

'A Watchman'

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of purpose in human life and the Church's heavenly calling and vocation, highlighting the need for the Prophetic function and the Watchman's role in discerning and interpreting the times.

Scripture: Ezekiel 3:17, Ezekiel 33:1

Topics: "Purpose", "The Role of the Church"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the critical role of purpose in human life, asserting that without a sense of purpose, individuals experience emptiness and despair. He highlights the biblical concept of the 'Watchman,' a role that the Church and its leaders must embody to guide and protect God's people, especially in times of spiritual decline. The Watchman is tasked with understanding and proclaiming God's eternal purpose, ensuring that the Church remains focused on its divine calling. Sparks warns against the dangers of losing sight of this purpose, as seen in Israel's history, and calls for a return to a vibrant, purpose-driven faith. Ultimately, he stresses that the Church must be vigilant and faithful in its mission to reflect Christ's significance in God's eternal plan.

Transcript

It is not too strong a thing to say that, in human life, everything hangs on a sense of purpose. Lose that, and we lose all motive and incentive in living and working.

A distinguished psychologist and psychiatrist has said that about a third of his cases are suffering from no specific neurosis, but from senselessness and emptiness of their lives. He says: 'Among my patients from many countries, all of them educated persons, there is a considerable number who come to me, not because they are suffering from a neurosis, but because they could find no meaning in life.' Someone else has said: 'The outstanding feature of our time is confusion, a depressing consciousness of futility and helplessness, and secret despair.' This, and much more is all too true, and, for this reason, there is a primary demand to return to that realm where 'Purpose' is a dominant feature. It is not wrong to say that the revealed truth that the world is not going to be an easier and better place to live and work in as we approach the end of the age, constitutes the main battle for faith where God's people are concerned, and it would be a very easy thing to let hands hang down, and for the knees to become feeble.

Over against all this, then, it is to some point that we have been led to the consideration of the 'Horizon of Purpose'.

A third specific point has to follow on and fit into our previous chapter, but we must continually keep in view the full setting and context. What we have pointed out is that the idea of Purpose stands over the whole Bible revelation. This all-governing idea explains all God's activities and interests in creation and men. In the Scriptures it is clear that God's Son, now known as Jesus Christ, our Lord, is the inclusive and ultimate sphere of all that Divine Purpose: that His Coming into this world; His life, death, resurrection, and exaltation are all immediately and exclusively related to the realisation of the Purpose: that the Holy Spirit has come as the age-long custodian of God's Purpose concerning His Son.

Further, it is revealed that the Church is the eternally elect vessel and instrument in which, and through which that Purpose is to be - in the first place - realised, and then administered in larger realms in "the ages to come": that it is the Church, as the Body of Christ, which is "called according to his purpose", and "chosen in him before the foundation of the world": and that individuals can and will only come into the realisation of that Purpose in an organically related way in the Body corporate.

Again, this "on high calling" explains the particular and peculiar spiritual history - the discipline, suffering, and trial - of those who are so called. Any truly spiritual ministry unto this Purpose, and any representation of it in companies of committed people of God do experience and suffer every wile, stratagem, and malicious effort of the evil powers to break them up, wear them out, pull them down onto earthly ground, force them to compromise, and so on. They are the object of every kind of misrepresentation, treachery, cruelty, ostracism, and discrediting.

All the above is more than amply revealed in Scripture. Israel was elect to illustrate and demonstrate all this in an earthly and historical way, and their history is just the history of Divine Purpose on two sides, one positive, when they were on the line of the Purpose; the other negative, when they got away from it, as they now are.

The Church is that in which the principles of the Eternal Purpose are taken up in a spiritual, heavenly and eternal way. All this has been implicit in what we have said earlier.

We have been in 'Ezekiel' because there in a way more definite and clear the two sides mentioned above are embodied and represented. There certainly is the temporal and historic side as to Israel, and the spiritual principles are clearly observable in the symbolisms, figures, signs, and mysteries. But there is much in 'Ezekiel' which is super-historical, extra-local, -temporal, -earthly; and which cannot be realised in an earthly nation without doing serious violence to the first advent of Christ, the meaning of His Cross, and present position and work. The Letter to the Hebrews, the Letter to the Galatians, and other vital and categorical statements as to the fulness and finality of Christ's work - the "once for ever" sacrifice and redemption - cannot be set aside because of a failure to discern and discriminate between what was only intended to be an earthly object lesson - which forfeited its calling and vocation - and that eternal, heavenly reality which, in principle, is implicit in God's methods in every age.

Now then, back to 'Ezekiel'. In this book we have - in the main - two things. In relation to Purpose - which is so evidently characteristic and dominating throughout - there is, firstly, the instrument and vessel, elect and dealt with on the sole basis of vocation. That vocation being universal (unto all nations) for a witness (what they were) and a testimony (what they declared). It was the failure in this by exclusiveness, making themselves the limit or 'horizon', and by pride, jealousy, bigotry, and fear, withholding from the nations the knowledge of God and His concern for their salvation; it was this self-centredness and self-sufficiency which lost them their place and purpose. By judgment, discipline, warning, entreaty, and the voice of all

the prophets, God sought to recall them to their position with Him in order to make them a blessing among the nations. This they finally and fully refused when the greatest of all the prophets - and more than a prophet - appeared among them, "whom they slew, hanging him upon a tree".

