

An Open Heaven

by T. Austin-Sparks

We must learn Christ, not just about Christ, in order to truly know Him and experience the fullness of God's will and purpose.

Scripture: Matthew 11:28, John 1:51, John 3:3, Romans 6:4, 1 Corinthians 1:30, 1 Corinthians 2:14, Galatians 2:20, Ephesians 1:17-18, 2 Thessalonians 1:10, 1 John 3:3

Topics: "Knowing Christ", "The Work of the Holy Spirit"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the necessity of knowing Christ personally rather than merely learning about Him, highlighting that true understanding comes from the Holy Spirit revealing Christ in our hearts. He warns against reducing the teachings of the Gospel and Epistles to mere doctrines or systems, urging believers to focus on the living Person of Christ. Sparks illustrates that entering the 'School of Christ' requires a transformation, where the self-life must be broken to experience the open heaven and the fullness of God's communication. He stresses that the open heaven is accessible to all believers, not just a select few, and that the Holy Spirit's work is essential for this revelation. Ultimately, the sermon calls for a deeper, experiential knowledge of Christ that transcends intellectual understanding.

Transcript

We have been led to think in these meditations about being in the School of Christ, where all the learning, all the instruction, all the discipline, is toward knowing Christ, learning Christ; not learning about Christ, but learning Christ. That is the point of greatest difficulty in trying to make things plain and clear. We could take up everything there is about Christ as doctrine, as teaching, but that is not what we are after. That is not what the Lord is after at all. It is Christ Himself. He Himself is the living, personal embodiment, the personification of all truth, of all life, and the Lord's purpose and will for us is not to come to know truth in its manifold aspects, but to know the Person, the living Person in a living way, and that the Person being imparted to us, and we being incorporated into the Person, all the truth becomes living truth rather than merely theoretical or technical truth.

Just a word of repetition here: and I cannot tell you with what force this has come to my own heart and how heavily it rests upon me in its meaning. Whenever things are in danger of departing from His full, His complete, thought, God will always seek to bring back a fresh revelation of His Son. He will not lead to the recapture of truths as such. He will bring back all that is necessary by a fresh revelation of His Son, an unveiling or presentation of His Son in fullness. In that connection we have more than once said in these

meditations that the Gospel written by John and his Letters and the Apocalypse, are the final things of the New Testament dispensation. They were written and brought in when the New Testament Church was departing from its primal and pristine glory, and purity, and truth, and holiness, and spirituality, and becoming an earthly Christian system. The Lord's way of meeting that situation was through these writings which are a new presentation of His Son in heavenly, Divine, spiritual fullness. It is a coming back to Christ, and the Holy Spirit would do that all the time. He would bring us back to the Person, to show us what that Person represents in a spiritual and heavenly way. We must be very careful that in our passing on from the Gospels to the Epistles, we do not get even unconsciously into the position that we have left elementary things and gone on to something that is not so elementary; that is, that the Epistles are something very much in advance of the Gospels. Emphatically they are not. They are only the opening up of the Gospels. All that is in the Epistles is there in the Gospels, but the Epistles are simply the interpretation of Christ, and the Lord would never have us occupied with the interpretation to the loss of the Person.

ALL THINGS IN CHRIST

Now, if I were talking to people who were responsible in the matter of Church building, that would be a very profitable matter with which to stay for a little while; but it just amounts to this for us. We take the Acts and the Epistles as setting forth the technique of the Church and churches and adopt it as a crystallized system of practice, order, form, teaching, and the weakness in the whole position is just this, that that is something as in itself, and the Lord Jesus has been missed and lost. I wonder if you detect what I mean by that? You see, the Holy Spirit's way is to take Christ and open up Christ to the heart, and show that Christ is a heavenly order; not that the Epistles set forth as a manual a heavenly order, but that Christ is that order, and everything in the matter of order has to be kept immediately in relation to the living Person. If it becomes some thing, then it becomes an earthly system; and you can make out of the Epistles a hundred different earthly systems all built upon the Epistles. They will be made to support any number of different systems, different interpretations, represented by Christian orders here, and the reason is that they have been divorced from the Person.

