

# Great Truths and Their Laws

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of understanding the laws that govern great truths, and how taking up truth without its laws can lead to an unbalanced state.*

**Scripture:** John 3:3-8, Romans 14:17, 1 Corinthians 2:14, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Galatians 5:22-23, Ephesians 2:8-9, 1 Peter 1:23

**Topics:** "New Birth", "Divine Truths"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the significance of understanding divine truths and their governing laws, asserting that every truth is accessed through obedience to these laws. He explains that God maintains these laws, and entering into truth without them can lead to imbalance and misunderstanding. Sparks highlights the necessity of being born from above to enter the Kingdom of God, illustrating that true spiritual life is characterized by an 'Otherness' that distinguishes the divine nature within believers. He stresses that this new birth is not merely a revival but an advent of God in the believer's life, enabling them to experience and understand the Kingdom of God.

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## Transcript

READ: John 3:1-9.

In resuming our meditation in this Gospel, the matter which comes immediately before us for our consideration is GREAT TRUTHS AND THEIR LAWS.

Every Divine Truth Is Governed by a Law

It is very important that we should always bear in mind that every Divine truth has its related laws, and is entered into only by way of obedience to those laws. I would have you pause, and give due consideration to the tremendous importance of that fact.

Three Things About These Laws

1. God Maintains Them

There are three things to be said as parts of that general statement. The first is that God maintains those laws, and He Himself sees that they are implicit in every movement into new truth; although they may not be always understood at the time. In other words, we never do enter livingly into any truth, except by the

way of the laws which govern that truth, or are basic to that truth. God sees to that. The experiences through which we pass on our way into any truth are God's ways of establishing His laws relative to that truth. We do not always understand what God is doing, or why He is so leading us or handling us, but He is dealing with us, not only to bring us into the truth, but to bring us into the truth according to the laws which govern that truth. We do not always understand those laws when they are being made effective, but God never sets them aside, overlooks them, or allows us to come livingly into the truth apart from them.

## 2. The Peril of Truth Being Taken Up Without Its Laws

Secondly, the truth taken up without the law operating (a thing quite possible), leads to an unbalanced state, a false position, and the truth operates against the people concerned rather than for them. The issue will be either a breaking of those concerned unto a reconciling adjustment and agreement with the truth spiritually, or else they will abandon the truth. (I want to make sure that you are grasping what I am saying, so please allow me to repeat.) What I have been saying is this in other words. It is possible to take up truth, but not in correspondence with the Divine laws which govern that truth, and apprehending, or taking up, or holding the truth out of correspondence with its essential laws would put us in a false position. We have climbed up some other way, we have not come in by the door. We think we are in, because we have got the truth, but our being in is on an entirely false basis. We have not got the truth by the door, which is the life; we have got the truth along some other line, by some other way, and without the life. We are in a false position. We have got truth without life; we are, therefore, unbalanced: the truth, therefore, will work to our undoing. We shall not find it supporting us but rather breaking us down, and the issue will be one of two things, either by our being broken down we shall be adjusted to the truth, by reason of coming into that truth, or we shall abandon it as a thing which for us does not work. We shall give it up, declaring that it does not "hold water."

## 3. Understanding May Come After Experience

The third thing. A true and pure experience of the truth may be had without a full understanding of its laws at the time; that is, because of the purity of spirit and honesty of heart. There are many who are living in the enjoyment of truth which they do not understand; living in the experience of truth which they could never define. The laws governing their enjoyment and their experience could never, by them, be set forth, and yet they are enjoying a true and pure experience of the truth. But the Lord does not leave it there, and His will is to bring all into an intelligent understanding of the truth. There is something added by understanding, something added to the enjoyment, appreciation and power in the individual concerned; and something added to the Lord in the way of having a more useful instrument for the purpose of the truth. On the one side it is a great day when we have our experience explained for us, and we are able to say: I have enjoyed that, but I have never understood it, but now I see the meaning of that. There has been something added. And to the Lord it is also a great day to have His children not only enjoying an experience, but in possession of the understanding which makes it possible for them to minister in an intelligent way. In the New Testament, doctrine mainly followed history, a history produced by certain truths. Certain truths were proclaimed; those truths were apprehended, accepted by faith, and history commenced. If you like to change the word "history" into "experience" you may, but experience is a personal word, and history a more general word. I am thinking in the realm of the Book of the Acts; the movements, developments, goings and stayings. The whole history was the result of certain facts apprehended by faith. A history was occasioned by those truths. But the history was not the end; later the doctrine came to explain the history. Acts comes before the Epistles. The Epistles were written to explain experience, history. What is the meaning of this, of that, and, that? The answer is given in the doctrine.

