of God. Well, in the final issue, the thing which is going to determine whether we go through and remain in strength and in a measure of confidence and assurance, or whether we come to a standstill and then just disintegrate and go to pieces; the thing which will determine that issue is vision. There is no doubt about it, and it is deeply true that where there is no vision, where the vision has been lost or where the vision has been a false one, or where there has never been any real vision, the absence of such true vision will be the cause of disaster. On the other hand, the presence of a true vision will be the basis of triumph. When we speak about vision, of course, we are speaking about Divine vision, and we mean two or three things.

The Meaning of Divine Vision

(a) Seeing God's Purpose

First of all, by vision we mean the seeing of God's purpose; and I feel, beloved, that we are right up against the supreme test of the one thing, namely the purpose of God, the eternal purpose, the Divine purpose. We are going to be tested as to whether that is a true vision with us or whether it is a phrase; whether it is something that has come to us by the Holy Spirit and has been entered into by us, as into the supreme meaning of things, or whether it is a form of words and teaching which has gone on around us, which perhaps we have accepted and to which we have assented. The developing situation is going to challenge us all on this matter of vision; and when we speak of vision, that is what we mean, and I believe that is what the Bible means throughout by vision, God's purpose being seen, having been made known by God Himself; and where there is no seeing of God's purpose the people will go to pieces, they will disintegrate. You and I have no more assurance of getting through triumphantly and having confidence in these and in coming days than men of the world have, unless we see inwardly, have inwardly the vision of God's purpose. We shall be paralysed and then we shall break down; our testimony will go, our ministry will go, our assurance will go. We shall have nothing whatever upon which to rest in a very little time but what has been revealed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit as God's purpose. That is vision.

(b) Seeing the Principles that Govern God's Purpose

Then, of course, it means in addition to that, the seeing of the principles which govern that purpose; that is, seeing how God ordains to reach His purpose; what are the determined and set laws of God in the reaching of His end? It is not enough to know what God is after; it is equally important to know how God will get there. Many people have glimpsed quite accurately God's end, but they have gone astray and missed God's end because they have sought to reach it along wrong lines, by false means. The principles which govern God's procedure to His end have not been known and recognised; and vision must mean that. So prophets who were seers, men who saw, men who had vision by revelation of God, were able not only to declare what God required, what God was after, but were also able to correct men about the way toward God's end, and to lay down the laws of God's realisation.

(c) Seeing Why and How Things are Contrary to God's Mind

Well, that carries with it a third thing. Vision means that we see how and why things are contrary to God's mind. It is a very important thing. There are many people today who realise that things have gone wrong, or that things are not right, that God's end is not being reached, but they cannot put their finger upon the cause, they cannot point out why, and so they have to speak in general terms and they are unable really to be true helpers.

Vision means these three things, then: firstly, a seeing of God's purpose; secondly, a seeing of those ordained principles by which God realises His purpose; and thirdly, therefore, a seeing of why it is and how it is that things are contrary to God's mind. *I feel that the object of the Lord just now is not to present these things again, but that He would have us face up to the situation.*

The Vision Tested

We are being brought face to face with a very exacting situation, a situation that is going to test us to our very foundations. The outlook is going to be extremely perplexing, utterly bewildering; or so it threatens and promises to be, and most of us, I think, are already aware of how searching the developing situation will be, how much it will remove of that which has had a large place with us. Supposing, for example, all our outward activities in Christian life are ended; meetings, ministries, and everything that goes with the wider activity, and we are simply shut in to what is personal, so that Christian work, as such, ceases. It may be that we are to be brought right down to the place where nothing remains for us but God - God is; and we have some inward relationship with the Lord, but there is very little that we can do and we see everything going into the melting pot; and perhaps worse things than that, such as a great number of the Lord's people simply being wiped out, and things which have stood for the Lord being destroyed. That is possible, because it has already become actual in many places. Well now, we are moving into a situation which is capable of testing us right out.

Now, beloved, what will be required in that situation to save us will be the reality of the vision of God's purpose, will it not? What is God doing? What is the end toward which God is working? Unless you and I can answer that question in our hearts by revelation of the Holy Spirit, we are lost, we are paralysed, we go to pieces. Further, for all practical purposes, we have to know and see very clearly those laws and principles which God has ordained and fixed as the ways by which He reaches His end; and then, in order to be of any use at all, to have a testimony, to be of value to others in so far as that is required, we have to be very clear in our own hearts as to why it is and how it is that things are so contrary to the mind of God. That is vision. Those three things comprise vision, and, where they are lacking, where there is no such vision, the people go to pieces.

