

A Vision That Constitutes a Vocation

by T. Austin-Sparks

The fulfillment of one's vocation in its fullness of realisation and accomplishment rests upon one's vision, and fullness of vocation requires fullness of vision.

Scripture: Psalm 46:5, Isaiah 25:7, Jeremiah 22:28-30, Hosea 4:6, Matthew 16:28, Matthew 24:14, Acts 13:27, Romans 10:18, Galatians 1:15-16, Ephesians 1:17-19

Topics: "Vision", "Vocation"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the necessity of having a divine vision to fulfill one's vocation in Christ, arguing that the people of Jerusalem, despite their knowledge of the Scriptures, failed to grasp the deeper implications of the prophets' messages. He asserts that a lost vision leads to a missed vocation, as seen in Israel's history, where they were meant to be a powerful representation of God's presence among the nations. Sparks encourages believers to seek a growing vision of God's purpose, which is essential for effective service and to truly express the lordship of Christ in the world. He warns against relying on mere knowledge or emotional responses, stressing that true vocation is rooted in a personal revelation of Christ. Ultimately, he calls for a corporate expression of God's presence, where the church embodies the reality of God's kingdom to the world.

Transcript

"For they that dwell in Jerusalem, and their rulers, because they knew him not, nor the voices of the prophets which are read every sabbath, fulfilled them by condemning him" (Acts 13:27).

We pointed out at the beginning of the previous chapter that the above statement indicates that there is something more to be heard than the audible reading of the Word of God. "The voices of the prophets." What were the prophets saying? - not, what were the actual words used by the prophets, the sentences and statements, the form of their pronouncements, but what did it all amount to in effect? These dwellers and rulers in Jerusalem could have quoted the prophets without difficulty: they probably could have recited the contents of all the books of the prophets. They were well-drilled in the content of the Old Testament Scriptures, but they never stopped and asked the simple questions: 'What does it amount to? What really is the implication? What were these men after?' And because they never did that, they never got further than the letter.

VOCATION MISSED BECAUSE VISION LOST

We are asking those questions now. What is that which is within and behind and deeper than the written and spoken utterances of the prophets? We know that the prophets were dealing with a situation which by no means represented the Lord's mind regarding His people. I could make it stronger than that, and say the situation was very far from the Lord's thought; but I have present conditions in mind, rather than any extreme state of things, and so I simply say that the condition did not then, nor does it now, really represent the Lord's mind and intention where His people were and are concerned. The prophets were dealing with such a situation, and, because it was like that, the real vocation of the people of God was not being fulfilled. They were failing in that for which the Lord had really brought them into being. Whereas they ought to have been a people of tremendous spiritual strength in the midst of the nations, with a real impact of God upon the nations, with a note of great authority which had to be taken account of - "Thus saith the Lord", declared in such a way that people really had to heed - whereas it ought to have been like that, they were failing. There was weakness and failure. The prophets sought to get down to the root of that situation, to get behind that deplorable condition and that tragic failure. To get there, of course, they had to work their way through a lot of positive factors in the condition. There were all the things to which the prophets referred - sins and so on; but the prophets were solid as one man on one particular thing, that back of these conditions, resulting in this main failure, the cause was lost vision. The people had lost their original vision, the vision which had at one time been clearly before them.

When God laid His hand upon them and brought them out of Egypt, they had a vision. They saw the purpose and intention of God. It became the exultant note of their song on the farther side of the Red Sea. I am not going to stay for the moment with what that purpose was. But they were a people to whom God had given a vision of His purpose concerning them, both as to themselves and as to their vocation. They had lost it, and this was the result; and the prophets, in dealing with that, lighted solidly upon this one thing; 'Your vocation in its fullness of realisation and accomplishment rests upon your vision, and fullness of vocation requires fullness of vision.' That means that if your vision becomes less than God's fullness, you will only go so far, and then you will stop. If you are going right on and through to all that God meant in constituting you His vessel, you must have fullness of vision; God is never satisfied with anything less than fullness. The very fact that you cannot go any further than your vision leads you is God's way of saying, 'You must have fullness of vision if you are coming to fullness of purpose and realisation.'

