

# In the Letters to the Corinthians (Continued)

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*The Corinthian letters emphasize the importance of Christ being the central place in the spiritual life, and the dangers of spiritual declension and simulation.*

**Scripture:** Numbers 10:2-10, Matthew 24:24, John 14:26, 1 Corinthians 1:18, 1 Corinthians 2:6-16, 1 Corinthians 15:52, 2 Corinthians 3:18 - 4:6, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Hebrews 4:12

**Topics:** "The Role of the Holy Spirit", "Spiritual Growth"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the parallels between the Corinthian Christians and Israel in the wilderness, highlighting their positional standing in Christ and the need for their spiritual condition to align with that position. He stresses the importance of Christ as the central figure and the Holy Spirit's role in guiding believers, warning against the dangers of spiritual immaturity and deception. The Apostle Paul, in addressing the Corinthians, continually points them back to Christ and challenges them to evaluate their lives in light of His teachings. Sparks underscores that true spiritual progress requires both spiritual seeing and hearing, which are essential for understanding and living out the Gospel. Ultimately, he calls for a return to the foundational truth of Christ crucified as the solution to their spiritual decline.

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## Transcript

We have seen that, in the Letters to the Corinthians, the Christians are spiritually in the position corresponding to that of Israel in the wilderness. That means that we have to see how Christ is applied to that situation. Every part of the New Testament, i.e. every book, brings Christ into view in some particular way or aspect in relation to some particular situation because THE WHOLE of the New Testament is comprehended by the mission, the meaning, and the message of Jesus Christ. We have seen that the position of believers in Corinth corresponding to Israel in the wilderness means that they were POSITIONALLY out of the kingdom of darkness; baptized into Christ; in the good of the passover lamb - flesh and blood; on the ground of justification by faith. POSITIONALLY they were in the Kingdom of heaven and on supernatural ground. All this was true by reason of sovereign grace. But now, all that was objective and what was positional had to be made inward and their condition; that is, it had to be made their own spiritual state. Many were the inconsistencies and contradictions between position and condition, and God could not accept that. Hence the serious warning drawn from the tragedy of Israel - the disaster in the wilderness in failure to "go on" to the PURPOSE of salvation. In our last message we put our finger upon one real cause of the disaster, and this will have to be kept in view as we proceed into these Letters. In the Corinthian letters we shall find Christians at the point where Israel were at Sinai, and

two things will stand out among others, or one thing in two aspects. Those two things are

## SPIRITUAL SEEING AND SPIRITUAL HEARING

A moment's reflection will at once bring to mind how very much those two things were the very substance of the mission, meaning and message of Jesus Christ, and, moreover, the governing principles of the whole New Testament.

With Israel in the wilderness these two things related respectively to the Tent of Testimony and the ordering of progress. They are both in the later chapters of the Book of Exodus through the Book of Numbers. The Tent of the Testimony, or the Tabernacle, was central and in view for all to see. The tribes were so arranged as to face the Tabernacle on all sides and from all directions. From the door of the Tabernacle the silver trumpets sounded, to be heard by all the people in connection with all order and movement.

The principles were seeing and hearing; THE SEEING EYE, and THE HEARING EAR. Put together they represent the Lord Jesus as central and supreme, and the Holy Spirit as God's voice concerning Him. Sit back with those facts and think of the Corinthian letters in their light. So, we come to

## THE PLACE OF CHRIST: THE PLACE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

in relation to spiritual order and progress in a Corinthian situation.

### The place of Christ

We must step back and join the Apostle when he was contemplating his letter to Corinth, after he had received the information about the situation there.

The Apostle had known about Corinth before his first visit five years earlier. Morally it was the worst city in the world, and such was the situation there that this courageous servant of God said that he was with them then "in much fear and trembling." However, out of the 400,000 population, a company had turned to the Lord and they represented the "Church of God in Corinth". But during the five years of the Apostle's absence there had been this grievous spiritual decline which we find described in this letter. Indeed, it was a decline for in the later part of the letter (chapter 15) the Apostle reminds them of "the Gospel which was [then] preached to them, and which they believed". What a Gospel! Knowing what he was going into at Corinth he had made a very definite and firm resolve: it was "to know nothing among you but Jesus Christ, and him crucified". He says here that he laid the Foundation, which was Christ. In five years they had built upon that foundation almost everything BUT Christ. Hence, he returns to the Foundation and is brokenheartedly ("with many tears") starting all over again. They had sent him a letter in which they asked for his mind on eleven matters, and the very fact of their not knowing what was right or wrong on such elementary matters shows how they had lost sight of Christ and the mind of the Spirit. The letter is largely an answer to the questions, but what we are taking particular note of is his approach to the whole tragic situation. We have said that he returned to his original premise - "Jesus Christ, and him crucified". In no Letter is the name of Christ so continuously introduced. It occurs no less than nine times in the first nine verses. Throughout the entire Letter, in every particular and problem, it is as though the Apostle was challenging as to how that, and that, and that corresponded to the Foundation, to Christ. That certainly, whatever he said, was his standpoint. Was it the divisions and partisanship? The challenge is: "Is Christ divided?" Those unhappy and deplorable conditions, he says, are due to immaturity, a baby measure, and