Vision the Dynamic of Life

So vision resolves itself into two things. It resolves itself into the very dynamic of life, the thing which keeps us going, which is the strength of our hearts. Look at the prophets. Take Jeremiah, for example. Well, from his own point of view, Jeremiah had to face a hopeless situation. For him his ministry was an utter failure right to the end, for himself. We have got the sequel and can see that others came into the value generations after; but in his own lifetime and for himself, his ministry was a failure, and he knew it. He sometimes turned to the Lord and had strong things to say to the Lord. At one time he would tell the Lord that He had deceived him and led him into a trap by putting him into prophetic ministry, simply because he realised that his ministry was an utter failure: and it

was destined to be so for his own day. Another time he cried, Oh that I might get right away from everything, out of it all, into some place apart from men, apart from everything! We all know something of that from time to time. Oh, to get away from everything and everybody even in this great thing which, at other times, we realise to be the greatest thing that God could put us into. We want to get out and away. Why? Because of the apparent hopelessness of the situation; the slowness of spiritual growth, or the utter absence of spiritual growth to our view, to our vision, and many other things. That is Jeremiah. But nevertheless, through all those vicissitudes, those changes, those differing moods, Jeremiah was a man with a fire in his bones, and though he determined that he would not go on, he could not refrain. That fire in his bones is only another phrase for a vision which God had given, and through all, it held Jeremiah. It held him in the dungeon, it held him in the pit, it held him in persecution, it held him through the despair. Although he might today go right down into the depths of darkness and hopelessness of spirit, he could not stay there. It was an experience; but he came out and the fire was still there, burning. The vision was there to the end.

Beloved, that is how the knowledge of God's purpose has to be with us. It has to be something that is stronger than the situation without, deeper than our own feelings and emotions and emotional experience. It has to be something that is more than what we are in our moods, a mightier thing than all that to which we are subject in our soul life. It has to be able to bring us up out of our spiritual pits and mire, and keep us going. Vision is the only adequate dynamic in days like these and that is going to prove to be so more and more. With everything going to pieces around us, everything in the world becoming more and more desperate, we must be able to say, I have seen God's purpose; I know what God has in view, what He is working toward. Have you the Divine vision thus in your heart? Now, there could be no more utter test and challenge for us than that. It will not be of any use to any of us to have been taught about the eternal purpose if that thing has not entered into us in such a way that, when everything outside is in a hopeless state, that keeps us going and is capable of bringing us up out of our own hours of deepest despair; for I do not hesitate to say that even prophets can go down into deep despair for a season. But, because they are prophets, because they are seers, because they have vision, they come back again, they come up again, and it is that fire in their bones that brings them back. *Have you a fire in your bones, born of that eye-opening work of the Holy Spirit, that vision of God's purpose?*

So vision is the dynamic of our lives. Thank God for the strength of such a thing! Were it not for that, where would some of us be today? Well might we ask the question. I know quite well that I should not be here, and I expect that is true of many of you. We have passed through depths of dark despair when it seemed that everything was failing and no more was possible. But we have *passed through* and come to the end of that tunnel, and what have we found? The fire of the vision, the old vision, is still there. We have not been able to abandon that, that has not gone. We have thought that it was gone, and that we would have to change our position entirely and give up all for which we had been standing. But no, it is as strong as ever, and it carries us on again.

Vision the Cohesion of Life

Then vision is not only the dynamic of our lives; vision is the cohesion of life. Where there is no vision, the people disintegrate, go to pieces, their cohesiveness breaks down; and, for any real value in testimony, there must be oneness in vision. I believe that is the foundation of the Church. I believe that the Divine foundation of the Church as a whole, is a revelation, a vision, a "having seen the Lord". The Church started there, the Church took its rise from a seeing of the Lord, high and lifted up, exalted at the right hand of the Majesty on high. The Church went forth on the basis of that