You see there are numerous things, numerous subjects, themes, teachings. There is the "kingdom of God", there is "sanctification", there is "eternal life", there is 'the victorious life', 'the overcomer' or 'the overcoming life', there is 'the second coming of Christ'. These are but a few subjects, themes, truths, as they are called, which have been taken up and developed out of the Scriptures and become things with which people have become very much occupied, and in which they are very interested as things. So certain people hive off around a sanctification teaching, and they are the 'sanctificationists', and it becomes an 'ism'. Others hive off; and they are bounded by the hedge of Second Adventism, the Lord's coming, prophecy, and all that. So you get groups like that. I want to say that would be utterly impossible if the Person of the Lord Jesus was dominant. What is the kingdom of God? It is Christ. If you get right inside of the Gospels you will find that the kingdom of God is Jesus Christ. If you are livingly in Christ, you are in the kingdom, and you know, as the Holy Spirit teaches you Christ, what the kingdom is in every detail. The kingdom is not some thing, in the first place. The kingdom, when it becomes something universal, will simply be the expression and manifestation of Christ. That is all. You come to the kingdom in and through Christ; and the same is true of everything else.

What is sanctification? It is not a doctrine. It is not an 'it' at all. It is Christ. He is made unto us sanctification (1 Cor 1:30). If you are in Christ and if the Holy Spirit is teaching you Christ, then you are knowing all about sanctification; and if He is not, you may have a theory and doctrine of sanctification, but it will

separate you from other Christians, and it will be bringing any number of Christians into difficulties. Probably the teaching of sanctification as a thing has brought more Christians into difficulty than any other particular doctrine, through making it a thing, instead of keeping Christ as our sanctification.

I am only saying this to try to explain what I mean that it is in the School of Christ that we are to be found, where the Holy Spirit is not teaching us things; not Church doctrine, not sanctification, not adventism, not any thing, or any number of things, but teaching us Christ. What is adventism? What is the coming of the Lord? Well, it is the coming of the Lord. And what is the coming of the Lord? Well, such a word as this will give us the key: "He shall come to be glorified in His saints, and to be marvelled at in all them that believed" (2 Thess 1:10). You see, it is the consummation of something that has been going on in an inward way. How then do I best know that the coming of the Lord draws nigh? Not best of all by prophetic signs, but by what is going on within the hearts of the Lord's people. That is the best sign of the times, namely, what the Spirit of God is doing in the people of God. But maybe you are not interested in that. You would far sooner know what is going to happen between Germany and Russia, whether these two eventually are going to become a great confederacy! How far does it get us? Where has all the talking about the revived Roman Empire got us? That is adventism as a thing. If only we keep close to Him who is the sum of all truth, and move with Him and learn Him, we shall know the course of things. We shall know what is imminent. We shall have in our heart whisperings of preparation. The best Advent preparation is to know the Lord. I am not saying that there is nothing in prophecy: don't misunderstand me. But I do know that there are multitudes of people who are simply engrossed in prophecy as a thing whose spiritual life counts for nothing, who really have no deep inward walk with the Lord. We have seen it so often.

I shall never forget on a visit to a certain country going into one of the big cities where I was to speak for a week. Everything was so arranged that my first message was timed to follow the last message of a man who had had a week before me, and he had been on prophecy for the whole week. I went into the last meeting where he gave his final message on the signs of the time. Notebooks were out, and they were taking it all down, fascinated. It was all external, all objective; such things as the Roman Empire revived and Palestine recovered. You know the sort of thing. Then he finished and they were waiting for some more, and the notebooks were ready. The Lord put it right into my heart that the first word was to be, "And every one that hath this hope set on him purifieth himself, even as he is pure" (1 John 3:3); to speak on the spiritual effect of that spiritual hope. They were not interested in that. The notebooks were closed, pencils put away, there was no interest as I sought in the Lord to be very faithful as to what all this should mean in an inward way, in adjustment to the Lord, and so on. They were only longing for the meeting to close. When I finished--they hardly waited for me to finish--they were up and out.

