

'Behold My Servant'

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the call to servanthood in Christ, highlighting the Church's role in fulfilling God's divine purpose through love and sovereignty.

Scripture: Isaiah 42:1

Topics: "Divine Election", "Servanthood"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the prophetic significance of Jesus as the ultimate servant of God, fulfilling the role that Israel failed to complete. He explains that the Church, as the Body of Christ, inherits this calling to serve and bring forth justice to the nations. Sparks highlights the sovereignty of God in choosing individuals for His purpose, using Paul, Peter, and John as examples of how God forms and equips His servants. He stresses that true service is rooted in love and spirituality, which are essential for the Church's mission. Ultimately, the sermon calls believers to recognize their divine election and the high calling of serving God in the world.

Transcript

"Behold, my servant, whom I uphold; my chosen, in whom my soul delighteth: I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the Gentiles. He will not cry, nor lift up his voice, nor cause it to be heard in the street. A bruised reed will he not break, and a dimly burning wick will he not quench: he will bring forth justice in truth. He will not fail nor be discouraged, till he have set justice in the earth; and the isles shall wait for his law" (Isa. 42:1-4).

I have found the Lord putting it into my heart quite strongly to say something about the service of God; and I think we can gather it under that first clause - "Behold, my servant." Of course, here the words are prophetically related to the Lord Jesus. There is no doubt about that, because they are actually quoted in the twelfth chapter of the Gospel by Matthew, verses 17 and 18 - "...that it might be fulfilled which was spoken through Isaiah the prophet, saying, Behold, my servant whom I have chosen; my beloved in whom my soul is well pleased"; and there are other passages in the New Testament which are a repetition, in part of these very words.

But then, as you go on from chapter 42 of Isaiah's prophecies, you find the same word used very frequently in relation to Israel. You have only to glance through chapters 43, 44 and 45 to find the constant reiteration - "O Jacob, my servant," "Thou art my servant." But you find that Israel failed in the service, and it was after Israel's failure that the Lord Jesus as the servant actually came in according to this prophecy,

and He took up that wonderful Divine purpose and vocation which it had been God's will for Israel to fulfil - a testimony to the nations. He, the Lord Jesus, became the great, inclusive, model servant of the Lord, fulfilled the service, and then passed it on to the Church. There is a very real and quite true sense in which Christ and His Body, the Church, now is the servant of the Lord, so, that it can be said - or should be able to be said - of Christ in the Church "Behold, my servant"; that is, as to Divine principle and purpose. The Church is called in to take up that service of the Lord Jesus and carry it out, and it has to do with a purpose of God which is in the nations. In the familiar words of Acts 15:14 - "to take out of (the nations) a people for his name."

Now, we shall take the Church's vocation in representation, the representation being found in three men. These men are, in principle, the dispensation in which we are living, according to God's mind; that is, they are representative of this particular dispensation which is the dispensation of the Church.

Do remember that in this dispensation we have everything in fulness. You may not think so, but we have everything in fulness. In the dispensations before, we had but figures, and every figure or type was in limitation, and failed at a certain point. Great as they were, even Abraham and Moses and the rest were but figures, and did not carry the purpose through to realisation. In this dispensation, we have them all brought to fulness in the Lord Jesus. If they were servants in the house of God, we have the "Son" in this dispensation. Service is brought to its fullest and its best in the Lord Jesus. Everything is carried through from the partial, the imperfect and the failure of past dispensations to completeness in this, embodied in the Lord Jesus and transferred to the Church, and that means that service in this dispensation ought to be on the very highest level. It ought to be something very much better than the service of past dispensations.

Now, these three who represent the dispensation in principle so far as the Church's vocation is concerned are, as you guess, Paul and Peter and John, each of them embodying one of the great principles of service.

Paul: The Sovereignty of God

(a) In Election unto Service

Paul immediately comes right into line with Isa. 42:1 - "Behold, my servant, whom I uphold; my chosen..."; and what a long way back that word 'chosen' goes! Where Christ is concerned, it goes far, far back beyond the bounds of time - the Father's choosing, electing and appointing of His Son, the elect of God, the chosen of God. Paul comes in as the embodiment of that principle in the Church. In him the Church takes up the first principle of service as to Christ - election. "Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles" (Acts 9:15). He is an elect vessel; and while Paul's special election had to do with his particular function, it was only an aspect of the more general principle of election where the Church is concerned. He makes that perfectly clear later in his letters to the Romans and to the Ephesians. "Called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28); "he chose us in him before the foundation of the world" (Eph.1:4). The Church is an elect vessel, foreknown, predestinated before the world was; and not in relation to salvation, for election - predestination - is not unto salvation. Salvation only comes in the line of it. It does not apply primarily to salvation; it applies to purpose - predestination unto Divine purpose; that is, that God must realise His purpose and therefore He must have a vessel for it. He cannot go on without such a vessel and so He secures it from all eternity. Election is unto purpose. I repeat, Paul was the embodiment of the principle that the eternal choice of the Lord Jesus Christ is transferred to the Church in relation to the service of God, so that when Paul brings the Church into full

view, he shows that it is unto a heavenly and eternal vocation. He traces its spiritual history right back to before time began and carries it right on into the ages of the ages, and says that the Church, planted right there in the eternities, stands for a special vocation, to serve God in a particular purpose dear to His heart.

