

'life... Promised Before Times Eternal'

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Holy Spirit is reproducing what was true of the Lord Jesus in us, and the beginning of His history and the beginning of our history is in eternity, governed by eternal life.

Scripture: John 1:4-10, Romans 5:17, Romans 8:29, 2 Corinthians 3:3

Topics: "Eternal Life", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes that the Holy Spirit is writing a spiritual biography of Jesus in the hearts of believers, starting from eternity rather than earthly beginnings. He explains that just as Jesus was born of God before time, so too are believers, linking them to eternal life and a new identity that transcends earthly origins. Sparks highlights the importance of understanding our spiritual journey as one that progresses through stages of infancy, childhood, and manhood, each marked by the governing factor of eternal life. He encourages believers to recognize their true home is in eternity, and that their spiritual growth involves both the joys and trials of life. Ultimately, the sermon calls for a deeper appreciation of the profound truth of being born from above and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in shaping our lives to reflect Christ.

Transcript

Our basic passage for these messages is 2 Corinthians 3:3: "...being made manifest that ye are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not in tables of stone, but in tables that are hearts of flesh".

We have seen that the Holy Spirit is writing a spiritual life of the Lord Jesus in the hearts of believers, and we proceed now with this spiritual biography.

THE BEGINNING OF THE BIOGRAPHY

When a biography is being written of some important person, we always want to know their beginning - something about their birth, their home and their country. That is very important to us where the Lord Jesus is concerned, for what we are trying to see is that what was true of Him the Holy Spirit is seeking to make true in us. His beginning has to be our beginning; His home has to be our home; His country must be our country. All that was true of Him at the beginning has to be made true of us, that is, in a spiritual way.

Now, when we open our New Testament, we have the biography of the earthly life of the Lord Jesus in three of the Gospels, and two of those Gospels tell us of His earthly beginning and birth. They give us His genealogy, tracing Him right back to the beginning of man on the earth. The third Gospel gives us the beginning of His ministry, but has nothing to say about Bethlehem, nor His earthly mother, nor His home. It just begins with the ministry of the Lord Jesus, when He was thirty years of age. But the fourth Gospel ignores all that. It has nothing to say about Bethlehem, nor about Nazareth. It says nothing about David, nor Adam, but just leaps right back over all earthly history and takes us into eternity before time was. You know that I am speaking about the Gospel by John, which begins with that dateless time before the world was, and shows us that the Sonship of the Lord Jesus was not a thing of time only, but that it was eternal and supernatural, and not natural. John describes it in this way (and he includes us with the Lord Jesus in this matter): "...which were born, not of bloods (that is, the blood of Joseph and Mary), nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13). Born of God! When was the Lord Jesus born of God? Not at Bethlehem only, but away back there before time was. And the wonderful thing is this: that the deepest truth in the life of a child of God is that he or she is not a child of time, but a child of eternity, born from above - not in Bethlehem, nor in Switzerland, nor England, nor Germany, nor in any other place here on this earth - but born from above. That is a supernatural act of the Spirit of God.

What does it mean to be born? It is to receive life. If, then, we are born from above; if ours is a supernatural birth, then the link with the Lord Jesus is the link of eternal life.

We must get hold of this! You may think that when you were born again it was in some place that you can mention, but that is only something to do with this earth. You were not really born again on this earth. You were born where the Lord Jesus was born. You were not really born on any date which you can mention in the earthly calendar. You were born in eternity. Your home is not here at all. Your home is outside of this world and outside of time. In this matter we, like the Lord Jesus, are born with eternal life.

This is a very wonderful thing. If the Bible is true, it is a very wonderful book. If Christianity is true, it is a very wonderful thing. We are so familiar with these things about Christianity that we have lost something of the wonder of it all. I think we need to sit down with our Christianity again and really think about it in this way: the Holy Spirit is reproducing what was true of the Lord Jesus in us, and the beginning of His history and the beginning of our history is in eternity.

You ought to look up all those references to "before the world was", "before times eternal", and see us in the mind of God away back there! "Whom he foreknew, he also foreordained to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Romans 8:29), and the first thing in that image is the eternal life which is in Him. So John begins his Gospel with: "In him was life" (John 1:4), and later in that same Gospel Jesus will say: "I am come that they may have life" (John 10:10). In both of those statements it is taken for granted that no one outside of Jesus Christ has that life. If they already had life why should He come from heaven in order that they should have it?

