

Faith in Relation to Life

by T. Austin-Sparks

Faith is essential for enlargement, establishment, and life, and the evidence of God is life.

Scripture: Romans 4:16

Topics: "Divine Life", "Faith"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the profound relationship between faith and life, illustrating how faith leads to spiritual enlargement, establishment, and ultimately, a deeper experience of life in Christ. He explains that true enlargement and stability in our spiritual journey come through the testing of faith, which deepens our roots in Christ and allows us to experience the fullness of God's life. Sparks highlights that the essence of life is not merely existence but a vibrant, divine life that is fresh, productive, inexhaustible, and incorruptible, contrasting it with the false life that leads to dissatisfaction. He concludes by affirming that faith is the key to accessing this divine life, especially during trials, which serve to strengthen and deepen our faith.

Transcript

Reading: Romans 4:16-25.

We are being led to see the relationship of faith to three things.

Firstly, faith in relationship to enlargement. We have taken note that God's thought revealed for His people is enlargement unto His own fulness. "All the fulness of God" is the word which indicates God's thought concerning His people. But every fresh movement toward enlargement, or every stage in enlargement, comes about by a fresh challenge to faith--faith being tested in a new way as not hitherto - and by faith's triumph there is further enlargement. The Scriptures show, from beginning to end, that there is no enlargement, no increase of God, in any other way.

Secondly, we see faith in relationship to establishment. We have seen the thought of God to have things in a state of stability, endurance, steadfastness, trustworthiness; something substantial, something deeply rooted and grounded and immovable. God works along that line, seeking to eliminate all those elements in us which are weak, unreliable, unable to carry a weight and take responsibility; to bring us to the place where we are established in Christ. But every bit of this work of confirming, establishing, rooting and grounding is connected with some further testing or proving of faith. Every fresh storm sends our roots deeper down, to take a firmer hold. It is along the line of faith's proving that we become established.

Where there is no testing or trying, no adversity, we are weak and unreliable. So we see that, right through the Scriptures, God is moving towards having things settled and fixed, after His own nature: eternal, abiding, enduring for ever. The whole Bible shows that this is brought about by faith.

In the third place, we see faith in relation to life. That is to be our occupation at this present time, with just a closing word on faith itself.

Faith In Relation To Life

I need hardly take you through the Scriptures to see how these two things go together. Much will come to mind as we proceed. I just remind you of the familiar fact that this matter of life bounds the whole Scripture. The Bible opens with the tree of life, and it closes with the tree of life, and that is the great issue from beginning to end. From one angle, as we were saying earlier, the Bible is all about this issue of life as over against death. We find, therefore, as in the case of the other two things - enlargement and establishment - that God has left us in no doubt whatever as to His mind on the matter. He has made it perfectly clear that His thought is life, and life in fulness. So much so that the Lord Jesus, in His coming into this world, reaching with one hand right back to the beginning, and with the other hand right on to the ages of the ages yet to be, declares that He is in that position on one ground and with one purpose: "I am come that they may have life, and may have it abundantly" (John 10:10).

Enlargement Depends Upon Life

Now these two things of which we have spoken - enlargement and establishment - are inseparably bound up with this matter of life.

All God's enlargements are by life. We see a parable of this in the work of creation. At the very beginning we find God filling the void, the waste, the emptiness which was the primal state of this world - we find God filling it in every realm in terms of life. His increasing fulness was along the line of life. That is a parable of God's way. Increase and fulness in the Christian life, in the people of God, is always in terms of life. When God adds, it is always additional life. All God's work has the issue that there is more life present than ever there was before. And so progressively, by crises and stages, God is moving with His people - where they will let Him, where they will not waver through unbelief - in the direction of His ultimate fulness on the basis of constantly increasing life.