the immaturity is not growing up into Christ. The spiritual eye was blinded to Christ by being occupied with other objects. Even Paul, Apollos, and Peter - he says - were between them and Christ. Paul positively refused to allow his own or any other man's name to justify a party or sect! The names mentioned probably represented a personality complex; or an aspect of truth complex; or a particular, temperamental, traditional, or positional complex; but, whatever it was, its effect or tendency was to obscure Christ, and Paul would have none of it. The irony of the situation was that there was a party which would not join the other sects because they were superior and claimed: "We are of Christ." That SOUNDS good, does it not? But Paul is not having that, either, because it embodied the party SPIRIT as much as any other. Paul is against the SPIRIT of things!

We may observe that many things which started out well and good have in time become more marked by their spirit than by Christ. You meet the superior mentality that 'we are the people' and 'they are not of us'. This is as big an abomination as any pronounced sectarianism. It is not that we SAY that we are of Christ, but how much of Christ and the Spirit of Christ is evident in us? The plummet, or plumb-line, by which the straightness or crookedness is determined is Christ.

So Paul brings Christ alongside of all the eleven questions presented to him in the letter from Corinth. The question of marriage, of non-marriage; of sex; of mixed marriages; of dress - head-covering of women and men; of behaviour in the assembly and at the Lord's Table; of meats offered to idols; of 'tongues' and prophesying, etc. While saying some things as from the Lord, and others as his own Christian judgment, in effect he is raising one question over all and making it the final criterion: 'How does this accord with Christ?'

Would that we always, in all things, so challenged the practical matters of our life in a world like this! Not what the world does or thinks; not what is current in the world, or even with some Christians, but is this well-pleasing and honouring to Christ? Not even: 'Is there any wrong in it?' But - positively - is it governed by love of Christ?

So, as with Israel in the wilderness, Christ has the central place and is ALWAYS IN VIEW.

But that is only one half of the matter. The other half is

## THE SILVER TRUMPETS - THE VOICE OF THE SPIRIT

(Numbers 10:2,8,9,10)

### The place of the Holy Spirit

Trumpets have an interesting place in the Bible, from the first in Numbers 10 to the "last trump" of 1 Corinthians 15:52.

In the wilderness their function was to sound "an alarm", to call to battle, to call to a feast (the Feast of Trumpets), to order the camp for journeying, etc. When all is said about them, a trumpet presupposes an ear to hear. It has no meaning or sense if there is no hearing. Hence, it is unprofitable for the Lord to speak unless there is a hearing ear. The Word of God repeatedly unites these two. "He that hath an ear to hear, let him hear" - but what? "What the Spirit saith unto the churches." The trumpet-sound then is the voice of the Spirit. This was from the door of the Tent of Testimony, that is, with Christ as the governing meaning. Order amongst the Lord's people, individually and collectively. Progress toward the goal and inheritance. To warn of dangers, and to stir to battle. All this is a matter of hearing the voice of the Spirit. If

we bring the principle over to Corinthians we shall - or ought to - be impressed with how large a place the Holy Spirit has in these Letters. Very soon in the first Letter we come on the principle which is an absolutely basic truth, and which runs right through the entire New Testament. This goes right to the heart of the Corinthian situation, as it does to every situation which is one of spiritual declension and weakness. We could fill a whole book with this one truth, because the New Testament has so much show about it. But we can here do no more than indicate it. Right here, then, early in the first Letter to the Corinthians (chapter 2:6-16), it is