This is very elementary, I know, but we have not got very far yet. This is the beginning of the biography of Jesus Christ which is being written by the Holy Spirit in the hearts of believers. Of course, it is very simple when you come to think about it. It is very wonderful, very profound, but very simple, for the very first thing that a newly born again child of God realizes is that something has happened which makes him know that he does not belong here any longer. He has a new home, a new nativity, a new genealogy, and it goes - not back to Adam. Thank God for that! - but back, past Adam, into the eternity of Jesus Christ. You understand that I am not talking about the deity of Jesus Christ, but about His Sonship, and I said before

that that Sonship relates to humanity. I am not going to argue that out now, but the purpose of God in creating man was to bring Himself into the relationship of Father and children, and by childhood to sonship. That is another thing I am not going to argue about! I think that will come out as we go on.

So we begin the biography in eternity. I wonder if you are aware of that! We have a hymn which says:

"I am a stranger here, within a foreign land,

My home is far away, upon a golden strand."

As we go on our life-journey we do find that we are getting further and further away from our natural birth, further and further away from this world, and we are becoming more conscious of our heavenly relationship.

ETERNAL LIFE THE GOVERNING FACTOR

I want to look at two or three fragments of Scripture:

"For if, by the trespass of the one, death reigned through the one, much more shall they that receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one, even Jesus Christ. So then as through one trespass the judgement came unto all men to condemnation; even so through one act of righteousness the free gift came unto all men to justification of life" (Romans 5:17,18).

"...in hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised before times eternal" (Titus 1:2). That life, then, links us with what is eternal.

"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, according to the promise of the life which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 1:1).

Now I want to say one or two quite important things at this point. This that is called eternal life is the factor which determines everything in history and destiny. Not religion, nor ritual, nor orthodoxy, but life determines history and human destiny. It governs everything. The Bible is God's Book of world history and human destiny, and it is wonderful how universal the Bible is. It comprehends the whole human race, it governs the destiny of all the nations which make up the human race, and it contains the principles of destiny. And the centre of the Bible, from the beginning to the end, is this that is called eternal life. It is the all-governing factor.

Life determines whether God is present or not. The question, down to the smallest detail, is a question of life. Begin with the individual and the individual's personal experiences. If we understood rightly we should know that this matter of life is governing our personal experiences. We are individually involved in this great governing matter of life, and that determines whether God is with us. The same is true of any company of God's people, or any company of religious people. The thing that determines whether God is there is this matter of life. God is the source of life, and He cannot be present and life not be there. That, surely, is a very searching thing for our assemblies! Thus, in every sphere, this question of life governs.

Now we are going to look at the Bible along three lines. The earthly life of the Lord Jesus was divided into three sections, and each one of those sections has to be repeated in the life of the believer. First, there was His birth and infancy; secondly, His childhood; and, thirdly, His manhood. These are three distinct sections in the biography of Jesus Christ, and the whole Bible is divided into those three main sections.

The issue in each of the sections is life.

BABYHOOD

The first section is what we call the time of the antediluvians, that is, the people before the Flood, and the great antediluvians were Abel, Enoch and Noah. That was the infancy of the people of God, of the Divine biography which was being written by the Holy Spirit. That infancy is marked by very simple things, as one would expect. We do not expect very much when we are dealing with babies, and here we have, in that particular period, the babyhood of the people of God.

One simple thing governed the babyhood of the race, and it is the characteristic of all spiritual babyhood. In doctrine we call it 'Justification by Faith'. I am afraid I am rather tired of that phrase, for it sounds so theological! Justification by faith is the mark of spiritual infancy, the beginning of spiritual history, but I think some of the music has gone from that phrase. What is justification? Another word used is, as you know, righteousness. But what is righteousness by faith? I love a certain translation, which translates that word 'righteousness', or justification, like this: 'Right standing with God.' Is that not lovely? 'Being in right standing with God.' Is not that what the whole world is craving for? Is that not what the whole human race longs for? Is that not what we all desire more than anything else? God, being what He is, so perfect, so holy, so particular, is it possible that you and I, being what we are, should be in right standing with Him?

You know, in business that is a very important thing. In the commercial world, if one business is asked to do something for another, they look at their books to see what transactions they have had with them before, and they say: 'Are they in right standing with us? Have they paid all their accounts? Are they in our debt?' Are they on good terms with us? Are we quite satisfied with them? Can we trust them? Can we commit our business to them?' It all depends upon whether they are in right standing or not.