Now this is not so much technical matter. It is of very great importance; it is leading up, of course, to concrete examples. I want you to see the order of things. Truth, not by any means understood in its fullness, seen as truth, apprehended by faith in purity of spirit and honesty of heart, producing history; but the Lord, never satisfied that it should stay there, afterward giving a great revelation, which became the teaching, or the doctrine of that history. The Church, in the Book of the Acts, did not move, and act, and go, and stay, on the ground of a systematized doctrine of Church order. It moved spontaneously, but afterward you have the explanation of that, and you get a spiritual system of Church doctrine, born out of history, which history was occasioned by truths accepted in purity of spirit by faith. If that order had always been maintained, we should have a very different situation today from what exists. We begin with an ecclesiastical system of Church policy and try to apply it and then get life afterward. The New Testament order is just the opposite; life, history, and then explanation. It is not enough to say: Well, we have the experience and it does not matter about the doctrine. Many say that. This is to preach an experience rather than the truth, which is always a dangerous thing, and to make experience something without a foundation in the Word of God for the hearer. "Come to our experience." That may be a tremendous peril. When Peter said, as it is written by him in his first letter: "...ready always to give answer to every man that asketh you a reason concerning the hope that is in you," he used there for the word "reason" the word "logos," and what Peter actually said was: Be ready to give an intelligent account, or narrative, or logical setting forth of the hope that is in you. It is ability to give a logical narrative, setting forth, presentation, account of what is in you.

I think that is enough by way of approaching this matter of great truths and their laws. Now we can pass to the consideration of the first of these great truths, and its law, in the Gospel by John.

#### The First Great Truth: The Kingdom of God

Chapter three. The truth is referred to in verses 3 and 5. "Except a man be born anew [from above] he cannot see the kingdom of God." "Except a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." You must remember that this is a great doctrine, the Kingdom of God. It was something that had to be preached. It was an object to be presented. It was something that had to take possession of the interests and concerns of men. Here, strangely enough, and perhaps you might be startled to hear it said, being born anew is not the first thing. The Kingdom of God is the first thing. You will have no interest in being born anew if you have no interest in the Kingdom of God. To bring you to the place where you are concerned about being born anew, you must first of all be brought face to face with the Kingdom of God; you must become interested in it. And so the disciples and the apostles preached the Kingdom of God - in the main sense a synonymous term with the Kingdom of The Heavens translated in our Authorized Version "the Kingdom of Heaven"; an interchangeable phrase often used for exactly the same thing. They were to preach the Kingdom of God, or the Kingdom of Heaven. Paul himself preached that right up to the end of his imprisonment in Rome, so it is stated in Acts 28.

Briefly then, what is the Kingdom of God? It is not merely a realm, but a state. It is not merely an order of outward things, but an inward state of life. "The kingdom of God is not meat and drink"; "The kingdom of God cometh not with observation." It is not a system which is first imposed from the outside, but it is a kind of nature which is heavenly and of God. If it is a realm, and it is, it is a realm in which a state obtains, and before you can enter the realm you have to enter the state. The Kingdom of God is that which in nature appertains unto God; is, in a word, God-nature, God-likeness, the abbreviation of which is Godliness; that is the Kingdom of God. In that Kingdom nothing which is not God obtains. That is a very far-reaching and utter statement. We shall come back to that in a moment. Just that brief word as to what it is, and what it is

not.