Establishment Depends Upon Life

The same is true in relation to establishment - the work of confirming, making things stable, solid, deep. This again is always in relation to life: confirming in life, making strong in life. The essential element in this life is its eternity. An increase of life is always an indication of something deeper having been done in the heart, the emergence from some state of uncertainty, some difficulty, some dark experience, in a crisis, through the victory of faith. The emergence just adds more life - that is all. It is like that every time: we find that we are experiencing and enjoying more life. Life is the basis of our becoming more settled.

There are many people who think that there are other things which lead to consolidation and establishment, to certainty and assurance. But it is not that way at all. You do not get established by more teaching, or by additional information, even about Divine things. You do not even become spiritually established by knowing your Bible better. That is not to say that you should not seek to know it better, but the real establishment is that which comes through life known in ourselves. "And the witness is this, that

God gave unto us eternal life" (1 John 5:11). The testimony is not a form of teaching, an interpretation of truth, a system of doctrine, or a way of doing things. "And the witness is this, that God gave unto us eternal life", and to be established means to be knowing this life in constant increase.

The 'Evidence Of God' Is Life

We will now take a look at what we will call some of the 'evidences of God'. Let us say at once that the inclusive evidence of God is just life. The evidence of God - the proof, the testimony to God, and the testimony to what is of God--if life. Let us go back to that original criterion in the symbolism of the beginning: the tree of life. It is perfectly clear that that tree of life, and what it represented and symbolized, held the whole issue of whether God was going to continue with man or not, whether man was going to continue with God or not, whether their relationship was going to remain intact. The 'evidence' of God was centered there.

Now that tree evidently represented another and different life from what man already possessed. God had brought in the living things. The waters swarmed with living creatures; the air swarmed with the living fowl; the earth was full of living creatures and living vegetation. Then man had been created, into his nostrils there had been breathed the "breath of life" (Gen. 2:7), and he had become an animate being. He had what we all have by nature - this natural life. It was after the imparting of that kind of life, and man becoming a living soul, that God pointed to the tree of life, and made that the issue of life and death. It was not the life that was in man that was the issue of life and death, because man did not forfeit that life which was in him when he disobeyed. The tree evidently represented and symbolized another life than that which God had already breathed into him - a different life altogether.

Divine Life Forfeited

Death, therefore, came to mean two things. In the first place, it came to mean a change in man as he was. Although he would continue as an animate being over a tenure of years, a change took place in him. We will not stay to analyze that change, but by disobedience he became different even in his own natural being. Secondly, he forfeited his right to this other and extra and really true life, as represented by the tree. He never inherited that, he never possessed that. It throws a little light upon John's words about the Lord Jesus, that "to as many as received Him, to them gave He the right to become children of God, even to them that believe on His name" (John 1:12). You see the whole question of faith coming in relation to the right. It is the right, in other words, to this other, Divine, life, which is through being begotten of God. The right to that life was forfeited by Adam through disobedience, or unfaith. The right to that life is restored through faith in the Lord Jesus.

Now Satan said, 'Hath God said, Thou shalt surely die? Thou shalt not surely die!' What a categorical statement! Now note: Adam, apart from his known rupture in fellowship with God through his disobedience because of unbelief, probably was not conscious of what had happened. True, a frown and a shadow came over the face of God; there was no longer the light and the clearness of fellowship; but man went on living. He did not there and then fall dead and perish. He went on living quite a long time, went on growing, developing, enlarging. When you see the tremendous enlargement after its kind that came from that man - his children, family, tribe, race - it looks very much as though the Devil was right. 'Thou shalt not surely die'. God was wrong, the Devil was right.

The Delusion Of A False Life

But what has happened? There has entered into man a deep and terrible delusion - the illusion of a false life, in which there is a lie right at the very core. And that has surely worked itself out, and is still working itself out. There is increase of days, unto many years, it may be; there is development and enlargement, of its kind, in the matter of this world; but right at the core of it all there is bitterness and disappointment. At last, at most, emptiness, disillusionment. What has it all been for? What is it all about?