That is how it is between humanity and God. So far as humanity is concerned, God may very well ask: 'Are they in right standing with us? Are they in debt to us? Have they been right in their business transactions?' That is all gathered up into one word, so far as God is concerned: 'Are they in the Lord Jesus? If they are it is all right. All the debts are paid and all the business is clean. We can go on with them. We can commit our interests to them.' That is right standing with God, justification by faith, righteousness by faith. Now you notice what Paul said in that passage in the Letter to the Romans which we read. What is the basis of the New Testament? Life because of right standing with God. That is wonderful! Can it be true? Brother, sister, worried to death about yourself and how God looks at you, worried because you think that God looks at you as you look at yourself, here is this wonderful word which is the beginning! The antediluvian just received life on the basis of right standing with God. That is all!

What about Abel? Do you think that he was a perfect man? But the whole of Abel's life is gathered up into one thing: he believed God, and he knew that he was in right standing with God. (Hebrews 11:4.)

What shall we say about Enoch? I think he was a very wonderful person. If you read the chapter in Genesis where Enoch is mentioned you find that it is all about people who are dying because of sin. This one lived so many years and died, that one lived so many years and died, and you are ready to go on with the whole miserable story - but it is interrupted. It just says, in Genesis 5:24: "Enoch walked with God - he was in right standing with God - and he was not, for God took him." Then you go back to more of the miserable story, until you come to Noah.

The whole earth was full of iniquity. The heart of every man was evil, but there was one man and his family which stood on one ground only. Noah, says Peter, was a "preacher of righteousness" - a preacher of right standing with God. The whole world was not in right standing with God, so it had to die, but Noah and his family, who were in right standing with God, were saved from death and from judgment.

Did I say that this was infancy? I think there are a great many Christians who have not got further than infancy yet! However, it is a great thing to have got that far!

The Corinthians had not got beyond Noah, for Paul said that they were still infants. They were the Lord's, because they had apprehended the truth of justification by faith, but the biography stopped at that chapter. They were still in infancy long after they should have gone on into the next chapter.

Do you see the point that I am trying to make? It is that God has ordained the whole history of humanity upon this basis of life, and the beginning of it is on the ground of right standing with God.

CHILDHOOD

The second stage in the life of the Lord Jesus on this earth was His childhood, His boyhood. We have not a great deal about His boyhood in the New Testament. There are only one or two things said about it, but it was a long period, and we cannot believe that it was an empty period. It does say that He "grew in stature, and in grace with God and men" (Luke 2:52). He grew in right standing with God.

The second period of the spiritual biography of Jesus Christ is much fuller than that, indeed, it occupies practically all the rest of the New Testament, for it is the period between being born and being perfected. It states that He "was made perfect" (Hebrews 5:9). What does that mean? It may create a problem for you in that He who was without sin, whom we think of as being perfect, should have to be MADE perfect, but, of course, our idea of the word 'perfect' is not the New Testament idea. The New Testament meaning of the word 'perfect' is 'being made full, or complete'. While for us it may mean being made different in nature, it was not that with Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit was working upon that which was not yet complete to make it complete.

I wonder if I am going to get into trouble over what I am going to say now! I am going to ask those of you who have been saved for, say, sixty years: 'Are you better in yourself today than you were in the beginning?' I have been saved for sixty years and I think I am a great deal worse today than I was when I was saved! Does that sound terrible? But you know what I mean - I am no more perfect today than I was sixty years ago. If you are speaking about my human nature, what I am as a child of Adam, well, old Adam is as troublesome to me today as ever he was! And yet, something is happening in us. I sometimes say: 'Well, I may be pretty bad today, but the Lord alone knows what I would have been if He had not saved me!'

This is the period from infancy to manhood. I believe that the Lord Jesus had many a temptation and many a trial during those thirty years. We just have a little glimpse of his home life, in that He had some brothers and sisters, and, you know, brothers and sisters can really put you on the spot! I had some brothers and sisters and I was not the eldest of the family! So they were often a very big trial to me. Jesus had some brothers and sisters and we are told that His brothers did not believe in Him. It is not easy when people in your own family do not believe in you. 'Oh, he thinks he is somebody! He has a lot of strange ideas, but we will knock all that out of him!' Is that not the way they talk? Jesus was not without those difficulties and trials, and that lasted for thirty years. I do not know how much Mary told her other sons and daughters

about Jesus, or whether she still kept it all in her heart, but they could see that He was different, and that was enough to provoke opposition.

