

Divine Life: Overcoming Death in Its Fullness

by T. Austin-Sparks

T. Austin-Sparks' sermon explores how Jesus overcomes various forms of death through His divine life, culminating in the resurrection of Lazarus as a sign of spiritual fullness and hope.

Scripture: John 11:25

Topics: "Resurrection", "Overcoming Death"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the profound significance of Jesus' return to Judaea and the raising of Lazarus as the culmination of His ministry, showcasing His mastery over death in all its forms. He illustrates how Jesus confronted various aspects of death--disappointment, bondage, limitation, and spiritual blindness--through His divine life, ultimately demonstrating that He is the Resurrection and the Life. The sermon highlights that Jesus' calm demeanor in the face of death teaches us about the nature of hope and the power of God in seemingly hopeless situations. Sparks encourages believers to recognize their union with Christ in His death, which signifies the end of human ability and the beginning of divine intervention. The message calls for a deeper understanding of spiritual life and the transformative power of Christ's resurrection in the lives of believers.

Transcript

Reading: John 10:40-11:57.

You will recognize that with this story, or incident, we are at the last stage in the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus. He had left Judaea because the Jewish rulers were planning to kill Him, but now He boldly returned to that district, and the result of this last sign will be that they definitely take counsel to kill Him. The disciples knew quite well that for Him to return to Judaea meant death: "The disciples say unto him, Teacher, the Jews were but now seeking to stone thee; and goest thou thither again?" Jesus knew, and the disciples knew quite well, that Judaea meant death.

We have been seeing that Jesus had been meeting the meaning of death in many forms, and had overcome every form of it with life.

Firstly, at the marriage in Cana of Galilee, where the wine faded, He met that aspect of death which is disappointment and failure - and death always means that. He overcame it with life.

Then, later, He was back in Cana again and the nobleman of Capernaum met Him because his little child was sick unto death. Jesus just spoke the word where He was, and at that very moment, away in Capernaum, the child was healed. Death always speaks of time - it is a time matter. The time we die is the end of our time on this earth. But in one moment Jesus spoke and many miles away the child was healed. It would have taken Jesus many hours to have gone from Cana to Capernaum. It took the nobleman from one o'clock in the afternoon until the sun went down, and then he had to start again the next morning. But Jesus spoke the word and in that moment all time was dismissed. The time factor in death was overcome in His life.

Then we had Him at the Pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem with the poor man bound to his bed for thirty-eight years. His bed had tied him to the earth all his life and, as we saw, he was a picture of Israel under the bondage of the law. And the Lord Jesus lifted that man out of his whole bondage in a moment with His life. Death is bondage. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews speaks of those who "through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (Hebrews 2:15). Death in the form of bondage to the law was overcome by the life of Christ.

Then we went back to Galilee with Him and saw Him feeding the five thousand, and those few little loaves and fishes were multiplied till everybody was filled, and there was much left over. Death always means limitation - it puts a limit to everything. But Jesus, by life, overcame all limitation there in Galilee. We could say that there was no end to this life that He gave in that bread. If there had been twenty thousand people, or fifty thousand, it would have been just the same. Death is limitation, and that is more true spiritually even than physically. Spiritual death is a great limitation, but the life which Jesus gives removes all limitation.

We went on to see Him walking on the sea, and we saw His ascendancy over natural laws. Now the most natural law is death. It is certainly something very unnatural if you never die! But on the lake in that storm Jesus triumphed over all natural laws. Where the disciples were threatened with death by the power of nature Jesus by life set aside the natural forces.

And then we came to the sixth sign, the giving of sight to the man born blind. Death is always blindness - and that is more true spiritually even than physically. Spiritual death is spiritual blindness, and in this matter we are all born dead, because we are spiritually blind from birth. But Jesus gave sight to the man born blind, and the sign was that the life that is in Jesus sets aside the blindness of spiritual death.

So we have seen Jesus meeting the meaning of death in all these different forms. Every one of these incidents sets forth as a sign, or as a type, some form of death, and Jesus, by the power of His divine life, the life that was in Him, met all these forms of death. And He changed death into life with His life.

Now we come to the seventh sign, and in this one all those six are brought together. This is the way in which to read the story of the raising of Lazarus. It is all-inclusive - all the forms of death are gathered together and dealt with fully and finally by Jesus Christ. This is why the Holy Spirit of Wisdom led John to conclude all his signs with this one. True to spiritual principle, seven includes all the others, for, if you know anything about Bible numbers, you know that seven is the number of spiritual fullness. You reach spiritual finality when you come to seven. We have only to turn to the last book of the Bible, for that is the book of the final things. Everything there is coming to finality and to fullness. And the number which is most prominent in that book is number seven. There are the seven churches, the seven lampstands, the seven spirits of God, the seven last plagues, the seven last trumpets - and so you go on through the book

with number seven, because in it everything is brought to fullness and finality. All the Bible is gathered into the last book. It begins with the book of Genesis - "the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God" (Revelation 2:7) - the river of life flowing out.