And the most dissatisfied people are always those who have the most. That is true, is it not? The people who have the most and have not the Lord are the most dissatisfied people in this world. The evidences of it are patent. As I was saying on a previous occasion, a year or two ago I was in a part of the world where the last whim and fancy is satiated to the full. Everything that the soul of man could crave or ask for seems to be available. In Southern California, you see acres and acres and miles and miles of the most wonderful fruit. I picked sackfuls of the most beautiful grapefruit and oranges that you ever saw. But my friend, on whose fruit-farm I was staying, said, 'Do you know, it is so prodigal that, in order to keep any market at all for it, tons and tons of this beautiful fruit are put into a ditch, and acid is poured over it, so that no one will get hold of it to try to make a business out of it.' Poor people who might make a little out of this surplus are deprived of it in order to keep some sort of market.

And it is like that, not only in natural products, but in pleasure. The word 'Hollywood' has come to connote the very ultimate in the gratification of human desire. You can see it all there is display. But oh! The feverish, the restless, the uncertainty, the anxiety! The biggest hospital in the world is there in Los Angeles, and four thousand cases are treated every day, in a country like that where every possible aid to health is available. What is it all about? It is the strain of coping with life. Out in a very beautiful suburb, I saw, as I went along, house after house up for sale, or to let; and I asked my friend, 'What is the meaning of this?'; 'Oh, everybody within miles of this city is living as if they were on the edge of a volcano, over this atomic bomb business. They are all moving out, as far out as they can get, because they think that any day the atomic bomb may be dropped on Los Angeles.' With everything conceivable to fill life, people are living in strain and tension and fear. I have not exaggerated the picture, because I could not.

I have cited this as an illustration of the truth that the more men have, the more dissatisfied they are. The more you give to this life, the more it will take - and can take - and the more it will demand, and the more unsatisfied it is. It wears out in no time. The whole thing fails to last - it just does not last; and that is the life that the Devil has given in place of this other life. You and I may have very little in this world - nothing at all comparable to a Californian set-up - and yet have the Lord Jesus in our hearts and be perfectly satisfied. The difference is a very practical thing. The Devil said, "Thou shalt not surely die", and man just swallowed it: he thought that God was wrong, and the Devil was right; and this is what it has led to - a false life, hollow at the core, never, never answering to man's real need; a mockery in the end, the fruit looking beautiful but falling from the trees before it is ripe.

But in that other life, represented by the tree of life, it is all the other way. This life has nothing to do with things at all: it has to do with a Person. This life does not wear out: it wears infinitely - it survives. It is not, like the other, kept going by artificial respiration and stimulants - and how artificial they are! This life is maintained from a living source.

That is very searching. It is very, very important to be quite sure that this thing has taken place with every new convert: that there is no illusion or delusion about this, but that they have really become, definitely and surely, the recipients of this other life - this life that will not require a constant succession of stimulants from without, but which, when all outward things cease, will still go on. That is going to be the test.

Now this illusion can get into religion, and that is the place where the Devil likes to have it more than anywhere else. The Lord had something to say on that very matter to the church at Sardis: "Thou hast a name" - a reputation - "That thou livest, and thou art dead" (Rev. 3:1). A reputation for life - and yet dead. The eyes of flame see through the false situation - the false reputation, the false name. It would not be difficult to imagine or portray what a church like that would be. We need not stay with it. There are many things that have a semblance of life, that look like life - what people call life - but they are not life. They require external 'stimulants' to be applied all the time to keep the thing going. What the Lord calls life is another thing altogether.

Marks Of Divine Life

(a) Freshness

One of the thoughts associated with this Divine life is newness, or freshness. "That... we... might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4). That word 'new' in our English versions has two Greek words behind it. One means something that never was before; the other carries the thought of that which is young and fresh. This Divine life is, of course, something that no one has ever possessed before, outside of Christ, but its mark, its characteristic, is its freshness - its freedom from the 'earth touch'. This earth is an accursed earth; it is in death, it is under judgment, and all that belongs to it is under judgment: if this earth touches anything, it touches it with death. This life of which we are speaking is completely free from the earth touch, and free from the touch of man as he is by nature. It is fresh, therefore, and for its freshness it demands that it shall be kept free from this earth and kept free from man's touch.

