

Ascension Union With Christ

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of understanding our ascension union with Christ for spiritual authority and living a life reflective of that reality.

Scripture: Psalm 24:3, Revelation 14:1

Topics: "Union with Christ", "Spiritual Ascendency"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the significance of spiritual ascendency through union with Christ's ascension, illustrating a diagram of spiritual proximity to Christ, the exalted hub of Zion. He explains that the church's authority and life stem from this heavenly position, which has been obscured by earthly entanglements. The sermon highlights the importance of the church's testimony, derived from the experiences of a representative company that ascends to witness the greatness of redemption and the ongoing work of God. Sparks calls for believers to recognize their ascension life, which is a progressive journey towards spiritual maturity and authority, ultimately culminating in a glorious ingathering. He urges the church to reclaim its voice and authority by living out the reality of their ascended position in Christ.

Transcript

Reading: Ps. 24:3; Rev. 14:1-5; Ps. 122:2-4.

"Who shall ascend...?" "Whither the tribes go up... for an ordinance (a testimony, R.V.M.) for Israel".

We continue for a little while in considering this matter of spiritual ascendency. It might help you if you could draw a mental diagram as of a wheel, and wheels within a wheel. The hub is that which represents Zion. The centre of the hub is the Lord Jesus exalted and glorified. The circle immediately next is that which represents the hundred and forty-four thousand, a representative company in closest proximity spiritually to Him. The next wheel within the wheel is the church as a whole, and the rim is the outermost bounds of the universe. From the hub there radiate numerous spokes. They pass from the centre, first into and then through that inner company, then on to the larger company of the Lord's people in general, who are intended to come into the good of what is there at the centre, and then on beyond the church to the nations who will walk in the light thereof. These many spokes represent the features of Christ in exalted glory, the practical outworkings and implications and significance of Him in that place and state. Now that mental picture may help a little. We now deal with some of the spokes, but we have to come back for a little while to the heart of the matter.

Comprehensively, it is just the question of Christ and His people in a position of absolute spiritual ascendancy. Unto that, very much is required in their discipline and experience. But out from that disciplined ascendancy of spirit tremendous values issue in widening circles. The Word of God makes it perfectly clear that that is the order of things. The book of the Revelation alone gives you that diagram. You start with the Lord Jesus in His glory and majesty and authority, His exaltation and His right to govern. You move to that company actually referred to, a representative company, one hundred and forty-four thousand; just a typical or symbolic number. The meaning is a company who have been brought, in the first place, to ascendancy on mount Zion for governmental purposes, as the very number -- twelve times twelve -- indicates, signifying not only government, but government in great fullness. Then you find that you bring in the whole church, the Jerusalem in addition to the Zion, and, beyond, the nations that walk in the light thereof. There is your diagram in the one book alone, but the whole Bible works on those lines.

Now we come back to this matter of spiritual ascendancy. We closed our earlier meditation by saying that spiritual ascendancy takes its rise from ascension union with Christ. That, figuratively, is all gathered into the fragment in the psalm: "Whither the tribes go up... for a testimony for Israel". You know that is derived from Exodus and Deuteronomy. Twice in the book of Exodus this matter of periodic going up to the place where the Lord had put His Name is referred to. Then again in the book of Deuteronomy it is reiterated: "Three times in a year shall all thy males appear before the Lord thy God in the place which he shall choose" (Deut. 16:16). That is the basis of this going up and appearing before the Lord. We shall come back to that presently. We are getting the setting.