vision as a cohesive testimony, as a corporate vessel, and what is true of the Church must be true of the relationship of all believers. You and I can never hold together by agreements. We can never hold together by certain rules and regulations, or by a creed. Nothing objective in that way can hold us; but, if we are to be a combined testimony and a vessel for effective use in the Lord's hands, it can only be as we are one in vision, one in revelation. If this vision is necessary to hold us together as individuals and to keep us from falling apart in ourselves, it is equally necessary to keep us together as the Lord's people, and that is going to be one of the tests of these days. It is very important, and the Lord only knows the point at which we may be standing today. He only knows how soon this must be pressed through to its practical outworking. There is a scattering today of the Lord's people, physically and geographically. Eight countries have been overrun. We do not know what the conditions in those eight countries are, but I think we should not be far from the truth if we said that things are not normal amongst the Lord's people, that things are very difficult. The old line of corporate expression and fellowship may have ceased and doubtless has in many places. Now, is this scattering, this breaking up outwardly, going to be the whole thing, or is there going to be, with all that, a spiritual cohesion that triumphs over it? Is it going to be seen that all the work of the Devil, all the destruction and the havoc and the breaking up and the outward disintegrating can have no effect upon that, but that there still remains in the unseen before God in heaven, and here as a testimony in the earth, that oneness, that cohesiveness of God's people which Satan cannot destroy, and which is working effective things against him?

Well, beloved, the answer depends upon vision, what we are seeing. I know in the first place it is seeing the Lord; ever and always it will be a matter of "looking unto Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith". That look will ever be necessary to save us in our suffering, because that exaltation is connected with sufferings. This is seen from the words that immediately follow: "who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and hath sat down at the right hand of the throne of God". Thus that is a word to help us in our suffering; but in our testimony we have to see the purpose of God and how God has determined to realize His purpose. That is the practical side outwardly. The upward look has to do with ourselves inwardly in a day of suffering; the seeing of the purpose has to do with our testimony to others in a day of suffering, of trouble, of adversity. Vision is the cohesion of life, and whatever may come, may it prove that we have seen; not that we have heard teaching, but that we have seen.

Vision Demands the Elimination of Self

Vision, beloved, demands one thing, otherwise it cannot stand; that is, it cannot save us, cannot bear its fruit, cannot do its work where we are concerned. Vision demands the absolute elimination of self. If you or I figure in the vision we have rendered the vision impotent. Take your place alongside of Jeremiah. Now say to him, Jeremiah, you can prophesy, you can appeal, you can weep, you can suffer intensely to the end of your life, but you will see no fruit of it! Now, Jeremiah, what are you going to do about it? That is the test. You are doomed to be a failure, Jeremiah! Yours is to be the most unpopular ministry in this world: no one will listen to you and after years of the bitterest suffering all you yourself will see is the dark side of your prophecy coming true. As for living fruit from it unto the glory of God, you will see none of it! Well, if Jeremiah was standing for the vindication of his own ministry, if he figured in the vision, to be used mightily of God to bring in the new age, and to be there on the spot when it was being done; well, Jeremiah could not have borne the strain if that was his position, his mind about it. Do you see what I mean? It is not easy for us to take this position: We shall not live to see the fruit of our ministry. All that for which we have suffered and been poured out, all our testimony, will bear no positive fruit in our day. Though it be

destined to do so one day, even as God is true, yet we ourselves will be most unpopular, never accepted. That is the test of self in the vision, a tremendous test.

Well, we have to face that test now. Are we prepared to go on to the end without figuring in things, just being faithful and maybe dying with nothing more than the knowledge that to have taken any other course would have been to violate that in us which most truly represented the Lord? Are we prepared not to see, not to have a place, not to gain recognition, and be faithful? You see, vision makes that demand upon us - true vision. True vision is a most challenging thing, since for most people, especially young people, that word "vision" means that, somehow or other, we are in the picture, we are seeing things happen, we are in it. That will not do. Vision demands the elimination of self.

Mark the case of the Lord Jesus. What had He to show for His life on earth? See the Apostle Paul, after his long life of service and suffering, in a prison; his converts, who owe everything to him spiritually, turning from him; his churches throwing him over; a lonely man in a prison. Was he a man of vision? Was the Lord Jesus a Man of vision? Were they right? Had there been any place for self in their case in the vision, they would have broken down, they could not have gone through. All the time they would have been in controversy with the Lord - Where do I come in! Was that not the temptation of the Lord Jesus right at the beginning of His ministry, to figure in things? Was it not the very essence of His victory over the enemy when He took the position: The kingdoms of this world and the glory thereof, yes, but by way of the Cross, by way of the despairing cry, by way of the unpopular road, by way of being rejected of men. Had He figured in it, He would not have gone on. The Lord save us, then, from that self-interest in Divine things which destroys vision and therefore leads to our own undoing.