

Captivity in the Lord (Ephesians 3:1, 4:1)

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon explores the concept of captivity in the Lord, where individuals and the Body of Christ are limited and restricted, but ultimately enriched and transformed by the sovereignty of God.

Topics: "Sovereignty Of God", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes that the Apostle Paul's imprisonment is a profound representation of the Church's journey, illustrating how divine sovereignty often leads to limitation and narrowing for greater spiritual enrichment. Paul, as 'the prisoner in the Lord,' accepted his circumstances as part of God's plan, which ultimately resulted in the creation of the 'Prison Epistles' that enriched the Body of Christ. The sermon highlights that shame and reproach can serve as God's means to deepen the revelation and connection to His testimony, urging believers to embrace their limitations as opportunities for spiritual growth. Sparks encourages the faithful to recognize that true freedom and expansion come through accepting God's sovereign will, even in confinement. The message calls for a deeper understanding of how God uses our struggles for His greater purpose.

Transcript

Read: Ephesians 3:1, 4:1; 2 Timothy 2:9 & 1:8.

There is a very real sense in which the Apostle Paul, in his own person and experience, was an embodiment of the history of the Church in this age. Indeed it would seem to be a principle in the Divine economy that those to whom a revelation has been entrusted should themselves have it so wrought into their very being and history that they are able to say, "I am your sign." To take the one fragment which is now before us, the end of Paul's life saw a process of narrowing down and limitation working itself through by "a great falling away" on the one hand, and a closing up from the general to the specific in the case of which (him who) represented the testimony on the other. This is precisely what is foretold as to the conditions at "the end" and it is not a little significant that it is specially referred to in prophetic utterances to Timothy - in the end letter. So that this phrase "The Prisoner in the Lord" occurring as it does in the last writings, is prophetic in its meaning, and wonderfully explanatory of the end way of the sovereignty of the Lord.

What we have here, then is

I. The instrument of the Lord's testimony in a place of limiting by the will of God.

As we read the record of the incidents which led up to Paul's going to Rome as a prisoner, and especially when we read the words of Agrippa: "This man might have been set at liberty, if he had not appealed unto Caesar" we are not far from feeling that there were mistakes and accidents, but for which there might have been a much more propitious issue, and the ministry of the Apostle at large might have extended. There may have been times of stress when Paul himself was tempted to wonder if he had not been impulsive in that appeal to the Emperor. But as he went forward, and when the Lord spoke to him from time to time giving light, it became clear that, however the thing might have been construed humanly, there was a sovereign government of God in it all, and that he was in prison not as the Emperor's prisoner, but as the prisoner of the Lord.

Perhaps Paul did not accept this all at once. Possibly he did not realise just how it would work out. A more or less quick trial and release may have been put to mind. Some hope of further ministry amongst beloved saints seems to be absent from his correspondence. (There probably was a short period of release from the first imprisonment.) At length, however, he fully accepted what was becoming increasingly clear as the Lord's way, and it grew upon him that this was in the greatest interest of the Body of Christ. Thus we see that when the time comes for the Lord's people to be brought face to face with the ultimate and supreme things of the revelation of Jesus Christ: things beyond personal salvation: things which relate to the mind of God from above being saved: then there has to be a narrowing down, a closing up, a limiting. Much activity that has been, and all quite right for bringing things to a certain position and state, now ceases to carry them further, and something more intensive is needed.

That which represents the testimony in its fullest and closest approximation to the ultimate purpose of God, then, has to be shorn of much that has been good, necessary, and of God in a preparatory way, and must be shut up to what is ultimate. The captivity is not to a conceived truth or a superimposed doctrinal acceptance. It is wrought into the very fiber of the being by experience following revelation, and revelation interpreting experience. It is not the championing of some espoused interpretation: it is that it is the very life of instruments and the instrument is that in its very being. It is not a matter of wanting to be or not wanting to be, but cannot be other, a prisoner, the sovereignty of God has done it.

II. The importance and value of seeing and accepting things into God's light.

This applied both to Paul and to those who were brought into touch with him. For the Apostle the settling in to the sovereign ordering of God in his imprisonment issued in increasing illumination leading to spiritual emancipation.