A New Order Introduced With the Ascension of Christ

What is the principle? The principle is just going up. It is ascension. These psalms are called "The Psalms or Songs of Ascent". "Whither the tribes go up", and they go up "for a testimony for Israel". Let us get right to this thing in actual spiritual expression. I think the Lord's people are still slow to recognize the immense significance of the ascension of the Lord Jesus. If it does not remain just a date in our religious calendar, in general it is not much more than something upon which we look back in remembrance with a certain amount of wonder, that the Lord Jesus did ascend up into heaven and that He is there. More or less we appreciate the fact, just the fact of the event. I say more or less, because some have seen more in it than others. But few of us have yet been really forcefully impressed with the significance of the ascension of the Lord Jesus -- with the fact that upon His ascension the whole character of the ages changed, and that from that time an entirely new order of things was introduced, everything of God from that time for this dispensation being from heaven and of a heavenly order. That is only one thing about the ascension, but it is an immense thing. It is a grievous fact that the church as a whole has missed the point of the ascension. For had it grasped the meaning it could never seek, as it has done, to construct anything of a more or less permanent character as attached to this earth, in system and form.

There were, of course, the great historic crises in the history of the church in which that very thing was developed. It came in with such fullness through Constantine, when he linked the church with the State and made it a thing of this world. That is what the devil has always tried to do -- to make the church something upon this earth, to be taken account of here, to have its standing here; its names, its titles, its recognitions, yes, its everything, as something here to impress this world with itself in a temporal way. And the appalling spectacle of the church today, speaking generally, is that it is without authority in this world; it has no voice. What voice has spoken in these terribly critical times through which we have been passing, when everything in itself proclaims that God has a controversy with the nations, and not least with this nation because of its greater responsibility? There is no doubt about it, the reign of vanity is accentuated a

thousandfold in our day, and yet not a voice is raised for God. The church is silent. The church has not the voice, it has not the message, it has not the spiritual position required. Why? Because it has become so interwoven with the life of this world and so much a thing of this earth, that its heavenly authority has gone. It is another case of the glory having departed. It is not our desire to dwell upon such things now. That is only by way of coming to this matter of spiritual ascendancy and enforcing the statement that the church has lost the meaning of the ascension of the Lord Jesus. For if that ascension has one meaning for the dispensation, it is this, that the church's authority rests entirely upon its heavenly union with the Lord Jesus, its spiritual "other-worldly" position.

The Ascension of Christ -- His Enthronement

Another thing about the ascension which is even greater is this, that in the New Testament the ascension was always looked back upon by the apostles and the church as the enthronement of the Lord Jesus at the right hand of the Majesty in the heavens. It is never just something in itself, a going up, a changing of location, something called "the ascension". It is His enthronement. "Being therefore by the right hand of God exalted... he hath poured forth this" (Acts 2:33). That is the ascension, and it is terrific when it begins to register upon this world the import of the fact that Jesus is Lord, and so it proved to be at that time.

The Church in Ascension Union With Christ

In the New Testament quite as much is said about the church's heavenly position as about Christ's. The two things run together. The one is the counterpart of the other. He "sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Heb. 1:3); and "God... made us to sit with him in the heavenlies" (Eph. 2:6). Those two things are there and they are kept together. It is a spiritual position, with all the values of it put to the good and the use of a church that will really take that position. That is the full meaning of spiritual ascendancy. It is really coming to the place where in Christ the church has been established.

Then, of course, the fight begins, and the fight, as we have said before, all relates to that: not to keep the church from getting there, but to keep the church from knowing that its place is there, and, if possible, to bring the church down from there; because, you see, the church began its history there. It was not a climb from the beginning to get there: the church WAS there. In the thought of God that is its place continually. But the history is that the enemy has concentrated upon bringing the church spiritually out of its place. There is a little fragment that the psalmist uses which, while it does not exactly literally fit in here, is a very good statement, speaking, as it does, about the righteous man, and the conspirators who are talking together of how they can bring him down from his high spiritual place. "They only consult to thrust him down from his dignity" (Psalm 62:4). The conspirators of hell are always at work to see how they can bring the Lord's people down from this excellency of the high place in Christ exalted. So it is ascension union with the Lord Jesus which is the real meaning of spiritual ascendancy, authority and power.