## The Law of the Kingdom of God

Secondly, then, what is its law? Its law is birth from above. "Except a man be born...." "Gennethei" means generated from above. It is something more utter than our meaning of birth. Birth with us is the consummation of a process. This is no consummation of a process, it is the original act. The same word is sometimes translated "begotten." Generated from above. Now we have three things in that connection. Firstly, the fundamental difference; secondly, the essence; and thirdly, the basis.

### New Birth - a Fundamental Difference

Firstly, the fundamental difference. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (verse 6). I want to lay my finger of emphasis upon what I have before called "the otherness" of the new birth. The greatest reality in the child of God, right on to the end of his or her experience, is this "otherness." Firstly it is an "otherness" of being, that is, of entity. Something very closely related to us, and yet completely distinct from us. There is a malady from which a great many people are suffering in these days called neurasthenia. One of the features of that malady is the consciousness of secondary personalities; that is, the sufferer is constantly conscious of some other unseen presence, usually evil, dark, near them, following them, haunting them, influencing them, sometimes insinuating, suggesting; very real, and very terrible, and as that malady develops and progresses, that secondary personality seems to become more and more their own personality, until a great many who have had a religious background accept the idea of devil possession, and believe themselves to be now, in effect, devils incarnate. Now I use that by way of illustration; I know that it is bringing it on to the wrong side, and on to a very low level. But in the new birth there is that "Otherness" which is not ourselves, though closely related to us, but is from above, and is the greatest reality of the true child of God right on to the end. I by nature am one thing, but This is another. I would go one way. This would not go that way. I would say a certain thing, but This does not agree with me, and checks the saying of it. I would choose a certain course, but This makes me aware that It is not approving that. It is a very difficult thing to define and explain, but it is a very real thing. It is the basis and the hope of everything for us, this "Otherness."

So the first note, then, is that of distinctiveness of entity. It is us, and yet not us, and we know that very often these two work apart, and do not agree. I once coined a technical phrase to try to define this - if you cannot grasp the meaning of this do not trouble - I spoke of it as the subjective-objective. That is, something within but yet apart, other than myself by nature. You see the importance of even that technicality. (I would like to say that I am not trying to give you a lot of technical matter. I really am anxious to get down to the root of matters for you. I never think of anything except in terms of practical value, and I am only trying to get to the practical value of things for the sake of the Lord's people. Do not think of this as so much matter which I have collected and am trying to pass on to you. I want you to get the real value.)

Then, secondly, it is an essence not only of being, entity, but of constitution, nature, outlook; altogether different from ourselves, differently constituted. So complete is the difference of constitution that it contradicts - very often - our very best and highest ideas and judgments and thoughts. Different nationalities have different conceptions. When certain nationalities come into our country, or we go into theirs, we find that they would do things we would never think of doing, and we do things they would never

think of doing, and things done represent an altogether different conception and standard. We should say: That is a thing not done in our country; for that to be done in our country would represent something in the nature of a scandal; it is not so with you, it is the accepted thing. They would perhaps say the same of many things among us. Take the matter of language; the same words in different countries mean entirely different things. We in England think a great deal of our delightful word "homely." If you say that about things in America you find people frowning at you. We think it is the greatest compliment in this country to say a woman is a "homely" woman. That saying, in America, means she is very plain and ugly. There is a difference altogether in conception. Now in that sense, this "Otherness" is different from our conception, our ideas, our judgments, our standards; even our highest, our best are very often challenged by this "Otherness." It is an "Otherness" of constitution. To put it in a word, God is other than ourselves at our very best. A break has come, and there is no such thing as the continuity of God in the fallen race. Oh, a great deal is made of the continuity of God in the fallen race, in man. A great deal is said in certain realms about God in every man. Much is said about the Christ in us. But a break has come, and in man by nature God is not resident, and Christ is not present. God is other than man, and as utterly other than man as is possible for the two to be; so much so that God, rather than put forth a finger or speak a word to save, to rescue Himself in that creation, consigns the whole thing to destruction. God would not do that, if He were in it. He would be consigning Himself to destruction. If the Cross of the Lord Jesus was a representative thing in which the whole race died under the hand of God, then God slew Himself, if He were in the race. So utterly is the race without God, that God will not save it as it is. No, there is a break, the continuity has been ended. That is the "Otherness."

