

Attainment by Discipline

by T. Austin-Sparks

The ultimate goal of the Christian life is spiritual ascendancy, where we come to the throne and rule with God.

Scripture: Deuteronomy 28:1, Psalm 8:6, Psalm 24:3, Matthew 27:24, Ephesians 1:22-23, Hebrews 2:9, Hebrews 12:22-23, Revelation 7:14, Revelation 14:1-5, Revelation 21:12

Topics: "Spiritual Ascendancy", "Discipline in Faith"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes that God's ultimate purpose is to have a people in absolute ascendancy, which is a central theme throughout Scripture. He illustrates this through the history of Israel, showing how their failures serve as warnings for the church today, as they lost their intended spiritual dominion due to clinging to the letter of the law rather than embracing the spirit of divine life. The sermon highlights that ascendancy is achieved through discipline and challenging experiences, urging believers to view their trials as opportunities for spiritual growth rather than personal grievances. Sparks concludes by affirming that true ascendancy is not merely a future promise but a present reality for those who rise above their circumstances through faith in Christ. The ultimate question remains, 'Who shall ascend?' and the answer lies in a disciplined and united people of God.

Transcript

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

We will say right away what it is that is really in view, so that you see what we are working unto. In a word it is this -- that God has always had in His mind and eye a people in absolute ascendancy. You can change the word ascendancy for other words if you like, such as dominion, exaltation, and so on. But ascendancy is a very good word, and I think it will suit our purpose; a people in absolute ascendancy.

That thought immediately resolves itself into a key to all the Scriptures. It explains everything that is there. The Bible is not just the record of numerous happenings, the story of many lives, or something about many nations. No; these all centre in one thing, and that is this -- a people corresponding to God's mind in the matter of absolute ascendancy, and what that means spiritually. That is a large enough matter.

In this closing book, at the point at which we have read (Rev. 14), we have a culmination of divine purpose. We have the question of ascendancy answered in one called "the Lamb," and with Him a hundred and forty-four thousand. The question has dated from a point long before David raised it in this form -- "Who shall ascend... who shall stand...?" That question has rung down the ages from the day that

Adam let the whole matter of ascendancy with regard to this world go into the hands of the devil. Who SHALL ascend, who SHALL have the dominion, who SHALL be above and who SHALL stand when all has crashed in the fall? That question at last is answered here, as the voice is heard as of many waters, as of a great thunder, as of harpers harping with their harps, and the Lamb and those that are with Him are seen on mount Zion. That is, as we pointed out in our previous meditation, the place of final impregnability so far as the forces of evil are concerned. The answer is there.

The answer, again, is found in a representative company. In saying that, we immediately introduce a new factor into the whole situation. Why do we, as the Lord's people, gather together? Is it that we are just a number of Christians who love the Lord and delight to come together from time to time to have some meetings and some teaching, and generally to help one another to be better Christians? I am quite sure that most of you answer No to such a question. You have seen that there is something very much more bound up with our belonging to the Lord than just being Christians, and good Christians at that. You have seen that God has a purpose concerning His Son into which believers are called, and which has only its beginning in our being born again. That purpose of God has been the occasion of intense and unrelenting hostility right down the ages from the whole kingdom of evil. It is the object which lies at the end of the Christian life upon which those powers of evil have their attention focused. If they are against the beginnings of Christian life in new birth, if they are against any and every stage of the Christian life, and if increasing intensity of opposition faces any believer who determines to go further and still further with the Lord, it is all because of what these things mean as to their outcome. The matter becomes individual and personal only because we are a part of a whole; but the whole is not to be found in any individual or any number of individuals as such, but in one united people.