Oh no, it is the Lord, and the Holy Spirit would bring us back to the Lord, and it is not, after all, coming back to nonessentials, to elementary things, to come back to Christ. It is coming on to the only basis upon which the Holy Spirit can really accomplish all God's will and purpose, to be in the School of Christ where the Holy Spirit is teaching us Christ; and the Holy Spirit's way of teaching Christ is experimental.

THE NEED OF A NEW SET OF FACULTIES

Now, here is where we become so seemingly elementary. You see, the very nature of this school requires the most drastic change in ourselves. It is impossible to get into the School of Christ, where the Holy Spirit is the great tutor, until the greatest change has taken place in us. We have to be made all over again or that school will mean nothing. We cannot come in here with any hope of learning Christ in the smallest way until a whole new set of faculties has been given to us. We have to have faculties given to us which

we do not possess naturally. "Except one be born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3); and that is the Lord's way of stating a tremendous fact.

That kingdom is one in which certain things obtain with which I have no correspondence at all, with which naturally I have no power of communication. Take a walk round the garden. Walk down by the potatoes and vegetables and talk about, well, anything you like. What would the potatoes think about you? What would the cabbages say about you? They neither hear nor understand what you are talking about, whatever it is. Their kind of life is not your kind of life. They are not constituted in your kingdom. There is no correspondence between them and you at all. They have not the capacity, the gift, the qualification, for the most elementary things that you may be talking about. You may be talking about such foolish things as dress, ordinary everyday things: they do not know. It is like that. There is just as great a divide between us and the kingdom of God. "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him; and he cannot know them . . ." (1 Cor 2:14). The divide is so utter that if you and I were brought in our natural state right into the place where the Spirit of God was speaking, unless that Spirit of God wrought a miracle in us, the whole thing would be of another world. And is it not so? You believers, go out into this world and talk about the things of the Lord and see men gape at you! It is all foreign to them. It is like that. "Except one be born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God." To get into this school, something has to happen to us, and that means that we have to be constituted anew, with altogether other qualifications and abilities for the things of God. That is the nature of this school. It is the School of the Spirit of God.

I know that is very elementary, but, after all, is not that the thing that is being pressed on us all the time? It is being brought home to us how that we may hear words, and yet that they may not mean anything to us. We need our capacity for spiritual understanding enlarged more and more. We are naturally handicapped in this whole matter.

THE BREAKING OF THE SELF-LIFE

There is one passage that I cannot get away from. It has been with me for a long time. It has been here as the basis of our meditation. It is John 1:51, and it seems to me that those are words which introduce us to the School of Christ, namely, those words of the Lord Jesus to Nathanael. I think it would be helpful to read the whole section from verse 47:

"Jesus saw Nathanael coming to him, and saith of him, Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile! Nathanael saith unto him, Whence knowest thou me? Jesus answered and said unto him, Before Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee. Nathanael answered him, TEACHER, thou art the Son of God, thou art King of Israel. Jesus answered and said unto him, Because I said unto thee, I saw thee underneath the fig tree, believest thou? thou shalt see greater things than these. And he saith unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Ye shall see the heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man."

Here we are approaching the School of Christ, and there is one thing which is essential before we can even come to the threshold of that school, and that is what is marked by those words, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!" That put alongside the final words--"the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man"--gives us a complete picture of what spiritually lies behind.

At the time when Jacob in guile--you remember the story of his guile--stole the birthright and had to escape for his life, he saw a very great truth, though but dimly as in type or figure, and a truth moreover

into which he was not then able to enter. Jacob at that time could never have entered into the meaning of what he saw, namely, the House of God, Bethel; that place where heaven and earth meet, God and man meet, where the glory--uniting heaven and earth, God and man--is the great link, where God speaks and makes Himself known, where God's purposes are revealed. Why was this the case with Jacob? He was in guile. Let him leave it there then, as he must, and go on, and for twenty years come under discipline, and at the end of twenty years' discipline meet the impact of heaven upon his earthly life, his earthly nature, the impact of the Spirit upon his flesh, the impact of God upon himself at Jabbok, and let that fleshly, natural life be smitten and broken and withered, to bear the mark for the rest of his days of its having come under the ban of God; and then with the Jacob judged, the Jacob smitten, wounded, withered, he can go back and pour out his drink-offering at Bethel, and abide. The guile is dealt with. He is now not Jacob but Israel, in whom, speaking in type and figure, there is no guile. The work was not finished, but a crisis was met.