We have spoken rather in the impersonal so far, now we have to bring it to the personal, and say the essence of the new birth is God coming in, in Christ, by the Holy Spirit. It is God Himself in Christ, by the Holy Spirit coming in where He is not. God is not in man by nature. Christ is not in man by nature. The Holy Spirit is not in man by nature. "The Christ in every man," of which we hear so much, is a phrase which makes Christ impersonal and speaks of Christ as some THING. But NEW BIRTH IS AN ADVENT NOT A REVIVAL. It is as distinctly and definitely an advent as the birth of the Lord Jesus at Bethlehem. That was not an evolution, and that was not a revival; that was an advent. Revival is not for unsaved people. New birth is for unsaved people. Revival is for saved people in whom the life has become either stagnant or has waned. New birth is the definite act of the Lord coming and taking up residence as the Lord, other than we are. You remember what the Lord Jesus said about the Kingdom, and its coming. "There be some of you standing here, who shall not taste of death, until ye have seen the kingdom of heaven coming in power." When did that take place? Its first movement was on the Mount of Transfiguration, its second movement was at Pentecost. The Kingdom came at Pentecost. But what was Pentecost? The advent of the Spirit! And what was the advent of the Spirit? The residence of the Spirit within the Church! It was an advent. Everything was in a state of suspense under Divine order until then. All the truth was apprehended, but if they had gone and preached the truth about Pentecost, they would have been in a false position, an unbalanced state; there would have been inconsistency, and that truth would have come back on them to break them, and not work for them. Pentecost, the Advent of the Spirit, was the cradling of the Spirit of God within the Church. There were foreshadowings and indications of it before then; there were the principles of it clearly marked and defined before then. There was a parenthetical period in which everything was in movement, but the actual consummation of that did not take place until Pentecost. I mean the Upper Room was the Church representatively in being, and when the Lord breathed on them there and said: "Receive ye the Holy Ghost"; that was the Church constituted by the Holy Ghost figuratively, but it was not then allowed to move, neither could it function. Everything was suspended for a probationary period until the Advent of the Spirit, which made all that good. Now the

law of the Kingdom of God is birth from above, which is the Advent of God in Christ by the Spirit in our heart, constituting an "Otherness" which is to be our true life to the end.

Those of you who have any spiritual sense and understanding and knowledge at all know how true that "Otherness" is. It is the thing upon which perhaps we have fallen back again and again as the last word in an argument, or debate with ourselves over our own Christian lives. That is, there are times when by reason of various conditions or circumstances, trials, difficulties, dark passages of experience, the enemy hedges us up in a corner, and makes us question the reality of everything; the reality of our own experience, the reality of our own salvation; and what is our last word in this argument? Very often in my own case the last word has been: Whatever I am, or whatever I am not, this "Otherness" is the greatest reality I know. I know by experience, that when for me certain things have been totally impossible, spiritually, mentally, and physically, this "Otherness" has come to the rescue and accomplished them. I know that my experience is not the product of my own genius; I know the work that I have done is not the outcome of my own ability. I know perfectly well my limitations, but I know there is a history which cannot be accounted for by anything of my own. I know it when every ounce of my being on its best side argues in a certain direction, and that "Otherness" will not go with me and persuades me against it, and the issue proves that that "Otherness" was right and I was wrong at my best. What is that "Otherness"? It is the Lord the Spirit. That is the essence of the birth from above, the Lord Himself. He is not as we are - He is other.

#### The New Birth - Its Basis

The third thing, the basis of the new birth. It is the accepting of the end of the possibilities of the old birth. That so far as the Kingdom of God is concerned and all that relates to it of character and conduct, of being and doing, of knowing and understanding and functioning, the natural birth provides absolutely no possibility, it cannot bring us there. We cannot naturally see the Kingdom of God. Even on the high level of a Nicodemus - equipment, religiously, intellectually, ecclesiastically, morally, we cannot see the Kingdom of God at our very best by nature, or by human achievement.