Israel as an Illustration of Spiritual Ascendancy

Whatever we find recorded historically in the Bible, whatever we find there relating to what is actually here on this earth, seen and tangible and known after the flesh, there is a spiritual counterpart to it. It is a representation of something not seen. And amongst the many things which fulfil that function, one of the greatest is the nation of Israel; something known in history, seen on the earth, but in the mind of God hiding a great spiritual intent. That ultimate intent in fullness is contained in a little statement in Deuteronomy 28:1 and 13: "If thou shalt hearken diligently unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to observe to do all His commandments which I command thee this day... the Lord thy God will set thee on high ABOVE ALL THE NATIONS of the earth... And the Lord will make thee the head, and not the tail; and thou shalt be ABOVE only, and thou shalt not be beneath." There is the secret of God lying within that vessel which illustrates God's thought. The thought is passed on in spiritual reality to the church, which is the spiritual Israel, and the very explanation of the existence of the church according to God's mind is just that -- a nation above all the nations, a people in absolute spiritual ascendancy. "Who shall ascend?" The answer is found there, in the thought and mind of God.

That thought will most certainly be realized, but in the first place it may only be realized in a representative company, of which these hundred and forty-four thousand are the expression. Oh, what a vast amount of the Word of God is opened up immediately you get that key! It brings in the whole history of Israel. It starts with Jacob, the man through whom the twelve tribes came. The whole history of Israel is wrought into that one man's spiritual experience. What is Jacob to begin with, before he actually comes under the disciplining hand of God? Well, he is just what the nation was in itself; a poor, miserable, wretched, contemptible thing. "The Lord did not... choose you because ye were more in number than any people" (Deut. 7:7); "He did not choose you because you were better than other people:" No, it was sovereign

choice, and that is all you can say about Jacob. If you want anything to commend the man, you will look in vain; and you will find plenty to the contrary. But that worm Jacob came into the sovereign hands of God, and from Jacob the supplanter, the mean, contemptible worm -- God made a prince. He changed his name to Israel -- a prince with God -- and gave him twelve sons and what a mixture they were! We dare not stay at the moment with the details. But here we have twelve sons, twelve tribes.

Israel's Twelve Tribes -- A Governing People

What does twelve signify? Twelve in the Bible represents government. The twelve stones taken out of the Jordan, and the twelve stones set up in the Jordan (Josh. 4:8,9) speak of ascendancy over death, death's subjection to the power of resurrection. (That is an absolute thing in the very existence of the people we are thinking about). Elijah on Carmel built an altar of twelve stones, definitely said to represent all the tribes of Israel, and that altar bore witness concerning the absolute ascendancy of Jehovah and His people.

Many things happened to the twelve tribes. Dan lets in idolatry and passes out of history (see Rev. 7), but someone else takes the place of Dan and twelve is preserved to Revelation 21. "The holy city... having twelve gates... and names written thereon, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel." The number is preserved right through to the end. You need not think historically now; think spiritually. Twelve is government in representation. One hundred and forty-four thousand (twelve times twelve) are seen on the mount. This speaks of government, complete, absolute, ascendent, transcendent -- you come into the realm of superlatives now -- through the Lamb.

So you could go on gathering it up, and seeing how this divine thought is wrought into the very fabric of the Scriptures. From start to finish, it is all centred in the challenging enquiry, "Who shall ascend...? Who shall stand...?" Who shall have the government of God's universe at last? Who shall be His governmental instrument and vessel in reigning over this universe? Who? "Thou madest him to have dominion" (Ps. 8:6). "We behold... Jesus crowned with glory and honour" (Heb. 2:9) "Thou didst put all things in subjection under his feet" (Heb. 2:8). "He put all things in subjection under his feet, and gave him to be head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all" (Eph. 1:22,23). From the head the government passes out to the universe through the church, which is His body. It is all of a piece.