The Apostle breaks that up and applies it to every individual member of Christ, and says in many more words than this - 'If you have been apprehended by Christ, if you know yourself to have been called into the fellowship of God's Son, if you are a member of Christ's Body, you are that on the ground of election, of eternal choice for a purpose. There is bound up with your life a great service, you are a part of a great vocation eternally predestined by God. You are in "Church" service, you are an elect vessel.' It is a tremendous thing to grasp that; it accounts for and explains a very great deal - far more than we are able here even to suggest. But let us note that there is a sovereignty which lies behind our being in our present relationship to the Lord Jesus. "Ye did not choose me, but I chose you, and appointed you" (John 15:16). There is a sovereignty lying behind our being here, and what a lot we owe to that! If it had been left to us, where should we be today? What would have happened to us? Thank God for that sovereignty which, having girded us, follows us up, and when we deviate and wander, girds us again, and we find ourselves back again and again and again. There is a sovereignty girding us. Let us make more of it. It will bring a rest into our hearts, it will take an over-amount of anxiety from us, and a wrong sense of responsibility. Our responsibility begins and ends with complete abandonment to the Lord, and trust in Him, and obedience where He shows it to be necessary. The rest is with Him, and His sovereignty has undertaken to perfect that which concerns us, and to relieve us of the very great deal of anxiety and worry and fret and burden which results from our taking upon ourselves what is God's responsibility. I think that we have not yet fully realized how great our God is. The God that we have made is very much after our own mind. We need that He should be enlarged in our own apprehension.

It was the very last thing that ever Saul of Tarsus thought of, imagined or intended, that he should be a servant of Jesus Christ; and because it was so foreign to his mind, to his will, to his intention, he was always afterwards striking this note - 'I was apprehended of Christ Jesus; it was the Lord Who did it.' It is one of those sure planks under his feet, one of those things which gives him such confidence, such assurance, as he goes on. 'I did not take this thing up, it was not my choice; the Lord did this in His sovereignty.' So Paul becomes the very embodiment of this Church principle, this dispensation principle - that the Church is chosen in relation to a purpose of God, and we are here because of that.

But it is the purpose that governs, it is the service that governs. We are not here elected to be Christians. If we were, we could sit down, fold our arms and do nothing, and say: 'We are Christians, not by our own will, but God made us such, so, all right, we leave it at that.' Remember, election is unto vocation. It is "My servant" which is related to "whom I have chosen." Election is in relation to service.

(b) In Governing the Fulfilment of Vocation

Then, again, this sovereignty governs the fulfilment of the vocation. See this man Paul. He is an elect vessel. He has to bear the Name, "before the Gentiles, and kings, and the people of Israel" (Acts 9:15). Note - he is not going just to preach Christianity; he is going to bear the Name, to carry that Name out to the Gentiles, to the nations. He will meet something, for it is in the nations that the prince of this world has his concern, and any name but his name will be unwelcome. Carry the name of Jesus as Lord and King before kings such as they were in Paul's time, and say to them, 'Jesus Christ is Lord' - and see what you will meet. If it needs any stronger emphasis, take the name of Jesus to the people of Israel. We know what happened when Paul bore the Name in those three realms, and particularly before the people of Israel

with their prejudice and bigotry and hatred of the Name. Paul found himself dogged everywhere he went by that bitter antagonism of the Judaisers, but he finished his course. He said, "I have finished the course" (2 Tim. 4:7). In words used by his Master, he could have said, on exactly the same basis and principle, "I lay down my life... no one taketh it away from me" (John 10:17-18). He ought to have died literally a hundred times, but he did not. He finished his course, he completed his service, he rounded it off, and, although he had to place his head upon the executioner's block and men slew him, it was in reality his offering of himself. The sovereignty which chose carried through to the fulfilment. Oh, take all that you can out of this; it is true. How often we have been tempted to feel that we should never finish our work, that we have come to an end prematurely, that circumstances, difficulties, adversities, sufferings, afflictions, trials, were going to bring an untimely end to our ministry, to our spiritual vocation! But here the word comes that there is a sovereignty which, having chosen, also governs the fulfilment. And it will be true of every servant, every member of Christ, who abides in Him. God saw to it that, having been called, they fulfilled their ministry. No matter what happened from the nations or from kings or from the people of Israel, they fulfilled their ministry. They had a mandate from heaven and no man could cut it short. It is as true of the Church as of Paul or of Jesus Christ. It is a Church matter. It only becomes an individual matter in that related way; but it is true.