Of course I know I am saying commonplace things to many, but be patient; it is very important that in taking the first thing we should say familiar things, and say them strongly. It is not settled as to why the Lord Jesus changed the order of His answer to Nicodemus in the fifth verse from the third. One thing is clear, that Nicodemus had misapprehended His statement. Nicodemus had taken Him up as meaning what our Authorized Version seems to suggest: "Ye must be born again."

That conveyed to him an altogether different idea from being born from above. The Greek word used allows of that conception and apprehension; indeed the same word is used elsewhere in the sense of again, a second time. Nicodemus just dwelt on that particular aspect of the word, that of the Lord's statement in terms of a birth repeated. The Lord, in His changed address, language, evidently intended to deal with that misconception and misapprehension, and that is the only way in which you can explain what He meant in His second statement: "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."

Now some think that the Lord, using the word "water" referred to the Word of God. Others, and I think by far the greater number, hold that it refers to baptism. The word here is: "...out from water and the Spirit." Now if it does mean that, in the Lord's usage, it touches immediately what we were saying in the earlier statement; but whether the Lord meant baptism and the Spirit or not, the principle holds good that to be born from above, as set over against a Nicodemus-position, means that one history is entirely closed, and

another - an entirely different history - comes in at its commencement; therefore the principle is the same, that if it is baptism, baptism is A TYPE of death to the old creation, death and burial, in which one entire system, order, and creation is put aside and out of God's sight; crucified with Christ, buried with Christ, then of course, raised in Christ.

It is our acceptance of the end of the possibilities of the old birth. We do not bring an end to those possibilities, that has been reached long ago, and God sees it and declares it, and birth from above presupposes and postulates the fact that this old birth at its best can never see or enter into the Kingdom of God, therefore it is futile and useless. You and I will never come into the Kingdom of God on any other ground than that God comes into us in a new birth; in that sense we are born from above; an act of God by the Holy Spirit; "...so is every one that is born of the Spirit."

"That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." The new birth means that we, by an act of God in the Holy Spirit, become spiritual, in this sense - that we totally correspond to the Kingdom of God in its spiritual nature. It is a suitability to God. "God is a Spirit; and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth."

Well, now I think we see why the Lord immediately, and so peculiarly and strangely, pulled Nicodemus up short with an imperative. Nicodemus starts his conversation - I do not know whether in a patronizing way, or in a somewhat high-falutin' manner, "Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God; for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him." "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." What is the connection? The thing does not seem to be connected at all, it hardly seems relevant. It is a tremendous break in on the part of the Master, calling this whole thing to a halt, and saying, in effect: Let us go no further, your need is to be born from above, if you have come to discuss spiritual things. If you have come to talk about the Kingdom of God and how to get into it, you must be born from above. If you are interested in Me and what I represent, you can only have a living interest and understanding as You are born from above. You see, He brings right forward the end that Nicodemus probably had in mind, and plants it with an imperative at the commencement, and says, virtually: Look here, Nicodemus, it is no use you and I discussing these things, we are in two different realms; we need to be in the same realm to have understanding and appreciation of these things, and I am from above; you have to come from above, Nicodemus, to be in fellowship with Me; we cannot talk over the thing while you stand in one world and I in another, you must come over to the realm where I am, and we will have fellowship and understanding, because that means you will have new capacities, a new consciousness; you will be able with spiritual ability to enter into these things; which is quite impossible to you, even as a master in Israel, until you are born from above. That imperative, that "must" carries with it all the content of the utter impossibility of man by nature, even at his highest, to enter into the things of the Kingdom of God, and all the mighty content on the positive side of what it is to be in the Kingdom of God. That is, to have what is of God resident within by birth; Divine capacity, Divine consciousness, Divine understanding and intelligence, and all that belongs to God - excepting deity.

For myself, the wonder of the Christian life is the reality of what I have called the "Otherness." The reality of Another so closely related within me, subjective and yet objective. In me, but not me, and yet as close to me, to my consciousness as it is possible for anything to be. That is the foundation of all our hope and confidence; it is the spring of everything for the ultimate realization of perfect God-likeness; "Christ in you the hope of glory."

In a further chapter we shall see with what a forceful illustration the Lord enforced His dictum as to the necessity for new birth, and the why of it.

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