The Lord Jesus is saying here, to put it in a word, just this; to come into the place of the open heaven, where for you God is coming down in communication, and the glory of God abides, and where you enjoy what Bethel means, is nothing else than to come into Me; and to come into Me and abide in Me as the Bethel, the House of God, and have all the good of heaven and of God communicated, means you have come to the place where the natural life has been laid low, broken, withered. You cannot come into His school until that has happened, and it is necessary for the Lord to say to us in Christ as we come to the very threshold of that door, Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no Jacob; you shall see the heaven opened! To speak of the Jacob-life, is, after all, only another way of saying the self-life; for self is the very essence of the natural life; not just the self-life in its most positive evil forms, but the self-life in its totality. Jacob was in the elect line. He had a knowledge of God historically, but the transition from the natural to the spiritual was through discipline and crisis.

Let me stay with that. Here is the Lord Jesus. No one will dare to say that the self-life in Christ was like our self-life, polluted, corrupted, sinful. Not at all! And yet He had a self-life, a sinless self-life. For Him the self-life simply meant that He could act and speak and think and judge and move out from Himself. That is all. Not with evil intent, not as motivated or influenced by anything sinful or corrupt, but simply independently. He could have done and said a lot of good things independently. But He took the attitude, the position, that, although there was no sin in Him, He could not and would not at any time act or speak apart from His Father. That would be independence, and give the enemy just the opening that he was working for. But we can leave that.

My point is this, that you and I must not think of the self life only as something manifestly corrupt. There is a great deal done for God with the purest motive that is done out from ourselves. There are many thoughts, ideas, judgments, which are sublime, beautiful, but they are ours, and if we did but know the truth, they are altogether different from God's.

And so, right at the very door of His school the Lord puts something utter. It is Jabbok. Jabbok was a tributary of the Jordan, and the implications of Jordan are right there at the very threshold of the School of Christ. He accepted Jordan in order to enter into that school of the Spirit for three and a half years. You and I will not get into that school of the Anointing in any other way. It has to be like that. If you and I are going to learn Christ, it will only be as the Jacob-nature is smitten. I am not talking to you mere doctrine and technique. Believe me, I know exactly what I am talking about.

I know this thing as the greatest reality in my history. I know what it is to have been labouring with all my might for God and preaching the Gospel out from myself for years. Oh, I know; I know what hard labour it is with the dome over your head. How many times have I stood in the pulpit and in my heart have said, If only somehow or other I could get a cleavage through this dome over my head, and instead of preaching what I have gathered from books and put into my notebooks, and having to study it up, I could scrap the whole thing and, with an opened heaven, speak out what God is saying in my heart! That was a longing for years. I sensed there was something like this, but I had not got it until the great crisis of Romans 6 came, and with it the open heaven. It has been different ever since then, altogether different. "Ye shall see the heaven opened"; and all that strain has gone, all that bondage has gone, that limitation; there is no dome there. That is my glory today. Forgive that personal reference. I must say it, because we are not here to give addresses; we are right down on the reality of this matter of the Holy Ghost directly and immediately revealing Christ to us, and that ever-growingly; and this cannot be until we have come to our Jabbok, until the Jacob-life has been dealt with through that crisis, and the Lord is able to say, An Israelite indeed, in whom is no Jacob; thou shalt see heaven opened! There is that dome, that closed heaven over us by nature, but, blessed be God! the Cross rends the heavens, the veil is rent from top to bottom, and Christ is revealed through the rent veil of His flesh. He is no longer seen as the Man Jesus; He is seen in our hearts in all the fullness of God's consummate thought for man. It is a tremendous thing to see the Lord Jesus, and it is a tremendous thing to go on seeing Him more and more. That is where it begins--Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile, no Jacob! Thou shalt see heaven opened!