Now, that is the very foundation of the thing with which we are occupied just now. The prophets were always speaking about this matter. We previously quoted Hosea 4:6: "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge: because thou hast rejected knowledge, I will also reject thee, that thou shalt be no priest to me." That is only saying in other words, 'My people go to pieces for lack of vision; you have closed your eyes to My purpose which I presented to you; I have no further use for you'; and that is a very strong statement. It links with another passage: "Israel is swallowed up: now are they among the nations as a vessel wherein none delighteth" (Hosea 8:8 A.R.V.).

If you want to get the full force of that, look at a word in Jeremiah's prophecies. "Is this man Coniah a despised broken vessel? is he a vessel wherein none delighteth? wherefore are they cast out, he and his seed, and are cast into the land which they know not? O earth, earth, earth, hear the word of the Lord. Thus saith the Lord, Write ye this man childless, a man that shall not prosper in his days; for no more shall a man of his seed prosper, sitting upon the throne of David, and ruling in Judah" (Jer. 22:28-30, A.R.V.). "Israel... among the nations as a vessel wherein none delighteth." "Coniah... a vessel where-in none delighteth... Write ye this man childless." There is no future for a vessel like that. We might well say of Israel as of Coniah, "Write this man childless." That is an end. A continuation, going right through without

that arrest, demands fullness of vision.

VISION, NOT KNOWLEDGE OF FACTS, QUALIFIES FOR VOCATION

Do give heed to this, especially my younger brothers and sisters in Christ. The fulfilment of that into which you are called through the grace of God - what you may call the service of God, the work of the Lord; what we will sum up as Divine vocation - must rest upon a vision which the Lord has given you: a vision, of course, that is not just something in itself but is the vision which He has given concerning His Church. You must have that. Then the measure in which you will go right on and through to fullness will be the measure of your vision - the measure in which you have come personally to possess that Divine vision. There can be all sorts of things less than that which lead you into Christian work. You may hear an appeal for workers, an appeal for missionaries, an appeal to service, based upon some Scripture - "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel" - and so on. And with the accompaniments of that appeal you may be moved, stirred up, feel very solemn; something may happen in the realm of your emotions, your feelings, your reason, and you may take that as a Divine call. Now, I am not saying that no-one has ever served the Lord properly and truly on that basis: do not misunderstand me: but I do want to say there can be all that, and in a very intense form, and yet it can be not your own but someone else's vision which has been passed over to you, and that will not do.

'But', you say, 'there is the Scripture - "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel".' Remember, those to whom those words were addressed had all the facts about Christ - the incarnation, the virgin birth, His life, His teaching, His miracles, His Cross, and all the accompanying heavenly attestations. Some of those very men - John's disciples - were there when the voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son". Others were on the mountain when again the voice said, "This is my beloved Son". They saw the transfiguration, and they saw Him in resurrection. Is that not enough with which to go out to the world - all that mass of mighty facts? Surely they can go and proclaim what they know? But no - "Tarry ye in Jerusalem".

What was it eventually that constituted them men who could fulfil and obey that command to go? 'Well', you say, 'of course it was the presence of the Holy Spirit.' Perfectly true. But was there not something else? Why the forty days after His resurrection? Do you not think that they were getting through the externals, the events, and seeing something - seeing what no human eye could see, what could never be seen by any amount of objective demonstration? If the Apostle Paul is anything to go by in this matter, he will tell us perfectly plainly that his whole life and ministry and commission were based upon one thing: "It was the good pleasure of God... to reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the Gentiles". "I make known to you, brethren, as touching the gospel which was preached by me, that it is not after man. For neither did I receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came to me through revelation of Jesus Christ". (Galatians 1:15,16; 11,12).

All the other things may be facts which we possess by reading our New Testament. We have it all and we may believe it as the substance of Christianity. That does not constitute us missionaries to go out and proclaim the facts of Christ - facts though they be. That is not it. How many have done so! How far have they gone? They go so far and then stop. We cannot stay to dwell upon the limitation. Dear friends, there is terrible limitation in the Church just now, limitation of the knowledge of the Lord, even on the part of many who have been the Lord's servants for a long period of years. There are many Christians, even of years' standing, to whom it is actually difficult to talk about the things of the Lord.

