

In the Gospel by John

by T. Austin-Sparks

T. Austin-Sparks explores the profound spiritual truths and transitions presented in the Gospel of John, emphasizing its relevance for today's Church.

Scripture: John 1:1-4

Topics: "Spiritual Understanding", "The Person of Christ"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the significance of the Gospel of John, written during a time of spiritual decline and confusion in the early church. He highlights that John's Gospel serves as a bridge between the old and new dispensations, focusing on the person and place of Jesus Christ and the spiritual nature of the new covenant. Sparks urges the audience to recognize the greater works that believers are called to perform in this spiritual dispensation, which surpass the physical miracles of Jesus. He stresses the need for spiritual understanding to grasp the deeper meanings of Christ's works and the transition from earthly to heavenly realities. Ultimately, the message calls for reliance on the Holy Spirit for spiritual intelligence and empowerment.

Transcript

Lord, every day brings its fresh need. We feel that as we proceed in this thing together, our need becomes still greater. A little while and this time will be closed; therefore, it becomes so necessary that Thou dost work hard to get that which is in Thy heart. We feel that today brings a very special need. This day could be the very turning point of this conference. Lord, if Thou dost so view it, we ask for the special help that is needed. Lord, our need is for utterance - the release of the Word in us, and the release of us in the Word. Insofar as Thou dost take charge, do that today. Thou hast chosen to speak through man; but Lord, You must not leave it to the man, You must take over the man. Take Thine instruments out of their own hands into Thine. May this not be of man, but of God; we do not want anyone to ever say that it was of man. Our whole heart's desire is that everyone should say, "That was the Lord." If Thou wilt do this, all the glory will be Thine. So far as we are concerned, then, we put ourselves into Thy hands. Work and take the glory to Thyself, in the Name of the Lord Jesus. Amen.

In order to arrive at the message of John there are two things to be noted. The first: that his Gospel is the last of the New Testament writings; and the second: the times and conditions in which he wrote.

THE PLACE OF THE GOSPEL IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

It is very important for us to note that John's Gospel was the last of the New Testament writings. If the New Testament were put together chronologically, the Gospel by John would come after the book of the Revelation, but the Holy Spirit did not arrange that. He arranged that it should come in the place where we have it, and I think we shall see His wisdom as we go along. When the Apostle John wrote his Gospel he was a very old man, with long and deep experience.

Perhaps there is a little word of warning to young people there. Young people today are inclined to despise the old people, and to say: 'Well, they have had their time. Now it is our day. They belong to yesterday; we belong to today.' Now, young people, if that is your position, you must cut out the Gospel by John from your Bible, and I am quite sure you are not prepared to do that! When we have finished this message I hope you will be less prepared to do so.

THE TIMES AND CONDITIONS IN WHICH THE GOSPEL WAS WRITTEN

When John wrote his Gospel all the other Apostles had gone to be with the Lord. All the New Testament epistles had been written, all the Roman Empire had been evangelised, and all the New Testament churches had come into being. The great storms of persecution by Nero and other emperors were fading away. Even John was now released from his exile in Patmos. He was not writing the Revelation to the church which was in Ephesus, but he was writing his Gospel IN Ephesus. Jerusalem had been destroyed and the Jews had been scattered all over the world. That was the time in which John wrote his Gospel.

If we ask about the spiritual conditions of that time, we have only to read the first three chapters of the book of the Revelation. We are familiar with the letters to the seven churches in Asia, and in the majority of cases there was a state of serious spiritual decline. The Lord had to send through John messages of very serious warning. A very tragic state of spiritual declension had come about, and Christianity was very largely in a state of confusion. You only have to read John's first letter to realise that! John felt that he had to write for end times, and that the conditions which existed then would be the conditions at end times.

I do not think that we today, if we believe that we are in the end times, fail to recognise very similar conditions. There was not only a historic feature in John's writings; there was also a prophetic.