A NEW PROSPECT FOR A NEW MAN

That word, "thou shalt see heaven opened" is the new prospect for a new man. A new man, a new prospect! In the Authorized Version, a word is added which has been left out in the Revised Version. I take it for the simple reason that it is implicit in the original, without the word necessarily being introduced. In the Authorized it says, "Hereafter ye shall see heaven open". In the Revised Version, that first word is left out, and it simply reads, "Ye shall see . . .". But "ye shall" is something prospective, it is a tense pointing on to a future day. Not 'ye are seeing', but "ye shall see". It is a new prospect for a new man; and therein lies a new era. It is the era of the Holy Spirit, for by the coming of the Holy Spirit, the open heaven is made a reality. The Cross effects the opening of the heavens for us, but it is the Holy Spirit who makes it good in us, just as was the case in that typical or symbolic death and burial and resurrection of the Lord Jesus in Jordan, when the heavens were opened to Him. Coming up on new, resurrection ground, He had the open heaven. The Spirit then alighted and abode upon Him, and the Spirit became, shall we say, the channel of communication, making the open heaven all that it should be as a matter of communication, intercourse, communion. It is the era of the Spirit, making all the values of Christ real in us. "Ye shall"; and, blessed be God, what was prospective for Nathanael is present for us.

That era has come. We are in the era of the Holy Spirit, of the open heaven.

THE MARK OF A LIFE ANOINTED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT

Now, what is, then, the mark of a life anointed by the Holy Spirit? You remember when Paul went to Ephesus, he found certain disciples and, without giving us any explanation of the reason for his question, he immediately said, "Did ye receive the Holy Spirit when ye believed?" Their reply was, "We did not so much as hear whether the Holy Spirit was". Then Paul's next question is full of significance, taking us back to Jordan. "Into what then were ye baptized?" 'Baptism is bound up with this vital reality. If you do not know the Holy Spirit, what can your baptism have meant?' Oh, we were baptized with John's baptism; Oh,

I see: well, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him that should come after him, that is, on Jesus." Then when they heard that, they were baptized into the Name of the Lord Jesus, they were baptized into Christ, and the Holy Spirit came upon them. Thus they came into the School of Christ; and the mark of a life anointed by the Spirit is that you know Christ in this living and ever-growing way.

Oh, listen to this, this is not so elementary and unnecessary as it may seem. Some of us, of course, are very poor scholars, and we take such a long time to learn. It took decades in my case to come to a true realization of this. We know so much, and we discover that our real personal knowledge of Christ is a poor thing. We are constantly brought up against that. At last, sooner or later, you and I are going to come to the place where we exclaim, 'Oh, it is not doctrines and truths and themes and subjects and Scripture as mere matter that I need to know!' It is all very wonderful when you are taken up with it; but let a man come into the fires, into deep trial, into trouble and perplexity and then what about all your doctrines and all your themes, and all your Bible study? What is the value of it? It does not really solve your problem, it does not get you through. This is a tragedy. It is true of many of us who have got certain doctrines, who have gone through the doctrines of the Bible and worked them out, and who know what is in the Bible on these things; regeneration, redemption, atonement, righteousness by faith, sanctification, and so on; it is true that after we have gone through them all, and have got them all well worked out, and we come into a terrible spiritual experience, the whole thing counts for nothing, and we come to the place where, but for the Lord, we could easily throw the whole thing over and say, This Christianity does not work! Yes, for those who have known the Lord for years, so far as the accumulation of truth is concerned, that is about the value of it in an hour of the deepest spiritual distress. The only thing then that can help you is not your beautiful notebooks full of doctrines, but, What do I know of the Lord personally and livingly in my own heart? What has the Holy Spirit revealed in me and to me, and made a part of me, of Christ? Sooner or later, that is where we are coming to. We are going to be brought back to the living, spiritual knowledge of the Lord; for He alone personally, as revealed in our very being by the Holy Ghost, can save us in the deepest hour. The day will come when we will be stripped of everything but what is spiritually, inwardly known of Christ; stripped of all our mental and intellectual knowledge. Many of those who have been giants in teaching and in doctrine have had a very, very dark hour at the end of their lives, a very dark hour indeed. How they have got through has depended upon the inward knowledge of the Lord as over against mere intellectual knowledge. How can I explain what I mean by that?