(c) In Governing Circumstances

So the sovereignty governs the circumstances. "To them that love God all things work together for good, even to them that are called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28). There is election, and there is the sovereignty of God coming in over and through circumstances to make the circumstances serve the end. The circumstances of a Philippian jail further the Gospel. Circumstances of shipwreck fulfil the purpose of God. Everything that Paul catalogues of adverse circumstances - including treacherous brethren - of it all he says, "I would have you know... that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the progress of the gospel" (Phil. 1:12). It speaks of sovereignty taking hold of circumstances where the purpose is concerned. This is all a part of the election.

That is not all that might be said about Paul, but it brings very strongly into view this principle of this dispensation where the Church is concerned, that election operates in relation to purpose.

Peter: The Formation of the Servant

As to Peter, what does he represent so far as the service of God is concerned in this dispensation? I do not think there is any more fitting word than the word 'formation.' Peter became a great servant of Jesus Christ. He did serve this dispensation tremendously. If there was one man of all the apostolic circle who needed to be made a servant, needed to be formed, it was Peter. What rough material he was! How raw he was! Yes, there was roughness, there was ignorance, instability, unreliability about him. He was not of the learned, the sophisticated; there was nothing of that about Peter; but he became a mighty servant of Jesus Christ, and everybody had to take note that this ignorant and unlearned man had become remarkably instructed and qualified and capable; that this man, who at one time shrank when a little servant maid associated him with Jesus, had now become full of courage. This man, who at one time was anything but like a rock, is now a rock. Oh, how great was the formation in this servant!

We are chosen, elect, in Christ, and all the sovereignty of God lies behind that if only we come into place and into line. It does not mean that there is nothing to be done in us. There is a great deal of formation needed. We know that; probably we are far too obsessed with that side of things. We are very depressed

about our being so unfit, unqualified if not disqualified. But the same sovereignty that elected worked out in formation, saw to it that the ignorant man became an instructed man, the weak man became a strong man, the man so rough and so raw became one of God's gentlemen. I detect that fine trait in Peter as he grows older. "As our beloved brother Paul also, according to the wisdom given to him, wrote unto you" (2 Pet. 3:15). That is the man whom Paul withstood to his face. He might have held a big grudge against Paul, and always felt the sting of that withstanding, but no - "our beloved brother Paul." He is a gentleman, at any rate. He is too big for spitefulness, revenge and pettiness. God has done a big thing.

The only thing to ask now is, are we makeable, adjustable, formable? God will do it; the same sovereignty will make us able ministers.

John: Spirituality Expressed in Love

Finally, John; and what is John as far as principle is concerned? He can be summed up in one word - spirituality. He was a man who had marvellous capacity for seeing through things, never taking things just as ends in themselves, beginning and ending with the things. In his Gospel, it is like that all the way through. John has laid hold of things. Yes, Nathanael under his tree, the marriage in Cana of Galilee, the interview with Nicodemus, the woman of Sychar, the impotent man lying by the pool of Bethesda - all the way along he is taking hold of these incidents and looking right through and giving you a spiritual principle in every one. He is not satisfied simply to narrate happenings; he is saying that those things contain spiritual value and meaning. That is the value of John - his spiritual perception. He is not living on the surface, he is getting the inner meaning of things, and passing on those spiritual values to the Church. Much might be said of John and his spirituality. It is something that is very necessary in the matter of true service.

The Church is not just an earthly institution, a temporal order. The Church is the embodiment of great, heavenly, spiritual truths and values. You have to get through all these externalities and formalities to spiritual principles and meanings, and when you get there you are touching life. And that word 'life' is one of John's great words.

If we were to sum up spirituality in one word, we should say spirituality is pre-eminently expressed in love. That is John. We may have the tongues of men and of angels, we may have the gift of prophecy or any other gift, but if we have not love we are not spiritual people. Love is characteristic of truly spiritual people, and that is the great vocational power. "By love serve one another" (Gal. 5:13). Love is the key to true service. We never get far on the basis of legalism. It is love that builds up. It is love that is the real power of God amongst men, to convict, and convince.

"Behold my servant... my chosen." Yes, behind the service to which we are called is a sovereignty operating, bringing us into the fellowship of God's Son with a great purpose in view. (I have not dwelt upon the purpose in its details; I merely state the fact of a great purpose to which we are called.) That sovereignty is operating in making us meet for the Master's use. God is going on with the work sovereignly. He is forming us; and in that same glorious election He is seeking to make us spiritual people, as His Church is a spiritual thing. That means that it is not simply some framework. It is the embodiment and the transmitting of spiritual, eternal values. They are the things that matter. The spiritual is the real.

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