That has been the issue all the way along. The life of God comes in, and is regnant and wonderfully fresh and beautiful; and then what? Man must needs take hold of it in some way, put it into his mould, run it according to his ideas, organize it and set up machinery for it, and it is not long before the freshness has gone. It is touched with something that takes the bloom off it; in the course of time it has become old; and - perhaps I may be permitted to say this, as one who is no longer young! - God has no interest in anything that is old. God is only interested in that life in us which is of Himself, and His interest is to keep it fresh. "Even to old age... and even to hoar hairs", there is still freshness if the life of God is the principle upon which we are living.

Yes, but we must keep our hands off, and we must keep the earth touch away. Oh, man's terrible habit of wanting to take hold of, and run, the life of God. It has killed more works of God than anything else, brought an end to wonderful movements of the Spirit. Man has taken hold, brought things into his framework, under the control and direction of his committee. Very well; the Lord withdraws, and the freshness of His life is no longer found. Freshness, newness, is the mark of God's life.

The Church is His new creation. The Church is His new cruse, to refer to Elisha and the falling fruit of the trees of Jericho because of the lack of this vital element in the water. "Bring me a new cruse", he said, "and put salt therein" (2 Kings 2:20). The waters were healed. And Pentecost is the counterpart of that. The Church is the new cruse with the life in it, to counteract all the death in this world: there is newness of life, and newness of vessel. The Lord Jesus put His finger upon this very principle when He said: "No man" (He might have added, 'much less God') "putteth new wine into old wine-skins" (Mark 2:22). It is folly. 'If you do that, you will lose everything', He said. "No man seweth a piece of undressed cloth on an old garment" (vs. 21); neither does God do that kind of thing. He must have everything new and fresh. We are citizens of the new Jerusalem (Rev. 3:12; 21:2); and so we could go on. If you look up the words 'new'

and 'newness', you will be surprised how much they cover in the New Testament. Everything is new where this life is.

(b) Productivity

The second feature of this life is its productiveness, or productivity. That is God's method of increase. There is all the difference between putting on, adding to, accretion, from the outside, and increase from the inside. That is God's principle, the organic principle of increase and multiplication by life from within, and it really does happen that way. Life produces life, and life produces organisms after its own kind: the seed has the life in itself to reproduce, to multiply a hundredfold.

That is a testimony, but it is also a test and a challenge. If there is no increase, then there is something wrong in the matter of the life. If you and I are not bearing fruit, if we are not really in the way of increase, then we need to look to this matter of our life. For it is inevitable, it is spontaneous. If there is to be productivity, there must be life: and if there is life, then there is reproduction - unless, of course, we thwart the life or get across the life. If somehow or other we block up the wells, then our fruitfulness ceases.

(c) Inexhaustibility

Further, this life is characterized by its inexhaustibility. There is no end to it, no exhausting it; it just goes on. As we have already said, it does not get old. We may get old, but that life in us does not get old at all. It goes right on; it is inexhaustible.

(d) Incorruptibility

And then, because it is God's life, it is incorruptible. Life is symbolized by salt in the Bible. The symbolism of the new cruse and the salt is just that of the vessel of God with the life of God in it. The presence of that life is the counter to the presence of corruption, wherever it is.

This, of course, is quite clearly seen in the first chapters of the Book of the Revelation, containing the challenge and message to the churches. It was clearly a time of spiritual decay: but we would go further, and say 'of spiritual corruption'. Strong language, but justifiable. "Thou sufferest the woman Jezebel" (2:20); "Thou hast... some that hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel" (2:14). Here is corruption, and the challenge to that state of corruption in the first place is indicated by the announcement of the Lord Himself. "I am... the Living one; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore" (1:17-18). It is as though He were saying, 'I am measuring you by the standard of this incorruptible life, on the principle of this incorruptible, deathless, death-conquering life: I am challenging you in your corruption.' The import of the message is this: 'These conditions of corruption are due to something having arrested the life. If you had the life vibrant and regnant and triumphant, there would be none of these conditions at all.'