Well, for example, you discover something in the realm of food that really does help you. You have gone all round trying everything, all that the food people can provide to help you in a specific malady or weakness, and nothing has helped you. Then suddenly you discover something that really does help you, and the next time you are put to the test you take some of that and find you can go through on that. It is in you, something that gets you through your ordeal. That is what I mean, with reference to this question of how and what Christ is to be to us. He is to be in us, that upon which we can rest back in confidence and assurance, and, doing so, He gets us through. We are to know Him in that way. That is the only way in which to learn Christ, and that is experimental. "Ye shall see the heaven opened." The Holy Spirit has come to make for us an altogether new order of things, so that Christ is being revealed in us as our very life. Ye shall see when the Spirit comes: that is the mark of an anointed life. Ye shall see! And those are great moments when we do see. Some of us have had those great moments in specific connections, and some of us have seen others have their great moments in specific connections. Yet we have known that they knew all about the thing, and have been taught it, and have had it drummed into them for years; and then after years suddenly it has broken upon them, and they have said, Look here, I am now beginning to

see what has been said all this time!

I remember a man brought up in a most saintly family, whose father I always used to liken to Charles G. Finney. He was like Charles G. Finney in spirit, soul and body; and one of his sons brought up in that most godly home was a great friend of mine for years. We had real fellowship together, always talking about the things of the Lord. One day --I can see it now right at the corner of Newington Green--I was going to meet him, and as I came toward Newington Green I saw him in the distance. I saw him smile, and we met and shook hands. He was one big smile. Do you know, I have made a discovery, he said. I said, What is your discovery? I have discovered that Christ is in me! "Christ in you, the hope of glory", has become a reality to me. Well, I said, I could have told you that years ago. Ah, that is the difference, he said: I see it now, I know it now.

You see what I mean. It is just that. Oh, that the world were full of Christians like that! Is this not the need? But inasmuch as this was said to Nathanael, it must be for us all. It was not said to Peter, James and John up on the Mount of Transfiguration: it was said to Nathanael, one of the general circle. It is for all; and if that wants strengthening, proving, notice what the Lord Jesus said--"Ye shall see the heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man." What has happened? A tremendous transition has taken place in the course of a few sentences. Behold, an Israelite indeed! That is for Israel; for Jacob, yes, the father of Israel; for sons of Jacob, the earthly Israel. Ah, yes, but that is purely within the limitation of earth, purely within the limitation of a people here amongst the nations, and within the limitation of types. Yes, but now for the tremendous transition. The Lord has cancelled out something Nathanael said. "Thou art King of Israel", said he. King of Israel? That is nothing. Thou shalt see greater things than these. Thou shalt see the heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man! That is something vastly greater than Israel. Son of Man! That is racial, that is universal; that is for all men who will come in, not just for Israel. Thou shalt see greater things! Heaven opened--and for whom? Not just for Israel, but for all men in Christ. The Son of Man!

That title, Son of Man, simply represents God's thought concerning man. Oh, the great, great thought and intention of God concerning man. The open heaven is for man when he comes into God's thought in Christ. The open heaven is for man: God revealing Himself to man in the Man. It is for all of us. Let no one think that this open heaven, this anointing, is for a certain few. Oh no, it is for everyone. God's desire, God's thought, is that you and I, the most simple, foolish, weak amongst men, the most limited naturally, with the least capacity naturally, should find that our very birthright is an open heaven. In other words, you and I may, in Christ, know this wonderful work of the Holy Spirit in an inward revelation of Christ in ever-growing fullness. That is for us, every one of us. May the most advanced Christian have a new movement toward the Lord in this matter, and all of us really come to this first crisis where the dome over us is cleft, and we know an open heaven, the Spirit revealing Christ in our hearts, for His glory.

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