

In Relation to the Race as God Intends It to Be

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon explores the significance of Christ's life and work as a sign of the undercutting of human pride and the securing of the open heaven for us.

Scripture: Isaiah 7:10

Topics: "Restoration", "Humility in Christ"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the significance of Christ in restoring humanity's relationship with God, highlighting the quest for power that led to the loss of God's face in the Garden of Eden. He explains that the nature of man, driven by pride and the desire for power, resulted in a closed heaven, but through Christ's incarnation and humility, the open heaven is restored. The preacher illustrates how Christ's virgin birth, humble beginnings, and sacrificial death undercut the prideful human nature, allowing believers to be accepted by God. Ultimately, the message conveys that our identity in Christ is not based on our own merit but on His grace and what He accomplished for us.

Transcript

"And the Lord spake again unto Ahaz, saying, Ask thee a sign of the Lord thy God; ask it either in the depth, or in the height above. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, neither will I tempt the Lord. And he said, Hear ye now, O house of David: Is it a small thing for you to weary men, that ye will weary my God also? Therefore THE LORD HIMSELF SHALL GIVE YOU A SIGN: behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:10-14).

In our previous meditation upon the significance of Christ, we were gathered around the Cross and heard the bitter, anguished cry wrung from the breaking heart of our Lord Jesus - "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" - and we sought to understand that in that deepest moment of all the ages the Son of Man was dealing with the deepest cry of the human heart, the cry for fellowship with God, the cry for the face of God. All through the ages that has been the one concern of man: to know that the face of God is toward him. With the garden and what transpired there, followed by man's expulsion, the face of God was lost to the race, and so for ever man has been, as it were, in a wilderness, having lost the face of God. The Lord Jesus took up that state of the withdrawn face of God on behalf of the whole race and bore the sin which brought it about, and recovered the face of God for all men who will believe. The face of God toward man is only another way of saying that heaven is opened again, having been closed fast by God himself.

Now we are going to consider the man of the open heaven. There is a man, we have seen, a man corporately, racially, a humanity of the first Adam who cannot have the face of God, cannot know the open heaven. There is the Man who can, and who has, and we are going to look at these men - the man of the closed heaven and the Man of the opened heaven; the man without the face of God and the Man with the face of God.

NATURAL MAN'S QUEST FOR POWER

We have to ask at the outset - from what was the face of God turned away and why? What was it that lay behind and led to Adam's loss of the light of God's countenance and resulted in the desolation of his soul as of a wilderness? The Bible, of course, is full of the answer. There are various ways in which that question can be answered. Doctrinally, we should use certain words. We should say it was because of sin or unrighteousness, but then we are committed to explain what we mean by sin and unrighteousness. I think the answer nearest to the heart of the whole matter is given more fully when we say that the reason for that lost face, that closed heaven, was and is a nature which is opposed to God, a nature which is sinful and unrighteous, a nature whose sinfulness and unrighteousness is found in its desire to usurp the place of God. That is the heart of it - a nature disposed to usurp the place of God, and when you try to gather that up and express it in a word, it amounts to this - THE QUEST FOR POWER.

It is to that that you trace everything in the fall, in what took place in the garden in Adam's case, and we are informed by the Scriptures that that quest for power, that unholy quest for power which is unrighteousness, which is contrary to what is right, had an earlier history in another realm. We are informed of the one who came to Adam having formerly made such a bid for power to usurp the place of God, and that was the essence of the temptation in the garden. Of course it was not explained to be so. Deception wrapped it around. Adam would probably have fled from that temptation had he seen its nature, perceived its essence. Anyone who does not implicitly obey the word of God because it is the word of God, without any explanation of why He has given it, will be deceived, and, being deceived, will be caught in the deepest trap of evil, of unrighteousness.

The essence of the temptation was to make a bid for power, which would put man in an advantageous position over God, make God unnecessary, put God out of His supreme and exclusive place, and bring man in as equal with God, at least. That is it. It was that that lost the open heaven, the face of God. And we find that that is the very heart, the very root, of the human nature which has sprung from that first Adam. That is the battleground. You might not, indeed, admit, when it is put so glaringly and nakedly and luridly, that that represents yourself. How little we know ourselves, and how little we make our deductions or draw our conclusions from all the things that are happening in human life! Why, this is the very stuff of 'psychology' - of what is happening today in the whole nervous system of the race; it is the reason why people are queuing up to see the nerve specialists - I will not use their technical names - people who can tell them what is the matter with them - because this and that and the other symptom brings such a lot of distress into their lives.