Well, I need not say more. The period of boyhood was a period of discipline, a period of learning, a period of education. The Old Testament has that period and it is quite a long one, for it is the period of the Patriarchs.

Who are the Patriarchs? Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and Moses. Do you not see what a period of education that was? God had these men in His school and He was teaching them the laws of Divine life. Visit Abraham at school and see what he is learning about the laws of Divine life! Was Isaac at school? Was he learning the great laws of Divine life? Let me put that in another way. Was Isaac being taught the principles of resurrection life? You know, we have some wrong ideas about these men, and we often think that Isaac was a little boy and Abraham could pick him up and put him on the altar. From our standpoint he was a grown man at that stage, not even a teenager. He had grown to have a will, a mind and feelings of his own, and he could have resisted his father. He could have rebelled against him. He was in a hard school, for he had to surrender everything to death in order that he might learn the law of resurrection life.

From Isaac we go on to Jacob. Need we say anything about Jacob? Was he at school? He was in a very hard school indeed! The discipline in Jacob's life was very severe, for God put him through it. However, he came out all right in the end and became the father of the nation, of the twelve tribes. That was resurrection! That was life out of death! That was victory out of adversity!

MANHOOD

Now you are wondering what the next phase in the Old Testament can be! Well, of course, I leave out a lot, and come to the phase of the Prophets. That is really a longer phase than the part of the Old Testament which is called the Prophets, for Samuel was a Prophet. You go through the whole school of the Prophets, and when you listen to them what do you hear? Can you hear the Prophets? They are crying, they are groaning, they are in pain. What is all this about? It is the travail of life. It is the mature, the manhood phase of the Old Testament.

That phase - the travail of life - began immediately Jesus moved from the Jordan. The battle for life began then and from then on to the Cross it was the travail of life. This great thing called 'eternal life' has entered into a great conflict in the universe, and Calvary became the centre of the whole universe. It was not just something that happened in a small place called Palestine, just outside Jerusalem. It reached out into all the world, and then it reached beyond the world. Calvary was a great cosmic battle. Paul says that He stripped off principalities and powers in His Cross (Colossians 2:2). It was the great travail of life.

Now, dear friends, this ought to help us to understand what the Holy Spirit is doing with us. I do not want to discourage young Christians, nor do I want to cast a shadow over your growing Christian life, but I must say this: the further we go with the Lord, the longer we live with Him and the closer we walk with Him, the more intense becomes this travail of life. Is that true? What do you know about that? We have sometimes said, when we are having a very difficult experience: 'It does not get easier as we get older!' You would think that, having walked with the Lord for so many years, He would let us have a little easier time at the end, but He does not do so. Does that explain something? Things are getting more difficult and sometimes the devil says: 'Ah, this is because the Lord is not with you. If that great Lord that you believe in was with you, you would not have these troubles!' That is exactly what the devil said to the Lord Jesus when He was on the Cross. 'Your Father has left you. You are suffering like this because He has given you up.' You

see how the devil twists things! But spiritual maturity involves intensive conflict.

I have said that the third period in the Old Testament, that of the Prophets, is the travail of life. How the Prophets are suffering to bring back that Divine life in fullness to the people of God! Yes, the Old Testament closes - but what are you going to say about closing the Old Testament? It closes in tragedy, in hopelessness? Not at all! It closes in order that the New Testament may open, and what does the travail work out to in the New Testament? A new history begins. Out of the travail 'a child is born, a son is given', the Old Testament is lifted up on to the heavenly plane, and the Holy Spirit begins all over again in the spiritual realm. He begins with our new birth, takes us on into the period of spiritual growth, where we learn the laws of spiritual life, and then on into the travail of life that the Kingdom should come, and we are called upon to share this part of the biography of Jesus Christ - "If we suffer with him, we shall also reign with him" (2 Timothy 2:12). And what was the suffering of Jesus? It was the travail of His soul that He should see His seed, prolong His days and be satisfied. That is what He is doing in us now by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is working toward that end - that He should be satisfied, and we shall be satisfied when we awake in His likeness.

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