Now John was evidently very troubled about the spiritual situations, and out of that troubled heart he wrote his Gospel. The question was, and is: What is the answer to such a situation? What is the answer to the problem of spiritual declension? What is the answer to the problem of spiritual confusion? John's Gospel is the answer. In this Gospel he gives what he is convinced is the need. When you read the Gospel by John always bear these things that we have said in mind.

One of the early Christian fathers, Clement of Rome, said, "John's Gospel is the spiritual Gospel", and that definition has stuck to this Gospel all through the centuries. John set himself to write not a new book on Church order, not a book on Church traditions, nor on new ideas and ways. That is what is being done now to try to solve the problem. Many books are being published on New Testament church order, and many new ideas are being introduced into Christianity. Some of them are the most extraordinary things! You cannot even find them in the New Testament! But what did John write as the answer? He wrote on two fundamental demands, two things which do not deal with the externals, but go right to the root. To use a medical term, he wrote not to deal with symptoms but to deal with causes. The two things with which John deals in his writings are:

1. The Person and place of Jesus Christ.

2. The meaning of Jesus Christ in God's universe, the meaning of Christ in the Divine economy, or order.

If we get clear on these two things we have the answer to all spiritual problems.

THE PERSON AND PLACE OF JESUS CHRIST

John begins on this matter right outside of history: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). You cannot put any date to that! Luke went right back to Adam, but John leaps back behind Adam and speaks of Jesus Christ, God's Son, in His eternal existence, before all time and before creation. Before John has finished this Gospel he will tell us that Jesus is praying to His Father, and in His prayer Jesus says: "O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was" (John 17:5). That was before the creation - a tremendous thing to remember!

If you were to read all that men have written and said about John you would certainly find yourself in great confusion. Some do not even believe that it was John who wrote this Gospel! Man in creation has brought his wonderful head over against the eternal Christ. There was a great preacher in London some years ago who preached a wonderful sermon on the greatness of God. He set forth the magnificence and glory of God, and all the people were holding their breath. They could hardly breathe for the wonder of God that was being set forth, and then the preacher pulled his gown up round him and said: 'There comes down the aisle there a little man, about the size of an umbrella, and he says: "Dr. Parker, I don't believe that there is a God!"' Yes, LITTLE man and the GREAT God!

Now, you see, John set himself to show how great is the Son of God: greater than man, greater than history, greater than time, and greater than all things.

Having introduced us to the Person, John proceeds to tell us that this One of whom he is writing created all things: "All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that hath been made" (John 1:3). He was the creator of all things, and then John brings this One into time: the great God of eternity, the great God of creation, is now present in human form: "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14).

Then John says that this One was the creator of light. He is the very source and embodiment of light. He is the light, and the generator of light: "...the true light, which lighteth every man" (John 1:5). Later John records that Jesus said: "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12).

Further, John says that He was the source of life: "In him was life; and the life was the light of men" (John 1:4).

THE MEANING OF JESUS CHRIST IN GOD'S UNIVERSE

Now what is it that we are coming to? John always goes beyond THINGS to the PERSON, and he had one purpose in his mind when he wrote this Gospel. That purpose was to transfer EVERYTHING to Christ, so that the Gospel of John is the Gospel of the great transition.

Here we see the wisdom of the Holy Spirit in putting this Gospel where it is. Matthew is the Gospel of the absolute Lordship of Jesus Christ, showing that all authority is vested in Jesus Christ. Mark is the message of ministry under the authority of Christ. Luke is the message concerning God's new humanity. Leap over from Luke to the book of the Acts, which takes all those three up on new resurrection ground.

John comes between Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Acts. He is the link between the two, the bridge over which they pass to the new dispensation. So John is the Gospel of the great transition. What is this transition? It has four aspects.

First, it is the transition from all the parts to one complete whole. Now, I want a whole conference on that alone! If you read the Gospel by John carefully you will find there, in the background, the history of the people of Israel. I dare not stay with all the details of that; but were Israel in the wilderness, needing bread? He said to the Jews: "Your father did eat the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which cometh down out of heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die" (John 6:49-50). All the way through this Gospel John has in the back of his mind something in the history of Israel. I beg of you to read it in that light! These are all the parts of the Old Testament, and now John gathers them together and makes them complete in the one Person. Jesus is the completeness of all the parts of history.