A whole list of new terms has been produced in recent years in that particular realm. 'Frustration' - what a word that is! 'Inferiority complex.' You are beginning to recognize the list. Behind many - not all, but many - of the nervous breakdowns, when the matter is looked into and explored, there is all the time something to do with the selfhood: the selfhood cannot have what it wants, do what it wants, be what it wants, get where it wants. In these various and numerous ways it suffers nervous reaction. The word 'frustration' is a very good one. People are bothered and troubled about themselves, and the matter resolves itself into a clash

with the power to do and to be - the defeat of the SOUL. How deeply related to the soul, that is, to the self-conscious life of man, is this question of power - power to be, power to do; power to find one's satisfaction and contentment in being something and doing something, and not being a nobody without significance - the whole soul revolts against that. It is a question of power. As I have said, frustration and the inferiority complex are the very stuff of psychology.

You see, this soul of ours must in some way or other be on top. In order to be on top, it must subject everything and everybody to itself. It must go one better and be one better than the others, and there rise all the jealousies, the rivalries, the competitiveness, the possessiveness, the impatience - to be on top, not to be underneath.

PRIDE LINKED WITH THE LUST FOR POWER

The lust for power and pride are inseparable. You know why pride is an abomination to God, why God 'beholdeth the proud afar off' (Ps. 138:6). It is because behind the pride is this selfhood which took its rise from the spring of Satan in the human race: the desire to have power. We can see quite clearly how true that is in human life individually. It lies behind the whole world today - power and pride working together to have domination, everyone going one better than the other. You have only got to suggest that some nation or people have made a certain discovery, or produced some invention and it will not be long before some other people or nation will say they have gone one better, and so it goes on. That is the thing that constitutes the root and basic sin of this universe - the quest for power. It is the commencement and the consummation of Antichrist.

This is the human nature of the first Adam, and as with its originator, Satan, so it is always insinuating itself into the things of God and invading His very presence. The whole painful story of the Church's disruption, dissension and failure is the story of this selfhood coming into the realm of the things of God - self-assertion, possessiveness, domination, place in the Church, place in the work of God. What a story is bound up with this inherent lust for power, which, if it does not show itself in the more positive forms of self-assertion, will express itself in a feigned meekness, and is manifest in this inferiority complex. You do not know anything about such a thing as an inferiority complex if you do not suffer: and what is it that you are suffering? You are suffering the mortification of being less than you think you ought to be - and that is simply an expression of the lust for power, I am not going to dwell upon the miserable picture. I am only seeking to come to the main point.

God is not going on with that. He decided right back at the beginning, in the garden, that He was not going any further with that, His face was not toward that, it was turned away; never would that kind of humanity or human nature find His face. No, God will not go on with that kind of humanity.

CHRIST'S UNDERCUTTING OF THE NATURAL MAN

There is another kind, another type, with whom God will go on; but this former has got to be completely undercut; and herein is the significance of Christ, where we reach the more helpful phase of this contemplation. Everything about the Lord Jesus relates to this very thing - on the one hand, the undercutting of a human nature, a human order and kind that can never know the face of God, and, on the other side, the bringing in of a humanity that can have that face, that countenance and that open heaven. I repeat - everything about Christ relates to that issue.

THE SIGN OF THE VIRGIN BIRTH

Now I go back to that passage in Isaiah 7:14 - "The Lord himself shall give you a sign: behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel": the sign of the incarnation; and there are several things about that - connected with the incarnation of the Son of God - which simply, beautifully and clearly bear out the issue we are considering.

Firstly, the sign of the virgin birth - "Behold, a virgin shall conceive". Man is ruled out. What is said about those who through faith have the right to become children of God? - "who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13). 'Not of the will of A man', it is literally: man in his strength, and his initiative, has no place in this new kind of humanity that knows the face of God. It is man on his weak side. You remember in the beginning He called them - man and woman together - He called them both "Man" (Gen. 5:2), meaning that the race had two sides, a strong and a weak. That woman is the weaker vessel is, of course, not universally acknowledged in these days! But therein lies a reversal of all the glorious Divine thought. Only on his weak side has man a place in this; shall we say, only in his weakness and not in his strength, not in his initiative by deciding: "not... of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man". "A virgin shall conceive." That represents weakness, the weak side of the race, humanity on its weak side.