#### THE ILLUMINATED SPIRITUAL MIND

The fuller truth is that Christ may be - or may have been - presented in great fullness and yet not understood. The Tabernacle was there complete for all Israel to see, but it was a THING, a SACRED thing, and it was known that God was with it, but it was not understood. It was a comprehensive representation, but what it all meant was not understood. The Holy Spirit was present, but the people's minds were not illuminated. It could hardly be said that the "things which eye hath not seen, nor ear heard (note, eye and ear) nor hath it entered into the heart of man" had really become A DYNAMIC REVELATION to those Christians. "The Spirit searcheth the deep things of God", but things were pathetically shallow and superficial at Corinth. No one who was hearing the voice of the Spirit in an inward way could possibly behave as they were behaving. I have to confess that it is one of my greatest perplexities how a true Christian can behave, look, and go on so long without the Holy Spirit so speaking in them that changes in conduct, appearance, and habits are spontaneously made without anyone else saying anything. I have to ask: 'Where is the Holy Spirit in them?' Here I just must say some relevant things which - although enlarging this message somewhat - are very appropriate to our times. We are in a time in this dispensation when deceiving spirits are invading this earth to such an extent that - to use our Lord's own words - "if it were possible the very elect would be deceived" (Matthew 24:24).

It should be clearly understood that the most outstanding and definite form of deception is THE SIMULATION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. The Christian is so utterly dependent upon the Holy Spirit for everything, especially in the knowledge of Christ that to simulate Him (the Holy Spirit) is the master-stroke of evil SPIRITS. The TRUE Spirit is assailed by FALSE spirits, and chiefly so by imitation. Their imitation will often, or usually, be thought to be something very spiritual. There is a false spirituality. Its most subtle form is to push secondary spiritual things up into a primary place and exaggerate them so that they are believed to be ALL-important! You have it here in 1 Corinthians, and the Apostle LABOURS to correct this because of its perils. See what he says about the GRADED importance of gifts. To these poor deluded Corinthians certain gifts of a display, and spectacular kind were the height of spirituality. This opened the door wide to the false in many ways. The sum of all deception is the projecting, assertion, and intensity of natural (soul) force. Deception came into this world through the soul of Eve, and Satan's link with humanity is just there. This is basic to Paul's strong corrective teaching, and in the first part of this first Letter he lays this as the foundation of all that follows. His warning corrective about women asserting themselves vocally and in other ways in Church life and matters, and his - to some people - strange talk about "covering" and "the angels" has a far more sinister implication than will be regarded.

Another form which deception takes is (and perhaps you will find it hard to believe it) superiority to the Word of God. Yes! It is possible to be so 'spiritual' as to blatantly violate the plain Word of God on the plea: "I felt led", "The Lord showed me", and so on. A man can neglect his plain duty as laid down in Scripture to wife and family, and eventually lose all influence with them and their respect because he is so 'spiritual'. We say this in particular reference to the Christian family. A wife can be so 'spiritual' as to violate the plain

injunction: "Wives, be in subjection to your own husbands." He may not be so 'spiritual' as you think he ought to be, but the Lord will honour the wife who, with the Cross in her own soul, honours His Word. The Word of God says that if a man does not work he should not eat. It is possible to be so 'spiritual' as to spend many hours, and even months of life doing nothing of any vital account. These are only examples of superiority to the Word of God; there are many more, and much worse.

The projecting of soul-life will most certainly result in deception, and the fruit of deception is just this: many psychic experiences, such as 'voices', apparitions, coincidences, which just go SO FAR as to seem of God and then abort and nothing comes of them. They leave a trail of unfinished, incomplete and disappointing 'experiences'. Satan can lead the intensely soulful person 'up the garden', as we say.

Now all this is in the Corinthian Letters and explains Israel's tragedy in the wilderness. Why did a journey of nine days develop into forty years and then end in tragedy? This Letter tells us, and Hebrews 4:12 (with context) puts it concisely and precisely! The soul-life asserted itself against or over the TRULY spiritual.

I expect that I shall get into a lot of hot water for saying some of these things, but things are in a very serious condition in these times and we MUST be faithful. I confess that the more I have got into these Corinthian Letters the more desperate I have felt the situation to be, and the more impelled to seek the explanation.

Well, we have not finished yet, but, dear readers, do you not now see why the Apostle said: "Nothing... but Jesus Christ, and him crucified" - "Christ - crucified"? The Cross is the solution!

Back, for a moment, to where we started. We said that the silver trumpets were the voice of the Holy Spirit, and that a hearing ear is essential to hear "what the Spirit saith". And then we have gone on to raise questions about hearing. But do note, please, how we have related the hearing. We said that first Christ has to be seen by the spiritual eye. The Spirit only speaks about Christ! Then we said that ORDER, movement, waiting, or going, when and where, were consistent with Christ in character, nature, and holiness. And the great altar was at the door through which the way of the voice of the trumpets was heard.