Israel Lost What God Intended

What a lot this explains in spiritual experience! I am going to pause there before I go on. This represents the big difference amongst Christians, the difference of conception as to the Christian life, as to what we are here for. Israel met many temptations and things adverse to this great destiny. Eventually Israel forfeited the destiny, and they are scattered among the nations, and have lost what God intended, so far as this dispensation is concerned. That did not just happen. There were many reasons for it and those are exactly the same things that you and I have to encounter and beware of in our calling unto this great destiny. For although God will achieve His purpose in the end, it will be achieved in a representative company, and all Christians will not reach this end. If it were otherwise, why the conflict, why all the exhortations, the entreaties, the urgings, the warnings of the Word of God to CHRISTIANS? Why do we not just -- automatically come to it? What is all the trouble about, if after all it does not matter, since we shall reach the goal in any case? You see how absurd it is to take it for granted that willy-nilly, once you are a Christian, you are going to arrive at God's full purpose. You are not! Israel, even though they were

called and had God on their side, and every divine resource at their command for the realization of the end, encountered things that proved too powerful for them and were worsted in the fight. They are used again and again as a warning to the church. The things which caused that downfall are the things of which we have to be fully aware, and although they are not pleasant things to say, they have to be said -- in all faithfulness.

Israel's Folly -- Clinging to the Letter, Not Open to the Spirit

One of the inclusive enemies to the great purpose of God in Israel's life and which virtually brought about their downfall was this: that they gathered all the truths of God together into a well-defined, compact system of sayings and practices, and said, "That is everything and the end." They boxed the compass of divine revelation and said, "We have it all, and now it is just a matter of observing these sayings and these forms." They resolved the whole revelation of God into a formal teaching and practice. They failed to see that the essence of all divine things is divine life; that there is a vast difference between the letter and the spirit; that you can have all the letter and all the forms and yet be quite dead, and all of it profit you nothing. Their attitude amounted to this, that if anybody claims to see something more of the meaning of the Lord -- not claiming to have had fresh revelation from heaven, but to have seen something more of God's meaning in what has already been given in His Word, demanding adjustment, demanding fresh progress, perhaps demanding revolutionary things -- then that is unsafe, it is suspect, it is something outside of what WE hold, what WE have been taught, what WE believe. They shut it all down like that and barred the way to all spiritual progress. That is what Israel did, and it was this that the Son of God came up against. It was this very thing that put out of court all the purpose of His coming and rendered it nil, so far as they were concerned.

Think of the story of our Lord's trial before Pilate. Where are our sympathies, and where are our indignations? Our sympathies are with Pilate, the man who said, as he took water and washed his hands, "I am innocent of the blood of this righteous man" (Matt. 27:24). He was a man in a predicament. You may despise him for apparent weakness, but in comparison with those who said, "Give us Barabbas, and let Jesus be crucified; His blood be on us, and on our children", it is Pilate who commands our sympathy, not these others. We feel more with the world than with the church. That is strong language. I mean, our sympathy is more there with the world than it is with those who claim to know everything, to be in possession of everything, of divine truth. In its hostility to Christ the world is nothing in comparison with a dead, fixed, systematized Christianity... That is where the danger lies; of having all the truth, and all the articles and all the practices, and losing the throne. Beware "that no one take thy crown" along that line.

That compasses a very great deal. It is for us to look carefully again at the things which brought about Israel's downfall and robbed Israel of that great and glorious issue which God had set before them. "The Lord thy God will set thee on high above all the nations of the earth" (Deut 28:1). Satan's answer to that is, "If I can help it, never!"; and he resorts to every means and method to see that no seed comes to final spiritual ascendancy. No church will arrive at ultimate dominion if he can prevent it.

Ascendency To Be Gained Through Challenging Experiences

It is that throne which is the centre of the universe, it is that glorious throne on high which rules, which governs. It is governing the experience of every believer. That is to say, it is determining our temptations, the assaults which we meet. As members of Christ's Body, our trials and sufferings are not things in themselves. It is a part of the mischief which the enemy has done in us, in numbing our spiritual faculties