Secondly, it is the transition from the historical to the eternal. John is showing an eternal significance to the historical. He is showing us a spiritual meaning in all these things in history.

Then it is the transition from the temporal, material, to the spiritual.

And fourthly, it is the transition from the earthly to the heavenly.

You remember the repeated phrase of the Lord Jesus in John's Gospel: 'Verily, verily, I say unto you...' How often the Lord Jesus uses that phrase! Most truly, **EMPHATICALLY**, I say unto you...' And what was the connection of that double exclamation? "Verily, verily, ...I AM." "I am the true vine" (John 15:1). Israel was called 'God's vine', but failed to give Him the fruit that He sought. Israel was a false vine, but Jesus takes that over to Himself and says, most emphatically: "I am the **TRUE** vine." Israel was God's flock of sheep, and He was their shepherd. Jesus says: 'Verily, verily... I am the **TRUE** shepherd'. The manna in the wilderness did not keep Israel alive for ever. "Verily, verily, ...I am the bread of life... this is the bread which cometh down out of heaven" (John 6:47-50). Everything in John's Gospel is a transfer to Jesus Christ.

THE NEW DISPENSATION

Now we must come close to the real message. All this that John wrote was an argument for one thing: he was making it perfectly clear that the new dispensation which had come is a **SPIRITUAL** dispensation. Jerusalem had been the centre of government for the old Israel. Now Jerusalem has gone, but have men been left without a centre of government? Have we no seat of government? Why is John continually recording that Jesus was saying: 'I return unto the Father'? For this very thing! The seat, and the centre, of government for the Lord's people is now in heaven. It is neither in Jerusalem nor in Rome. The Church has no headquarters on this earth. You may do what you can to have a government for the Church on this earth, but you are contradicting this fundamental truth. Paul says that Jerusalem is above, and we are to get all our direction from above. That is how it was in the book of the Acts - the headquarters had gone from Jerusalem. Where was the headquarters of the New Testament Church? Some people have said 'Antioch', but I cannot agree. Even at Antioch they were going to their headquarters in heaven. It was there that the Holy Spirit said: "Separate me Barnabas and Saul" (Acts 13:2). John is transferring the city from the earth to heaven, and is showing that all that Jerusalem had been in the old dispensation was true of the Lord Jesus in the new.

I ask you: If it were like that now, would it not solve a lot of the problems? Would it not get rid of a lot of the confusion in Christianity? The prayer meeting, not the board room, is the way of the Church's government. Have the churches declined, as they did in the time of John? What is John going to say about this? He will teach us that the Church and the churches are no more than the measure of Christ in people. Quite early in his Gospel the Lord Jesus will say to the woman of Samaria: 'The hour cometh, and now is, when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem shall ye worship the Father. Not in the great temple at Jerusalem, nor in the great Samaritan temple in Samaria, but God is a Spirit and they that worship Him must worship Him in Spirit' (John 4:21-24).

What, then, is the Church? It is not a place, nor a building, nor a congregation, nor so many men and women gathered together. It is just the measure of Christ that is there in those people. If it is only two or three 'in Christ', that is the representation of the Church. CHRIST is the Church, and it is only the measure of Christ in people that makes the Church. The Church is more or less represented according to the measure of Christ. Confusion, yes, spiritual decline, yes; but bring Christ in and all that is dealt with. If we will remain on the ground of Christ most of our problems will be solved. Has Jesus gone to the Father? Yes, He has, but the Holy Spirit has come in His place. You see, we are keeping very close to John's Gospel.

Now, that is the nature of this dispensation. It is wholly a spiritual dispensation. But John does not only tell us that as to the nature, but he tells us that this dispensation is superior to all other dispensations. How superior this dispensation is to the one when Jesus was here on this earth! I wonder if you believe that. We have a little children's hymn, and, of course, we like to sing it with the children:

"I think when I read that sweet story of old,

When Jesus was here among men,

How He called little children as lambs to His fold:

I should like to have been with them then."