You will not misunderstand my usage of that word weak. It is a glorious word when rightly related. Do not misinterpret, you sisters who read this, and say you have to be weak in the wrong sense. You have got to be strong in weakness as you have to be weak in strength. When the angel appeared to the virgin and announced what was going to happen, and she got through her perplexity and the battle which would very naturally arise in her, and surmounted the natural human factors, her response was, "Behold, the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word" (Luke 1:38). A virgin, a handmaid - weakness, humility and subjection. It was along that pathway that the new Heavenly Man came and recovered the face of God for man. That is the very beginning of this humanity, the kind of person who will have the face of God, who will inherit the open heaven: weak, humble, not assertive.

You see, right back even before His birth, His very door into this world was the door which undercuts the whole Adam race, in that nature of unrighteousness which, in its own strength, or in having strength in itself, would usurp the place of God. For "Be it unto me according to thy word" speaks of a disposition that is far removed from usurping the place of God. It was the sign of the virgin, that had been promised: "the Lord himself shall give you a sign". What is the significance of Christ? Here is the answer. Right there, before He is born into this world, He has undercut the human strength of the race, man's will, the strength of the flesh - nay, more than that, has undercut the very work of the devil in the race. He was manifested "that he might destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8). While it was by His Cross that He did that, the basis of it was the incorruptible life in Him. The Virgin Birth is a deep thing of God in the undercutting of a fallen nature, the work of the devil.

THE SIGN OF THE UNIMPORTANT TOWN

"But thou, Beth-lehem Ephrathah, which art little to be among the thousands of Judah, out of thee shall one come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel" (Mic. 5:2). Little among the thousands of Judah - the thousands of families, that is, of Judah. The sign of that unimportant town. The Lord is sovereignly keeping to principle. Everything connected with the very birth, incarnation, of the Lord Jesus contains the principle. To be ruler He ought to have been born surely in Jerusalem or some important place, but no. By that time Bethlehem Ephrathah had lost its place of importance. Its importance was spiritual, not natural. It was just there that Rachel died when Benjamin, 'the son of Jacob's right hand' was born (Gen. 35:18,19), and it

was said that in him Israel was to find its realization. It was spiritual significance. All natural significance has gone now, and there, where there was no significance, the most significant thing happened and the most significant Person was born. It is very simple. It is not making something of nothing. It is following the working out of a principle.

THE SIGN OF THE MANGER

Listen again to this sign in Luke: "And this is the sign unto you: Ye shall find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, and lying in a manger." "This is the sign unto you." What does it signify? What is the significance of the lowly manger? Well, it is obvious, it is plain. Surely such a One as He ought to have had a more imposing, impressive place for birth, for entering the world? But no: He is undercutting all the importance of this world, all the glory of the flesh, of the old race. He is just undercutting it with every step. Many, many have been the homilies and helpful addresses upon Bethlehem's manger, the place of His birth; but oh, let us see right back behind that manger, behind that humble cattle-trough, right back into hell, right back through the whole depth of a fallen and God-abandoned humanity. That is what it touches. It is related to that.

"A SIGN... SPOKEN AGAINST"

And then in that very same chapter - Luke 2, verse 34 - we have this: "And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother, Behold, this child is set for the falling and rising up of many in Israel; and for a sign which is spoken against." "This child is set... for a sign which is spoken against." As you know, the reproach which was laid upon Him by His nation was that He was not important enough. He disappointed all their expectations and hopes as to what their Messiah would be. Oh, what a crashing of their castles in the air was the actual fulfilment of the prophecy - "Behold, thy king cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass" (Zech. 9:9). A sign spoken against. If only He had been somebody of greater importance, a personality with power in the temporal realm, they would not have spoken against Him as they did. It was all the time - "Is not this the carpenter?" (Mark 6:3). 'Who is this fellow making Himself out to be? He is a nobody! He is taking far too much on Himself. He really cannot rightly lay claim to all this. Look at Him!' A sign spoken against. What was it for? It was to undercut all that the world looks for and must have in its great ones - strength of their own kind, power of their own. "A sign which is spoken against."