THE VISION - GOD'S FULL PURPOSE IN REDEMPTION

But reverting to Israel: you do not find anything concerning Israel that suggests or indicates that they came out of Egypt, and were in the wilderness and later in the land, to declare as their gospel that God brought them out of the land of Egypt. That was not their message. Of course, it is recounted many times, but that was not their message, not what they were proclaiming. What was it that was always in their view? It was what they were brought out for. It was God's vision in bringing them out. So many of us have settled down to preach just the 'coming out' side - salvation from sin, from the world. It goes so far, but the Church does not get very far with that. It is good, it is right, of course; it is a part of the whole; but it is only a part. It is the full vision that is needed to go right through. Oh, the pathos associated with the lives of many of the Lord's servants! They come to a standstill, in a realm of limited life and power and influence, because their vision is so small. Is that not true?

What am I saying to you? First of all, if you are going right through, to serve the Lord in any full way, you must have revealed to your own heart God's purpose concerning His Son. You will have to be able to say that God has 'revealed His Son in you', in this sense, that you see, not merely your own deliverance from sin, but God's purpose concerning His Son unto which you are saved - the big thing, the full thing. You are only a fragment in it. That is the basis of service, of vocation; and these very Apostles were held back until there broke upon them the full blaze of the meaning of Christ risen and ascended - the vision of the glorified Christ and all that that signified in the eternal purpose of God. Then they went out, and we find their message was always, not the gospel of God concerning personal salvation, but "the gospel of God... concerning his Son", Jesus Christ. They had seen, not the historic Jesus, but the glorified Christ of God; and they had not just seen Him as an objective vision, but His true significance had broken in upon them.

What a change it represented from the old days, when they were always thinking in terms of the coming Messiah who would set up a temporal kingdom on this earth, with themselves seated on His right hand and on His left! They would be notable people down here on this earth, and would oust the Romans from their country! That thing on the earth was their full and only vision - fighting with literal arms, revolting against literal usurpers of their country.

But oh, what a vast change when they saw His kingdom! Now, the thing which had held them in its grip simply went, not to be thought of any longer. Seeing His kingdom! He had said, "There are some of them that stand here, who shall in no wise taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom" (Matthew 16:28). What is the kingdom? It is Christ, far above all rule and authority, the centre and the goal of all Divine counsels from eternity. That is language, of course - mere words; but the import needs to be apprehended. You must have vision in your own heart before you can be a servant of God who will get very far, and you have to have growing vision in order to get right through. Come back to Hosea. "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" (Hosea 4:6). What does he say a little later? "Let us know, let us follow on to know the Lord" (Hosea 6:3). It is growing, progressive vision that brings us through to God's full end. It must be like that - not being contented with two or three facts about Christ and salvation, but having the eyes of our hearts enlightened to see Him.

What I am saying, of course, is a statement of facts. I cannot give you anything, I cannot bring you into it; but I can, I trust, influence you a little in the direction of going to the Lord and saying, 'Now, Lord, if Thou needest me, I am available, I am at Thy disposal; but Thou must lay the foundation, and open my eyes, and give me the requisite vision that will mean that I do not only go out and preach things about Christ.' Something very much more than that is needed.

That is the first thing, and it applies to us all, not only to those who are going out into what we call 'full-time service'.

ISRAEL'S VOCATION - TO EXPRESS GOD'S PRESENCE AMONG THE NATIONS

Saying that, I am able to come to the next thing for the moment. What was the vision that Israel had lost and to which the prophets were seeking to bring the people back? The vision was this - the very vocation for which God had laid His hand upon Israel, the meaning of their existence as Israel. What was that?