What we said at the beginning of this chapter about the malady of frustration and meaninglessness afflicting so many, has been literally true of the Jewish nation, ever since they were set aside, and the Church inherited what they forfeited - in a spiritual way. Let the Church take note of this solemn warning and avoid like a plague anything that would militate against its heavenly calling and vocation; and let it realise that it is 'horizoned' by Purpose, which "calling and election" must be made sure. Too many things have started out in the glorious emancipation and release of Christ in resurrection and have in course of time become something in themselves, jealous for themselves, fearful of being touched in their resources or 'work', or community; the result being that their original vitality and effectiveness has been largely lost. It is eventually some thing, whereas it was once the Lord.

Having seen the election of a corporate vessel, the other thing in 'Ezekiel' is the specific nature of its ministry. This we have seen as represented by two of the three designations of the Prophet, in this book, i.e., "son of man" and "a sign".

We now proceed to consider the third.

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This is what Israel ought to have been to all the nations (illustrated, e.g., by Jonah and Nineveh). This is what the Church ought to be to the world. This is what every local church ought to be to its locality. But, in 'Ezekiel' where things are bad in the nation, the designation and its meaning apply to the people of God themselves; and in this connection we consider it here. It must now - while still being a call to the Church and churches as such - be a call for specific ministries within the Church. What we say then is, in the first place, to the servants of God.

"Son of man, I have made thee a watchman to the house of Israel" (Ezekiel 3:17; 33:1-9).

This is not an altogether new idea or title for the Lord's servant. It occurs more than once in Isaiah in an objective and kind of abstract way. No one else but Ezekiel is mentioned as having been specifically appointed to this position.

It will be noted that this appointment took place very early in his ministry.

What then was the particular function of the Watchman, and what were his essential characteristics?

Firstly, and supremely, he was the custodian of the elect purpose of the people to whom he was appointed. The very existence of those people as related to the Divine purpose was very largely in his hands. In this respect, perhaps one of the most clamant and urgent needs of our time is of this prophetic function. There are Evangelists, whose function is related to the unsaved, and positively not the oversight of a local church. For the Evangelist to get - or be put - into such a position will sooner or later mean that he frustrates the full purpose of God by keeping God's people to a very limited and elementary measure of Christ. This is the tragedy of any evangelistic work which stops at itself. It is the tragedy of many so-called Gospel Missions and Mission Halls. They often serve to abort full purpose and spiritual maturity. Let the Evangelist - anointed of God - do his work, but let him - and all others - recognize that his work is only relative and not something in itself apart.

The world is now seeing the terrible spectacle of Christians and a 'Church' unable to meet and go through the awful fires of testing, and without the tremendous impact of an authoritative witness and message. In a day of spiritual declension or weakness, it is the Prophetic function that is needed.

The Watchman's Vocation is at Night

Firstly then, the Watchman must have a deep sense of the essential purpose for which God's people exist. He must know, with a heart-consuming 'burden' what one immense phrase means - "according to his purpose". It is his mission to instil into God's people this supremely important matter of "the on high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:14). The servant of the Lord is essentially one who has had his eyes opened, and that to the superlative purpose of salvation, grace, redemption.

This man must be one who can see in the dark.

He compasses the whole Horizon of Christ. He is alert to all that invades that Horizon to destroy or spoil the vocation of God's people. He cannot force them to heed his warning or obey his entreaty. His it is to see, to proclaim, to be faithful, to know.

We have heard it said without due thought that a people are the expression and representation of the ministry they receive. This is only half the truth. They may not lay it to heart; they may "hear and not give heed", "see and not perceive". They may be in the presence of the best that the Lord can give, and be a very poor expression of it. The point here is that the Watchman must be exonerated by his faithfulness. This is the message of Ezekiel 33. A people may disintegrate, lose out, and be a denial of all that God has said, but it must never be rightly laid to the charge of the Watchman.

It is costly, lonely, and wearisome work, this vocation of the Watchman. A psalmist said. "My soul looketh for the Lord, more than watchmen look for the morning" (Psalm 130:6). Often a watchman had to do a day's work and then be called to go on duty at night. How he longed for the first rays of dawn so that he could creep away for a little rest before the day's work began again. The Watchmen of God often long for the darkness to pass, but they must not sleep while it lasts. Within the meaning of this vocation there lies the necessity to discern and be able to interpret the portents, the processes, the implications of developments and events, especially as they affect the people of God.

His Horizon is Christ, and his supreme and inclusive business is to see the significance of Christ in God's eternal purpose.

The Watchman in the Prophets was a man depicted or described as a man with a 'burden' - "the burden of the word of the Lord".

So great are the issues of Purpose, so vital to life and work is the meaning of the Church's eternal vocation, that anyone who enters into it in reality will be one who has a deep sense of heavy responsibility. What he says is what he has seen! But it is unto the seeing that God would bring all His people, for only as they see can they fulfil their heavenly calling. The Church itself is meant to be a Body with eyes wide open. The quest of the Great Church-Apostle must be the quest of the Church itself - "a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the [full] knowledge of him" (Ephesians 1:17).

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