THE SIGN OF NAZARETH

And so we can glance through His life and see the same principle always obtaining. His home was in despised Nazareth. "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). 'Give a dog a bad name, and hang him!' Nazareth had a bad name, and He lived there. Not much of a prospect, coming from Nazareth. His work? - a carpenter of Nazareth! "Is not this the carpenter's son?" (Matt. 13:55).

THE SIGN OF TWO TURTLE-DOVES

Then consider His poverty. In that chapter, Luke 2, we find that they brought Him to the temple, to offer the offering commanded by Moses, and what was it? - the offering of the poorest people in the land. Some could bring a bullock, some could bring a ram, but the poorest, who could not afford anything like that, could bring two turtle doves; and His parents offered two turtle doves. How poor they were! His life throughout was like that.

THE ACCOMPLISHMENT OF CHRIST'S WORK OF UNDERCUTTING

And then His death. Oh, the depth of shame, of SHAME, of ignominy, of disgrace! Oh, the stripping of every vestige of human pride when He became "obedient unto death, yea, the death of the Cross". The death OF THE CROSS! Not being compelled to it, but being obedient to it: not having by outward compulsion to yield, but Himself accepting it. Does it need that we should say more? Has He not undercut the old Adam in all his pride, in all his self-importance, in all his quest for power? Yes: He did it when He was "crucified through weakness" (2 Cor. 13:4). This is the Man who has opened heaven; this is the Man to whom heaven is opened and heaven's attestation is given, who lives in the light of God's countenance; and this is the Man who, because of what He was and is, has secured that open heaven, that countenance FOR US.

CHRIST FOR US

The first principle of our Christian life, the very foundation of our Christian life, is not that we are like Him, or that there is anything about us like that. The beginning of the Christian life is not that you have in some way to forsake your pride and be like Jesus. The BEGINNING of the Christian life is that what He was and is is given to us by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ. It is put to our account. Yes, I know - you and I are still proud, we still suffer from this horrible thing, it is in our nature. We still resent and resist being made nothing of, being left out of account, being despised and rejected. There is still that in us which does not like it, to say the least. We like to be acknowledged, to be recognized, to have some kind of title amongst men, if we can. It is still there. But, blessed be God, the whole meaning of grace, the grace of God, is that what Jesus Christ is - not what we are, but WHAT HE IS - is put right to the account of every one who will accept Him. We speak about accepting Jesus Christ as Saviour, accepting Him as Lord; but what does that mean? It means accepting Him as the One that we are not, but that God requires; as the One who makes good all that God demands and we can never supply. That is accepting Christ. Never depart from that. However much you may become concerned and occupied with conformity to His image, that is a later consideration. However much you may be occupied with being made like Christ, never, never at any time allow the matter of the process to get into the place of what He is for you ALL THE TIME. He IS that Other whom God favours, and we have been made accepted in the Beloved One.

I am going to stop there for the present, in our consideration of the significance of Christ, of the many-sided sign of the Son of Man. Every thing about Christ sets forth some aspect of the undercutting of one kind of humanity or mankind - of one kind of man who has come into this universe and has no longer any place or standing with God. That kind was put away by His great substitutionary and representative act, when He accepted the full, final and consummate result of it in the moment of His cry 'Thou hast forsaken Me'. It was all swallowed up in the bitterness, the unspeakable bitterness, of His soul's desolation, and having been swallowed up, there is no longer any place for it; and inasmuch as He Himself in His own nature was not that, He could be raised again - what wonderful words! - "by the glory of the Father" (Rom. 6:4). It is shame that has gone in the Cross; it is glory that springs out of it, the glory of the Father. And, being raised, He is the "firstborn among many brethren" (Rom. 8:29). He is the first of this new and different race, the race of those who are begotten, "not of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God", and have the right to be called children of God, a new race in Christ. Because of what He is, being put to our desolate and hopeless account by the unspeakable grace of God, we ought to sing, with the deepest, the most profound gratitude and wonder -

Not what I am, O Lord, but what Thou art:

That, that alone, can be my soul's true rest.

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