Some in Israel a Testimony for Israel

Now we can come to the next phrase: "Whither the tribes go up... for a testimony for Israel". In the type there was periodical ascension; they went up from time to time. They could not have known the meaning of it, but they did go up every so often, fulfilling a spiritual principle that the Lord's thought for His people is that their fullness of life is found on high; and it was so for them in their way. We have said already that it was the high peak of Israel's national life when they went from time to time to Jerusalem, to Zion. They were carrying out this spiritual principle, that ascendancy is a divine law of fullness of life.

"Whither the tribes go up". And why did they go up? For what did they go up? "For a testimony for Israel". What does that mean? Remember, it is not all Israel that has gone up literally. "Three times in a year shall all thy males appear before the Lord thy God". A company representative of Israel went up, and in that representative company there was the testimony for Israel. What was that testimony? It expressed that which the whole house of Israel came into by means of that representative company, the blessings and benefits that all the Lord's people derived from the fact that there were those who went up on their behalf.

Let me pause there. Although the point is not applicable to Israel because, I expect, all of them would have gone up if they could have done so. Yet when you come to the spiritual outworking of this you find, tragically enough, that all the Lord's people are not willing to go up. It works out in this way after all, that only a certain proportion of them will really take this heavenly position and live this heavenly life. There are so many who want to live a Christian life down here on a merely earthly level, bringing everything in a wrong sense down to earth and relating it to things here. You understand I mean spiritually, not literally. I am not talking about abstract things in the way that we do when we speak of "living with your head in the clouds". We have said enough to show that this living in the heavenlies is a tremendously and grimly practical matter of everyday life. There is nothing more practical, more real. I venture to say that the realists of this earth are the people who are the most spiritual. They are up against the greatest realities, THE realities. They are a representative company through whom there will be derived by many others the benefits and blessings of their paying the price, taking the journey, putting up with all the difficulties, going right on to the Lord's fullest intention.

What is the testimony? Just use your imagination for a moment in the case of Israel and their representative company. When they went up, what happened? Well, they went up on three distinctive occasions. The first was at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which marked Israel's deliverance from Egypt. The second was at the Feast of Firstfruits, which marked the growth of the life of the Lord's people. The third was the Feast of Ingathering, the consummation of the life of the Lord's people. When they went up to these feasts, what was their testimony when they came back?

A Testimony to the Greatness of Redemption

Firstly, they would say, "We have had a glorious time up there in connection with our redemption. We come back just full of it, full of the greatness, the grandeur, the wonder, the ever-freshness of our redemption. We bring back to you something fresh in spirit as to what a great thing the Lord did when He saved us, when He delivered us from Egypt." They would go over it; and while down there, in the customary places of their dwelling, it had become for everybody just some bit of their history, this going up for this particular thing once a year brought into continual, perennial freshness the greatness of their salvation. They saw the great king in "the city of the great king", and they saw the great house of God; and they saw, in relation to the great king and the great house, how great a salvation theirs was. Until you have really seen the King, you have never grasped the greatness of your salvation. I mean that the more we see of the Lord Jesus, the more we wonder at the greatness of our salvation. "If he shall be manifested", cries the apostle, "we shall be like him; for we shall see him even as he is" (1 John 3:2). Again another apostle says, "We... beholding... the glory of the Lord, are transformed into the same image from glory to glory" (2 Cor. 3:18). Oh, IF we only saw the greatness of Christ, what a new apprehension and appreciation of our salvation we should have! And this, in the ordering of the Lord, was to be a perpetual memorial, something to be renewed all along the line; not a living back there so many hundreds of years ago -- or so many decades of years ago when we were saved. It is more wonderful today than ever it was! That is the testimony for Israel. Our testimony ought to be, "We have seen the Lord anew, we have seen

the King anew, we have seen the house of God anew: we have seen this magnificent thing, this masterpiece of God, the church, which is His Body." What a thing it is to see the church with spiritual eyes, to see God's conception of it! The more we see, the more we wonder at our high calling. It is no small thing to have been chosen in Him before the foundation of the world, to be conformed to His image, and to be a part of that magnificent spiritual edifice which is to dominate the world to come and to be the administrative centre of God through His Christ unto the ages of the ages. They went up and saw the king, and they saw the house, and they went back saying, "It is more wonderful than ever!" and so all Israel came into the good of their refreshed vision.