The movement of God was like this. Here are nations and peoples spreading all over the earth. Out from those nations God takes one solitary individual, Abram, and places him, so to speak, right at the centre of the nations. That is the spiritual geography of it. And then God raises from that man a seed, and constitutes his seed a nation right in the midst of the nations; distinct from the nations, perfectly distinct, but in the midst. Then God constitutes that nation on heavenly principles - a corporate body constituted on heavenly, Divine, spiritual principles, with God Himself in the midst - with the result that all the other nations gather round to look on.

And what do those nations take account of? Not of the preaching of this nation in their midst; you have nothing about their preaching at all - that is, the proclaiming of doctrines and truths. But the onlookers become aware that God, the only true and living God, is there. There is no mistaking it, they cannot get away from it, they have to recognise it: God is there, Because this people is so constituted, God is there, and there is a registration of God all around, wherever these people come. Ah, even before they come, something is beginning to happen. Listen to Rahab! What did she say to the spies? Israel has not arrived yet, but she says, 'We know all about you. We know what you signify. We have heard all about it.' Already the fear of this people is ahead of them. There is something of spiritual power there which does not have to be preached in words. The people are there, with God in their midst - because God has His heavenly thoughts and principles as the very constitution of their life, He is there; the rest follows.

Now I have gathered into that statement the whole of the Bible, Old and New Testaments. As to the Old Testament, what was Israel's Divine vocation? Not primarily to say things about God, but to be as God in the midst of the nations. "God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved" (Psalm 46:5). 'The Lord is here!' How much that counted for! That was their vocation. You may say that in the Old Testament it was type; but oh, it was much more than type, it was very real; it was a fact.

THE CHURCH'S VOCATION - TO EXPRESS THE LORDSHIP OF CHRIST

When we come into the New Testament we find ourselves in the presence of a double development. God is here present in the Person of His Son, Jesus Christ. His name is Emmanuel - 'God with us' - and all who have to do with Him have to do with God in a very personal and immediate way. He claims that His very physical body is the temple of God. Then, through His death, resurrection and ascension, He returns in the Person of the Holy Spirit and takes up His residence in the Church, which is His Body. Things then begin to happen quite spontaneously, out from the world of spiritual intelligences - not just because of certain doctrines being preached, but because of that Divine presence.

There are conscious intelligences all around, behind men and nations, and the conflict has started; not because of what God's people say, but because they are here. Let that be corporate, and you have God's idea of vocation. This is not the dispensation of the conversion of the nations. I wonder even if this is the dispensation of the full evangelization of the nations. We are hoping the Lord may come any day. Half of

this world has never heard the name of Jesus yet, after two thousand years. If the Lord is coming tonight, something has to happen if the world is to be evangelized before He comes! That is not said to stay or weaken evangelization. let us get on with it and do all that is possible; but, remember, the Lord has given us His meaning for this dispensation. "This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a testimony unto all the nations; and then shall the end come" (Matthew 24:14).

Look at your New Testament. It was said, "Their sound went out into all the earth" (Romans 10:18). It was said that the whole world was touched. But the world has grown a good deal since then. What happened at that time? The Lord planted nuclei, corporate representations of His Church, first in one nation and then in another, and by their presence the fight broke out. The one thing that Satan was bent upon was to eject that which inoculated his kingdom with the sovereignty of the Lord; to get it out, break it up, disintegrate it, somehow to nullify it; turning those concerned one against another, creating divisions - anything to spoil, to mar, to destroy their representation of Christ's absolute lordship; to neutralise that, to get it out, to drive it out, to do anything to get rid of this thing inside his kingdom. Satan's kingdom has acted in this way, as if to say: 'While that thing is here, we can never be sure of ourselves; while that is here our kingdom is divided, it is not whole: let us get it out, in order to have our kingdom solid.'

God's object is to get into the nations a corporate expression of the lordship of His Son - to have His place there. I am not saying we are not to preach; yes, we must preach, witness, testify; but the essential thing is that the Lord must be there. There are times - and this will be borne out by many servants of God - when you cannot preach, you cannot do anything but hold on where you are, being there, standing there, keeping in close touch with heaven there. You can do nothing else, and the waves break upon you. It has happened many times. Before ever there has been any advance or development there has been a long-drawn-out period in which the one question has been, 'Shall we be able to hold on, to stand our ground?' Satan has said, 'Not if I can help it! You will go out if I can do anything about it!'