Now that is very sentimental! And it is very lovely. And lots of people still go to Palestine to see the places where Jesus was. While they are there they are living twenty centuries ago! Would you prefer to be back there with Jesus on earth rather than to be here today? Now think about that! You have missed the message of John if that is what you think. John is telling us that we are in a far superior time to the time when Jesus was on earth.

There was one word that Jesus was very fond of using: 'Greater.' You remember Jacob and his ladder - his dream when he saw a ladder from earth to heaven, with angels of God ascending and descending, and the Lord above it. Well, that was very wonderful, and out of that dream came the twelve tribes of Israel. But to Nathanael He said: "Thou shalt see GREATER things than these." 'You will see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man, and this will produce a far greater Israel than the earthly Israel.'

WORKS IN THE NEW DISPENSATION

But the word that I really want to get to at the end is in chapter 14:12. Jesus has been speaking about the works that He has been doing, and then He says: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, he that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also, and greater works than these shall he do; because I go to the Father."

In the dispensation that follows the earthly life of the Lord Jesus greater works are going to be done than those He did when He was here. What were the works that He did?

At the Pool of Bethesda He raised a poor, impotent man and made him walk. That man was thirty-eight years old. They did not live so long in those days, and I wonder if you realise that even the Apostle Paul was only a little over sixty when he died. This poor man at the Pool of Bethesda only had, at most, a few more years to live, and then he died and went into his grave. 'Greater works than these shall ye do.' What are the greater works? In this context it is a far greater thing to put a man or woman on their spiritual feet than on their physical feet! It is a wonderful thing to see how we are kept by the power of God, for in the course of the Christian life there are many times when we might easily collapse. How often we have felt: 'I cannot go on any longer!', and yet, after many, many such times, we are still going on. Oh, the miracle of lives we have known which seem many times to be going to give up, but they are still going on. The spiritual is the greater work than the physical. Oh, the miracle of the walking power of the Holy Spirit! The same thing is true of all these other works of Jesus. Did He open the eyes of the blind? It is a far greater thing to have your spiritual eyes opened! Spiritual knowledge and spiritual intelligence are far superior to the natural. Did He work a miracle of feeding the thousands in the wilderness? Well, friends, would you not sooner have spiritual food than your breakfast this morning? We go on in this wilderness of a world, and the world can provide us with no food. It is a far greater work to provide spiritual food than to provide natural bread. What was the greatest work that Jesus did? After all these works, He crowns them with the raising of Lazarus. I suppose it would be thought to be very wonderful if we could raise the dead physically, but is it not a far greater work to raise the spiritually dead? 'Greater works than these shall ye do.' This is a greater dispensation than when Jesus was on the earth.

This is the message of John: the transition from the earthly to the heavenly, from the natural to the spiritual, and this will solve the problems and will answer the questions.

THE NEED OF SPIRITUAL UNDERSTANDING

But when we have said all that: John knew one thing when he wrote his Gospel. He called all these works of Jesus 'signs', and he implied that the great need of this dispensation is spiritual understanding. Any ordinary person can see the thing that is done. The Jews saw the things that Jesus did, but they were not saved because they did not have the spiritual intelligence to understand the deeper meaning. The great need is spiritual intelligence. The Holy Spirit has come to be spiritual intelligence. May He give us spiritual intelligence so that we understand the true nature of the dispensation in which we live!

We know, Lord, that it is this very thing that creates the difficulty. Oh, Lord, we do pray that we may be brought into the superiority of this dispensation, the superiority of spiritual understanding, the superiority of spiritual power - the power of Thy resurrection. Open our understanding to what we have been seeking to show this morning. Make this message alive. We pray that it may not be so many words, that it may be light and life. Watch over the word and watch over our hearts. In the Name of the Lord Jesus. Amen.

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