I know it is a costly way, but it is a tremendous thing for any of us to have left the lower levels of Christian life, those remote places, and come up to the mount, and to have been shown the Lord in greater fullness. None of us has seen Him yet in very great measure, but it is a great thing to see a little more of Him, and of the meaning of Christ personal and Christ corporate. Therein lies the power of a testimony to the Lord's people -- "We have seen!"

I have often asked myself the secret of Paul's endurance and persistence and triumph. The only answer I can find is that he had seen the Lord. You can never undo that.

They went up and were for a testimony for Israel. Oh yes, the hundred and forty-four thousand are with THE LAMB. Ever and always it is the way of suffering and of sacrifice that leads to that place, but it is good to have for the Lord's people that which they need to lift them from their low levels of spiritual life. In the end it is worth it -- to know the greatness of their redemption through seeing the greatness of the King and of the house of God.

A Testimony to the Lord's Persistent Working

And then the Feast of Firstfruits: "The feast of harvest, the firstfruits of thy labours" (Exodus 23:16). The Lord has done something in us. It may not be all done yet, but He has done something. It has been scorching work, fiery work, but He has got us so far. And this is the point: His having done that much is the guarantee that He is going to finish the work. That is the significance of the firstfruits. "He who hath begun a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil 1:6). The Lord has exercised power in bringing us thus far. He is at work upon us and in us; there is a history of His faithfulness. Oh yes, however much we feel needs yet to be done, however far we have yet to go, nevertheless we have a testimony; the Lord has done something; and wherever that is the case, He means to finish it. If ever the Lord has taken a life in hand, He purposes to see that life right through, if that life will let Him. We shall never break down because the Lord is not persistent, because He, as though He were one of us, suddenly slacks off and turns to other interests. No, He is going to pursue this thing. Thank God for that! The fact that He has done something is the earnest that He wills and intends to finish it.

There is a testimony for Israel in what the Lord has done and is doing, both in and for His people. What I mean is this. It is a great thing to be able to say, "Not only was I converted so many years ago, and came to a knowledge of the Lord, but I have a history since then with the Lord, and it is a very real and living one. I know how imperfect I am, how far short I come, what a lot more there is to be done, but I do know the Lord; right up to date I know the Lord." They went up to Zion; and whatever they had been feeling about it all through those months while they had been in their own homes, they went back and said, "The Lord started a work in us long ago and He is going on with it; there are evidences that He means to get us right through to glory; there are tokens that He is doing something." The people were heartened and lifted

up out of their discouragement and despondency as these went back with their testimony. The Lord needs a people like that today. In the midst of everything that has settled down to a cold system and form of teaching and practice, everything that has become merely a set thing, He needs just such a people. Oh, the Lord does need a company, "a hundred and forty-four thousand", who represent the goings of God, who are really in the good of a present work of God, in whom something more of His life is manifested. They, in themselves, may be of no account whatever: you may look at them and say they are a poor lot. But there is something there; you meet the Lord in them; you sense life. Those people are alive, there is something there that is active in the life of God. The Lord needs a representative people like that today. Is it not true in this Christian world that is so short of life, so systematized and fixed and static, that there is a need of the flow, the release, the impact of life? I say again, there is a price attached to that, to serve in that capacity. But the Lord needs that company, and may He not be seeking out that company even in His approach to US?

The occasion of the Feast of Firstfruits is better known to us as Pentecost. Pentecost seems to have been an inclusive festival and occasion. It looked backwards and brought up the greatness of redemption. It spoke of the mighty emancipation of a people for God from the world through the blood of the Lamb. It looked forward and set forth the consummation in the full and glorious ingathering. It led immediately to firstfruits through ripening fire of persecution (e.g. Stephen, and others) and in itself it immediately signified ascension, ascendancy -- the Lamb on mount Zion -- "My king upon my holy hill" (Ps. 2:6).