There is one more message in relation to our particular theme at this time before we leave the Corinthian Letters. We have observed that, by many allusions, these two Letters find the believers to whom they were addressed, spiritually where Israel were when in the wilderness, that is, between Egypt and the Land of Promise; between the Exodus - the coming out - and the Eisodos - the entering in. We have seen how precarious that position is, and therefore how strong the warnings are as taken from Israel's tragic failure.

We are now seeing how our main title above applies to that situation. The Second Letter to the Corinthians has some very rich things in it. Of course, commentators almost universally interpret or define it as the Letter of the Christian ministry, and that is summed up in the words in chapter 4, verse 1: "Therefore seeing we have this ministry." We have often taken that clause in the particular connection, i.e. the ministry of the Church. But for our present purpose we light upon another immensely rich and comprehensive phrase. In the same chapter, verse 4, we have: "...the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ"; and then, in verse 6: "...God, that said, Light shall shine out of darkness, who shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." How rich! Break it up: "The glory of Christ." "The gospel of the glory of Christ." "The light of the gospel of the glory of Christ." "The face of Jesus Christ." "The glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." "The light of the knowledge of the glory of God." "The knowledge of the glory of God." Every clause is a theme!

In the context the Apostle makes a great transition with a comparison and a contrast: from Moses to Christ. He is emphasizing the startling and shattering effect upon the people of the glory of God ON the face of Moses. He is very strong on that point, and thus prepares the way for his particular message. The comparison is in THE SAME GLORY, but the contrast is threefold: one, the glory IN the face of Jesus Christ, and, two, the EXCEEDING glory of the latter, leading to three, the effect in each case. The former was a ministry of death, the death-sentence of the Law: the latter was life, the life which comes by grace. This is the transformation implicit in the wilderness, it is the ministry of life in surrounding death. It is the glory of grace in the realm of condemnation. All this, says the Apostle, is focused in "the face of Jesus Christ". The face is the register, the index, the medium of character, of personality. The glory was ON the face of Moses. It was not his own personal perfection of character, divine nature. It was IN the face of Jesus Christ, "who is the image of God" (4:4). It was THEREFORE a surpassing glory. Earlier the Apostle says that we are "REFLECTING... the glory of God". It is not inherent in us; we are but "mirrors" (3:18, margin).

The point of all this, for Corinthians and for all Christians, is that in a wilderness world like Corinth, and the world generally, it is not necessary to perish, to die. It is not necessary to fail and not reach the inheritance. Israel's tragedy need not overtake us, because, although we are but "vessels of fragile clay" (4:7 - Conybeare), there is "the exceeding greatness of the power", which is "of God, and not of ourselves" (4:7).

This is the Mission, the Meaning, the Message of Jesus Christ to His Church as in the world where there is nothing else to help. It is the message to "pilgrims and strangers" here.

The Apostle will take much space in this Letter to meet the cruelty, opposition, criticism, slander, and discrediting work of his enemies, some of them Christians. His inclusive and most powerful answer to them is in this "God hath shined into our hearts." It is the glory which we have beheld in the face of Jesus Christ. We may be poor and despised "earthen vessels", but there is a "treasure" within, the power of which will bring us to glory. By this spiritual experience and possession we can, and shall, reach God's end "while we look, not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen", which are eternal (4:18).

This is true for the wilderness journey, but, says the Apostle, it is true for our "ministry"; a heartening word - if challenging - for the ministers of Christ.

But there is another tremendous allusion running through these two Letters. We have heard the Apostle say that what had happened to him and other Apostles was like that which happened in the creation: "God, that said, Light shall shine" (or: "Let light be") "hath shined in our hearts."

In the second Letter, chapter 5, and verse 17, he says: "If any man be in Christ there is a new creation." God said: "Let there be light." "There is a new creation." In the first Letter, chapter 15, he refers to the two Adams, the first and the last, in contrast: the earthly and the heavenly. It is not difficult to discern that "in the face of Jesus" we have the new and heavenly order of man and creation. This surely, being in the Corinthian Letters, is set over against the disorder and chaos, the darkness and confusion in the old creation spiritually, the "natural man" of the early part of the first Letter. If this is true, and not just our imagination, we can surely see that the position of Israel in the wilderness, and of the Corinthians correspondingly, is that of transition from the old creation - or before it - to the new; from fallen Adam to the New Man, the Last Adam.

"We all, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are changed (being changed) into the same image."

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