So number seven is the number of spiritual fullness. And, true to that principle, the Holy Spirit led John to put this sign of the raising of Lazarus right at the end, because in this sign we have death in its fullness overcome by Jesus Christ, the Resurrection and the Life. Jesus was moving in an environment of death in its fullness. Everybody knew that His coming back into the vicinity of Jerusalem meant death for Him. He knew it; the disciples knew it; other people knew it; and the rulers were waiting for Him to come back to put it into effect. The whole atmosphere was full of death. And here, just a little way out of Jerusalem, was Lazarus dying and dead.

But look at Jesus! His attitude toward the death of Lazarus signified His own attitude toward death. He was told that Lazarus was dying; and then He knew in His spirit that Lazarus was dead. He also knew in His spirit that He, too, would be dead before long. How did He face this situation? Look at the quiet way in which He met it all. There was no panic, no sense of emergency, no fear, no despair and no hurry. He was completely master of the situation, and as He was master of the situation with Lazarus, so He was master of His own death. There is no suggestion here in the case of Lazarus that death was a victory, nor that death was the master. Jesus was not worried about it for one moment. He could just move serenely in the midst of it and toward it.

That is very impressive. You see what it means? Let us just go over it again. Jesus knew that in a few days the Council in Jerusalem would have decided to destroy Him there and then, and He knew that coming back near Jerusalem meant that for Him, but He just came back quietly, without any fear. He was completely master of the whole situation - and that is in the sign of Lazarus.

Oh, everybody was trying to make Him hurry up! They were looking upon this situation as a terrible tragedy, as something terribly serious, and they could not understand why Jesus was not taking it more seriously. He was such a master of the situation that it was almost as though it was nothing to Him.

But we have said that there are one or two things that we must notice. While that is all true where Jesus was concerned, He must let people know that death is death, and death means that everything is put beyond any kind of human ability. When we are dead that is the end of all our ability to do anything. Jesus had to let it be known that death really is death, and means that the situation is beyond man's resource to do anything. It is altogether beyond natural power and natural hope. Jesus took very great care to see that that was how things were and that people knew it. That is why He stayed two days where He was, and then took another two days before He got near the place at all. He let this whole situation go beyond human hope, and He did that quite deliberately because He was teaching the disciples a spiritual lesson: that death is death and only God Almighty can do anything when it is like that. No one but the Lord can do anything. Now, while this was a sign in the case of Lazarus physically, behind the sign there is a great spiritual meaning.

Presently Jesus will be dead, and when that happens only God Almighty can do anything about it. There is no more future unless He comes into the situation. No natural power can do anything at all.

That, dear friends, is what union with Christ in His death means. You know from Romans 6 that we have been "united with him in the likeness of his death" (verse 5), and Paul said elsewhere: "I have been crucified with Christ" (Galatians 2:20). What does it mean to be united with Christ in His death? It means to

be put into the position where there is no hope whatsoever for anything unless the Lord does it. When Paul said: "I have been crucified with Christ" he added: "No longer I, but Christ". No longer 'I'! What a big 'I' that was with Saul of Tarsus! He was just one big 'I' - 'I' in natural strength. See him in his persecuting of the church! He put forth all his mighty strength. And we all know about the great 'I' of his wisdom. Saul of Tarsus was a man of considerable natural wisdom and he had much natural knowledge. He was a man of mighty zeal and enthusiasm - a very big 'I'. Now that very big 'I' says "I have been crucified and it is no longer I". It is no longer natural strength, natural wisdom and understanding, nor natural zeal and enthusiasm, and whatever more there was of 'I'. It is no longer 'I' - 'I have been crucified with Christ, and there is nothing more possible unless it is the Lord'.

Oh, the Church has not learnt this lesson yet! We can read the Letters to the Romans and to the Galatians, but it is as it was with Israel. It is said that they read the Scriptures every Sabbath, but they were perfectly blind to what they were reading. Look at the tremendous lot of 'I' there is in Christianity, although we have Romans 6 and Galatians 2:20 in our hands!

We were saying that when Jesus died that was the end of all natural hope; the only hope was that God came in and raised Him from the dead. That is the sign of the raising of Lazarus.

First of all, Jesus had to make everybody know that death is death, and the end of all hope so far as man is concerned. No one could do anything about it. These poor sisters struggled with the situation and tried to find some hope, but they were defeated in every attempt, and they had to accept the situation. Lazarus was dead, and there was no doubt about it. He had died four days before. That is the first thing that Jesus had to teach.

But I hope that you are thinking in spiritual terms and not just natural. Spiritual death is real spiritual death, and to be spiritually dead means that there is no natural hope whatsoever. When Jesus had established that fact, then He went over to the other side and showed that He, and He alone, was the Resurrection and the Life. The situation was not hopeless when He was on the scene. The life that was in Him was superior to the whole situation - and that is true spiritually as it is naturally.