A Testimony to the Glorious Consummation

That brings us to the third occasion on which the tribes went up to Jerusalem -- the Feast of Ingathering, otherwise called the Feast of Tabernacles. It was then that the whole of the chief fruits of the ground -- the corn, the wine and the oil -- were gathered in. That feast was the consummation of all else -- a testimony to the Lord's coming for His own in final fullness, a glorious crown to the whole process that commenced with the deliverance of a people from the bondage of Egypt. It was the consummate expression of the ascendancy of the Lamb and of a people with Him.

I believe that really is the heart of the value of the Lord's coming as something held by the church. That coming has been resolved into a bit of the church's doctrine, and, strangely enough, as a subject it has split the churches into fragments. Instead of being a means of elevating the church and bringing it into a place of power and authority, the teaching of the coming of the Lord has had the opposite effect. You will agree with me that to believe with all your might in the second coming of the Lord does not necessarily carry with it tremendous spiritual power in your life. You can swallow all that has been written on the subject by eminent servants of God, and it may make no difference to your spiritual life. But it ought to. And how should it work? Well, it is not that you have an objective conception and are lifting up your eyes in imagination to that day when the Lord comes. That does not always carry you through the difficult patches. But the Holy Spirit, Who always has that day in view as the counterpart of the ascension and exaltation of the Lord Jesus, Himself bears witness in us, and imparts to us the values of that exaltation whenever we do really, in spirit, contemplate His coming again. Is it not true that if you really in the Spirit sing a hymn about the coming of the Lord, you begin in spirit to rise already? You cannot spiritually dwell upon the coming of the Lord without a tremendous sense of ascendancy. It lifts you up. It is a spiritual thing, not some historical thing in the calendar of the church, and the Spirit bears witness. On a certain line, we have everything to put us off being occupied with the teaching of the Lord's coming. In my childhood I was told that the Lord would be here before my life had gone much farther on, and that certain people were never going to see death. But they are all dead! That has been going on for centuries. Long before I was born

people were saying that kind of thing, and you might well say, "I have done with this, it does not hold water". Yet we are going to sing those hymns again, in spite of all these theories and all these things which seem to be so false and untrue, and which seem to justify the men who said, even in Peter's day, "Where is the promise of his coming? for, from the day that the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning" (2 Pet. 3:4). In spite of it all, we are going to sing, and as we sing our spirits will rise. Why? Not because we are putting on blinkers, shutting our eyes, imagining things, wishfully thinking. No; but because the Spirit of God is in us and He bears witness to a great fact, when we in heart, in spirit, turn in that direction. The church is going up where the Lord has gone up. Ascension is going to be consummated by a great ingathering.

The testimony for Israel is not this or that theory about the second coming of Christ, but a living testimony in the life of the Lord's people; which is borne out in this way, that those concerned are really already in the good of it, they are living ascension lives; they know already something, if only a little, of what it means to be raised together with Him. "Whither the tribes go up for a testimony for Israel". Those Israelites went up, and then they went back with their testimony glowing in their faces, and the rest got the good of it. And there is a big "rest" today waiting for the good that can come to them through a company of the Lord's people who really do know what ascension life with Him is.

Ascension life is reached progressively, not at one bound. They did not leap from their distant cities and towns on to the peak of Zion. It was a journey and a climb, and it could only be done one step at a time. If they had tried to take more than one step at a time, they would very soon have been discouraged. It is just a going on with the Lord against discouragement, adversity, trial, suffering, against the enemy that lies in wait. Yes, all that, but it is a going on, and almost imperceptibly coming more and more to the place where you are not so easily discouraged and overcome as you once were, where the enemy has not quite the same ground as he once had for pulling you down and undoing you. It is a going up. It may seem slow, but none the less it is a going up. There will be a consummation, and we shall arrive at last in glory.

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