The issue, then, for the overcoming, the setting aside, of all corruption, is that of life. The corrective for false teaching - for heterodoxy - is not orthodoxy. Let us say, changing the words: the corrective for error is life. That is what the Scriptures show. It was so with the seven churches. John, who wrote the Revelation, at about the same time also wrote his letters, and these likewise deal with falsehood, error, decline, decay, corruption, Antichrist, and all the rest - a bad state coming amongst believers; and John's great word in his letters and in the Revelation, as well as in his Gospel, is life. That emerges from the most elementary study of his writings.

John begins his Gospel: "In Him was life; and the life was the light of men" (1:4), and that is the keynote to the Gospel all through. His letters are on that note all the time. "The witness (testimony) is this, that God gave unto us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He that hath the Son hath the life; He that hath not the Son of God hath not the life" (1 John 5:11-12). At the beginning of the Revelation you find: "I am... the Living one" (1:17-18); you pass on to the "four living ones" (4:6), and their testimony and influence; and you close the Revelation with the "tree of life" and the "river of water of life" (22:1-2). It is all about life. But that is all presented in a day of corruption. The answer to corruption is not argument, but Divine life.

(e) Intelligence: Life Recognizes Life

This life is something which is only appreciated and understood by those who have it. Those who do not possess it can see its effect or its fruit, but they do not understand it at all. They may say, 'Well, those people have got something that I do not know anything about: I do not understand it at all, I do not know what it is. They seem to be happy about it, but I am certainly a stranger to all that.' Or it may not affect them at all. They may come in where there is abundant life and go away unaffected. They just do not understand it or appreciate it. But those of us who have this life both appreciate and understand it. We cannot explain it to anyone else, any more than we can explain what natural life is. No one can explain what life is. But if we are spiritually alive, really spiritually alive, and we go in amongst other children of God, we sense something. It may be we feel death, a lack of life, something here that is not alive; there is some check to life here. On the other hand, we may sense the presence of life. Now, that capacity to appreciate and to understand is the guide of the Lord's people. It is a very intelligent faculty - it is, indeed, our 'intelligence', in more senses than one. Why do we say, 'Something is wrong here', because we do not sense the life; there is something that is not alive. We are 'alive' to the fact that something is wrong!

I believe that is exactly what Paul knew when he found those disciples at Ephesus. They were having some wonderful Bible teaching from Apollos, who was a man mighty in the Scriptures; but Paul had to say when he came down to them: 'You have a lot of Bible teaching here, and you are professing disciples of the Lord - but what is the matter with you? There is something amiss here. Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?' (Acts 19:2). The Holy Spirit in Paul, as the Spirit of life, registered here the absence of life: there was no witness of life, even with all the Bible teaching and the profession. The Spirit enabled Paul to put his finger upon the situation, and to clear it up.

Life Through Faith

Now, all the Lord's progress with us, as we have said, the Lord's enlarging, the Lord's establishing, is along this line of life. But this life is all governed by faith. We are thinking much of Abraham, and we have something to say about him yet. With him, every fresh movement toward enlargement and consolidation and increase of life was by way of fresh testing of faith. Everything rests upon this matter of tried and proved faith.

If you and I pass, then, into a time when our faith is being sorely tried, really being put through it, let us ask the Lord to help us to adjust ourselves to this: for this is not unto death, but unto life. This is not permitted by the Lord in order to bring an end in death. This is meant by Him to bring us into larger life yet. If only we could rest in that assurance, it would rob the dark times and the difficult times of their deathliness, and make them the very ground upon which we might come into newness of life through fresh victories of faith. Faith is the way to life through trial, testing, suffering, adversity.

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