Now we have to run over the six signs again, because we have said that they are all gathered up into number seven.

The marriage at Cana in Galilee: We said that the wine that Jesus made had about it a new and different quality from the old wine, an altogether better quality. The master of the feast said: "Thou hast kept the good wine until now" (John 2:10). And the life that Jesus gives has about it a quality that is altogether different. Of course, this does not appear on the surface in the sign of Lazarus, but it does not want much imagination. If Lazarus had been your beloved brother and you had lost him in death, and for so long as to mean that there was no hope whatever (in that country four days of death was a very utter thing: they said "Lord, by this time he stinketh, for he hath been dead four days"), and then he had been raised from the dead and given back to you, would you not find something more in having him in resurrection than you had before? Remember Mary Magdalene. She lost her Master, and then in the garden she found Him again. When He said to her 'Mary', she turned and said 'Rabboni' - 'My great Master'. She used to call Him 'Rabbi', that is, just 'Master', but now she said 'Rabboni', and tried to take Him by the feet. She said: 'I lost You once, but I am never going to lose You again. You are more dear to me today than ever before.' And I believe that is how it was at Bethany. There was a new quality in resurrection, an altogether different kind of life, more precious than ever before. So Lazarus took up sign number one, the marriage in Cana.

And then this seventh sign took up this matter of the nobleman's son being healed. We pointed out that in this sign all time and all distance were dismissed by the word of Jesus. All the miles and all the hours were simply dismissed in a moment of time. Now look at this story of Lazarus. Oh, what an important thing time was with these people! Why does He not hurry and come? Why does He stay away for so long? And now the brother has been dead for four days. What a factor time was! And what a factor distance was! And the best that a sister can say is: "I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day" - and only the Lord knows when that will be! Jesus came on the scene and with a word all time and all distance were dismissed. The life that is in Christ destroys time - it is eternal life. So Lazarus took up the second sign.

And then, what about the poor man at the Pool of Bethesda? He was bound to the earth by his bed and his infirmity for thirty-eight years. That was a living death - bound by the law. And Jesus, by life, released that man. Lazarus took that up: "Lazarus, come forth" - and the grave had no power to hold him. 'Loose him and let him go.' Here is the liberating power of the life which Jesus gives. So the man at the Pool of Bethesda is included in the sign of Lazarus.

Is it necessary to go on with the rest? We saw in the feeding of the five thousand how limitless is the life which Jesus gives. It can just go on, and on, and on. And how long will it go on? As long as Jesus lives! Just that long and no longer - but what do you believe about that? 'He ever liveth' (Hebrews 7:25)... "I am... the Living one; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive unto the ages of the ages" (Revelation 1:18 - R.V. margin). And the life that Jesus gives will go on just as long as Jesus does. "I am the resurrection, and the life". And that is taken up in this sign of Lazarus.

As to the walking on the sea: we saw in Him the power which transcends all natural forces. Well, that is so obvious in Lazarus! What were the natural laws in his case? Well, death, corruption and all that that means. That is the natural law, and Jesus put His feet on top of that. He walked on those waters; He had that under Him, and He brought Lazarus up in spite of all natural laws.

And as to the man who was born blind: we saw that he was a man who was born with a great handicap, and Jesus took hold of that very handicap and made it the instrument of His glory. Here Lazarus has a handicap. You may take it that the sisters did everything they could to stop Lazarus from dying. They evidently were people who had money, and we can be quite sure that they had the best medical advice. They did everything that Lazarus should get well, but he was born with the handicap that he must die some time or other, and now his handicap was at work. And, like the man who was born without sight, it was a hopeless situation naturally. What did Jesus say about it? "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified thereby." Although death may come in, it has not the last word. The last word is with Jesus, and so He turned the handicap into His own glory.

We have to note, as we close, that all this became true in the experience of the disciples. You must go over the seven signs again and see them in a spiritual way in the after life of the disciples. This is what Jesus came to bring us in His own person, for He said: "I am the resurrection, and the life".

Now, dear friends, if we are disciples, and every Christian ought to be, these are the things that we ought to be learning in our own spiritual experience. You go away and sit down quietly with these seven things, and you will see every one of them in the Epistles of the New Testament which were written after Jesus had gone to heaven. The New Testament is full of these things. We are told that we are to have 'the eyes of our hearts enlightened', that 'we can know Him and the power of His resurrection', and that we can be 'set free from the bondage of the law'.

All these are the things which make up the true Christian life. All we have to ask ourselves is: 'Am I learning this in the School of Christ? What do I know about this in my spiritual experience?' I am happy to think that many of you know quite a lot about it. We are not just doing Bible Study or giving addresses on subjects in the Bible. We are speaking of spiritual experience. We can say with John: "That which we have seen with our eyes... and our hands handled, concerning the Word of Life" (1 John 1:1).

Now this is what we all have to know, for it is the very essence of the life in Christ.

We must leave it there, but we must, every one, ask the Lord to teach us what this means and to bring us into the reality of this great life.

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