No one can fail to recognize the tremendous enrichment of ministry as contained in what are called "the Prison Epistles". If he had been restive, piqued, rebellious, or bitter, there would have been no open heaven, and a spirit of controversy with the Lord would have closed and bolted the door to the fuller Divine unveilings and clarifyings.

When all was accepted according to the mind of the Lord, then "the heavenly places" became the eternal expanses of his walking about, and earthly bondage gave place to heavenly freedom. So it must be with every instrument set apart in relation to the higher interests of the Lord's testimony. Then the reading of certain passages in his letters and the record of his imprisonment shows how this applied to others. Take the following:-

"Be not ashamed therefore of the testimony of the Lord, nor of me his prisoner" (2 Tim. 1:8). "And he abode two whole years in his own hired dwelling, and received all that went in unto him. ...teaching the

things concerning the Lord Jesus" (Acts 28:30).

"The Lord grant mercy unto the house of Onesiphorus: for oft he refreshed me, and he was not ashamed of my chain; but, when he was in Rome, he sought me diligently, and found me" (2 Tim. 1:6).

Clearly the effect of these passages is that there had to be a Divine apprehension and not merely a human appraisal of Paul's position. Human levels of mentality would have produced an atmosphere of doubt, suspicion, question, and would have let in elements of false imputation. Regarded on merely natural lines, association with the prisoner would have involved such associates in the suspicion and prejudice. Doubt of the Lord's servant was very widespread, and even many of the Lord's people were not sure of him. But the Lord was shutting up a very vital revelation to this channel, and for such as were really in spiritual need, and such as were to stand in a living relation to fullness of testimony from identification with Christ in death and resurrection, on to throne-union with Him, power over "Principalities, Powers" etc., and on to the ministry "in the ages to come", there had to be a putting aside of all human, personal, and diplomatic considerations and a standing right in there with the instrument where God put it in honorable imprisonment. For possession of which is to come through the vessel, there has to be a coming where the vessel is, without consideration for reputation, influence, or popularity.

In this way the Lord sifts His people and finds out who really is wholly for Himself and His testimony, and who is actuated in any measure by other considerations and interests. The instrument in this position of popular rejection is thus the Lord's means of searching, and it will thus meet their need.

The other truth remains here, then, is that

III. Shame, reproach and limitation are often God's ways of enriching the whole Body of Christ.

This has always been so. The measure of approximation to the fullness of the revelation has always been accompanied by a relative cost. Every instrument of the testimony has been laid under suspicion and reproach in a measure commensurate with the degree of value to the Lord, and this has meant that, humanly, they were limited to that extent. Many have withdrawn, fallen away, held aloof, doubted, feared, and questioned. But as Paul could say "my tribulations for you, which are your glory" (Eph. 3:13), or "The prisoner of Christ Jesus in behalf of you Gentiles" (Eph. 3:1), so the measure of limitation in the Lord is the measure of enrichment in His people. The fuller the revelation, the fewer those who apprehend, or the greater the number of those who stand aloof. Revelation only comes through suffering and limitation, and to have it experimentally means sharing the cost in some way. But this is God's way of securing for Himself a spiritual seed plot.

A seed plot is an intensive thing. There things are narrowed down to very limited dimensions. It is not a great extensive show that is immediately in view, but things are all considered firstly in the light of seed. The real meaning of things is not always recognized there, but you can travel the world over and find a great many gardens which are the expression of that intensive and restricted seed plot. If ever there was such a seed plot it was Paul's prison in Rome.

All this may apply to individual lives in relation to the Lord's testimony. There may often be a chafing against limitation, confinement, and a restless hankering after what we would call something wider or less restricted. If the Lord has willed us to the place where we are, our acceptance of it in faith may prove that it becomes a far bigger thing than any human reckoning can judge. I wonder if Paul had any idea that his prison meant his continuous expansion of value to the Lord Jesus through nineteen hundred years? What

applies to individuals also applies to corporate bodies, assemblies, or companies of the Lord's people scattered in the earth but one in their fellowship in relation to the Lord's full testimony. May the Lord be graciously pleased to cause the merely human aspect of prison walls to fall away, and give the realization that, far from being limited by men and circumstances, it is imprisonment in the Lord, and this means that all ages and all realms are entered through that prison.

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