The whole question at issue is the foothold of the heavenly Lord in the nations. Israel was constituted for that; the Church is constituted for that. It cannot be done single-handed by units; it requires the corporate - the two, the three; the more the better, provided there is the unifying factor, the oneness, of a single eye. If double motives and personal interests come in, they will undo it all. Are you fighting a lonely battle? You need co-operation, you need corporate help to fight that battle through and to hold your ground. Mark you, the enemy will drive you out if he can. Preach if you can; but if you cannot, that does not mean that you are to quit. Until the Lord says, 'I can do no more here,' you have to hold on. Do we not know the terrific efforts of the enemy to drive us out? Many of you have gone far enough to know what that means. If he could put you out, he would.

But that is the vision - what the Church is constituted for in relation to the Lord Jesus: so that, in the light of the coming day, you are standing as a testimony of the coming day; in the nations for a testimony, "until he come whose right it is" to reign, and "the kingdom of the world is become the kingdom of our Lord, and of his Christ" (Rev. 11:15); a foothold unto that time; an altar built, which testifies: 'This belongs to the Lord: the Lord's rights are here: He has purchased this.' But you will find every kind of contradiction to that in conditions, and every kind of assault from the enemy to try to prove that the Lord has not anything there, that He has no footing and that you had better get out.

Do you see how necessary it is to have the vision? You cannot do that on enthusiasm - it will not last; nor on someone else's vision - it will not support you to the end. You must be like this man Paul and those who "endured, as seeing him who is invisible"; not as having seen Him long ago, but living continually in the

light of what you have seen and are seeing - a light which is ever growing.

VISION IS THE MEASURE OF VOCATION

Now, if all this is simple and elementary, it is nevertheless basic. Do you see that vision of God's full purpose concerning His Son, revealed in your own heart in its beginnings, but then growing clearer and fuller, is the basis of vocation? I do trust that nothing I have said will have the effect of making you less earnest and devoted in all simple ways of witnessing, or testifying concerning salvation; but do remember that, for fullness, you need to see very much more than that. You will go just as far as your vision takes you; therefore, we all have need of Paul's prayer that God "may give unto you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him; having the eyes of your heart enlightened, that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints, and what the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe" (Ephesians 1:17-19).

That is the vision. And then, as is written in Isaiah 25:7 (A.R.V.): "... he will destroy (lit. swallow up) in this mountain the face of the covering that covereth all peoples, and the veil that is spread over all nations." What does that mean - "this mountain"? What mountain? Well, it is Zion. But has that literal mountain, Mount Zion, that rocky eminence in Jerusalem, ever been the instrument of taking the covering veil from off all faces? Of course it has not! What is Zion? Zion, in spiritual interpretation, is that people who are living in the good of the Lord's complete sovereignty. It says in the immediate context, "He hath swallowed up death for ever" (vs. 8). It is through His triumph, the triumph of His Cross and resurrection, that He comes to us. "Ye are come unto mount Zion" (Hebrews 12:22). Zion is the realm of His absolute lordship, and a people living in the good of His lordship. Then the veil is taken away. What the Lord wants here and there and there are these nuclei, these little companies of people living in the good of His victory, living in the good of His having swallowed up death victoriously; and where they are, people will see; they will be the instrument for taking the veil from other people's faces. Where such a company is found, there you see the Lord. When you come into touch with those people, you come into touch with reality.

So the final appeal is that everything must be adjusted and brought into line with the vision, and the one question for us is this: Are people seeing the Lord? It is not a matter of whether they are hearing what we have to talk about - our preaching, doctrine, interpretation - but: Are they seeing the Lord, are they feeling the Lord, are they meeting the Lord? Oh, I do not ask you in your different locations to gather two or three together to study certain kinds of Bible teaching; but I do ask you to ask the Lord to constitute you corporately that which will have a spiritual impact, that in which the Lord can be seen, the Lord can be found; of which it can be said, 'The Lord is there!' May that be true of us, wherever we are.

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