and blinding our eyes, that we regard the things that happen to us as personal things. It is one of the most devastating things to take our sufferings as merely personal things. By so doing we rob them of their point and meaning. So soon as we begin to turn in on ourselves and regard our sufferings as directed against ourselves, making the whole thing into a personal problem, we have lost the way to the throne. If you see a person who is continually occupied with his own troubles, all the time in the circle of his own sufferings, one who has made altogether a personal matter of this whole question of discipline and training, of the trying, testing and proving of faith, you can see at once that such a one has cut the very vitals of divine intention in his trial and suffering; he is a defeated person. If only we could take up the trials, the adversities, the sufferings, the problems, that come to us, and look at them in the light of the great end, as the rungs of a ladder for our feet to rise to the throne! It is the ladder of suffering to bring us to the throne. It is the LAMB Who is in the throne, it is suffering and sacrifice that bring to mount Zion. Yet we resolve such trial into a personal thing all the time and defeat the end by so doing.

Do not be consumed with self-pity. See what it is doing. It is giving the enemy the ground he wants for holding you in defeat. You are no good for anything whatever; your phraseology about victory counts for nothing. Until we take hold of our affliction and suffering and say, "This thing has got to bring me higher, I have to get it under my feet: God has given me a good opportunity to learn ascendancy by means of this"; until we take an attitude like that our affliction and suffering is working just in the opposite direction to what God intends.

"These are they that come out of the great tribulation, and they washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (Rev. 7:14). That is said of another company in this book, and though the company may be different the principle is the same. When God gets a representative company there in the throne it will be in virtue, not of sovereign acts of picking them up and putting them there, but of a mighty travail; but not a travail in which they have wallowed in self-pity but in which they have risen by the grace of God and gained ascendancy.

Do not literalize these things and, by so doing, vitiate them. Get rid of the literal conception of a mountain and a throne and a hundred and forty-four thousand, and crowns and elders and what not. See that it is symbolic language which enshrouds spiritual principles. It is all spiritual in nature and essence; and spiritual ascendancy, or coming to the throne, is something that is to be effected inside of us, not at some future date but now. Any day in the life of a child of God will provide plenty of material for determining whether he, or she, is coming to the throne or not. Do not wait for the great day when Satan shall be cast down from heaven and there shall no place be found for him any more. Let us ask the Lord to see that in the measure that is done today. The heavens may be geographical, but they are spiritual also. That is what is before us, that is what the Lord is after: not merely to have a number of Christians, and as good Christians as He can get, but to have a people who will come to that place where the answer will be given fully and finally, both to the question and to the challenge -- "Who shall ascend...?"

Need and Challenge Both Met Through A Disciplined People

We referred in our earlier meditation to Job, and we will for the present close with a reference to him. Job's was a tremendous climb up out of a miry condition, up and out into that place of vindication where the Lord could point to him in a new way and say to others, "This man is the key to the answer to your prayers and you will not get any answer to prayer unless he stands in the breach: your spiritual interests and destiny hang upon him." That is tremendous: that a man should have reached some specific point where the destiny of many others hangs upon him, and God has determined it and said it in so many words -- "Your

spiritual good is bound up with this man; I have had to bring him to this position for your sake." It was a climb up: and what a climb up and out it was for Job!

What was God doing in all this? He was answering a challenge from hell. In effect, if not in word, the challenge of Satan was, "Who shall ascend? Who shall stand? Let me touch Job and You will see whether he will stand or not, You will see whether he will come up or not." And God said, "I will answer that challenge by means of this man." The challenge was answered. May it not be that this is exactly what the Lord is doing by means of the church? Why has Satan been allowed to continue for these centuries? Why was he not wiped out of existence when Christ destroyed his power at Calvary? Why has the church suffered through the ages as she has? Why today are the people of God so oppressed and afflicted? God is answering the enemy, and in that company on mount Zion with the Lamb the answer will be fully found. These have ascended and these shall stand. It yet remains, of course, to see what is basic to that standing and that ascendancy. That is spiritual history, but we have the fact of what God is after, what it is that alone will satisfy His intentions from the beginning. "Who shall ascend? Who shall stand?" Mount Zion and what that means spiritually will be the answer. And the apostle says, "Ye are come unto mount Zion... the church of the firstborn" (Heb. 12:22,23). It is the same thing.

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