

Obedience to the Word of God

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of knowing and obeying God's will, which is realized through the Word of God, and the role of the Holy Spirit in guiding us to obey God's Word.

Scripture: Deuteronomy 4:1, Joshua 1:8

Topics: "God's Will", "Obedience"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the critical importance of obedience to the Word of God as the foundation for understanding and fulfilling God's will. He outlines that the Bible is fundamentally about God's purpose and that true spiritual progress is contingent upon adhering to His Word. Sparks highlights the tragic consequences of failing to obey God's commands, illustrating this with biblical examples, and stresses that the Holy Spirit plays a vital role in guiding believers to align with God's will. Ultimately, he encourages believers to immerse themselves in Scripture, as it is essential for spiritual growth and the realization of God's purpose in their lives.

Transcript

These messages and this ministry are based upon a three-fold supposition, or assumption:

1. That you have a very real concern to know the will of God.
2. That you are quite prepared to consider anything that may be a help to you in that direction.
3. That you are of a mind to obey any light that the Lord may give as to His will.

Given that foundation, I think the Lord will find a clear way of meeting us and speaking to us.

The business of any servant of the Lord is, perhaps in many ways, to bring His people to know what is His will concerning them, and it is on the heart of this servant of the Lord, if He will help, to give you a fuller understanding of what that good and perfect will of God is. We will come back to that more specifically as we go on.

The Bible, which is the charter of the Christian faith, is altogether occupied with that one thing. You can read through your Bible, and perhaps you will find some of it rather tedious, and other things you might not understand, but the whole Bible, altogether, is concerned with that one thing - the will of God. So it is as well to read the Bible everywhere in that relationship: What has this to do with the will of God?

GOD MOVING ACCORDING TO PURPOSE

In other words, the Bible is a revelation of God moving according to purpose. That is only another way of speaking about the will of God. God is seen, from the first words in the Bible to the last, moving according to purpose, moving IN and WITH purpose. He is a God who is motivated by one final and all-inclusive object, which we understand in New Testament language as God's eternal purpose.

The first section of the Bible, which consists of the first five Books, shows us, clearly, fully and meticulously, God moving according to purpose. It is a section of movement forward, and although in the fifth book, the Book of Deuteronomy, there is a retrospective aspect, a looking back with this word: "Thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God hath led thee" (8:2), even that retrospective aspect has a forward aspect connected with it, for the remembering is related to what is yet to be. As you know, it is the book of people between a past history and a new history of the future, and it is looking back to pick up the lessons of the past in order to carry them into the future. So we move into the Book of Joshua with all that the past history has taught as the foundation, and how meticulous the Lord is in that book of Deuteronomy! He is reiterating and re-emphasizing, and laying a very sound and very particular foundation for the future. It is important to note that in the light of what we are going to say, for we are going to be occupied with the laws of God by which His will - which is His purpose - is realized, fulfilled and accomplished in His people. So all this first section has the future in view, with the will of God governing.

The last section of the Old Testament, the Prophets, is occupied with the tragedy of lost purpose. The cry of the Prophets is that God's will has not been realized and fulfilled. It is a tragic cry of failure and disappointment, and you must listen to it, for as you listen to these Prophets and hear their anguished cry over these people, you are hearing just this: 'What God meant has not been realized, and that is a terrible thing!' The Prophets have a voice of tragedy, pathos and anguish, because God has been disappointed over His purpose in these people, and they have missed what He intended for them.

So we have the first and last sections of the Old Testament. We are not here occupied with the whole of the Old Testament, but just notice these in connection with the will of God. Of course, I am talking about the big, comprehensive will of God, not about what we might call the little wills of God with which we are occupied every day when we say: 'What is the Lord's will for me in this, or that?' No, that is not what I am talking about but, mark you, all those expressions of the Divine will in the particular matters and situations are gathered into the big will, and until you get into that big will, you really do not have the ground for the little wills of God, the particular application of that will.

Turn over to the New Testament, and in the first section God is taking up His purpose again. Now He is taking it up in the Person of His Son, and in Him the purpose and will of God is embodied and personified. Now it is all gathered into a PERSON. It has been expressed, as the writer of the Hebrew Letter says, in many different ways and "by divers portions" at different times. Now the whole thing is summed up in the Person of Jesus Christ, who says: "I am come... to do thy will O God" (Hebrews 10:7). This whole will and purpose of God, therefore, is personified, or incarnated, in Jesus Christ, God's Son; and although you have heard that a thousand times and have listened to many, many messages about it, it may not have occurred to you that there is one statement by the Lord Jesus which comprehends all this: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). That is a comprehensive statement as to the whole will of God.

"I AM THE WAY"

What do you have a way for? To get somewhere! A way implies a goal, a moving toward an object. 'I am the way of this eternal purpose of God. I am the way of its realization. I am the way, the embodiment of the will of God.' "I am come to do thy will, O my God." The way is a Person.

"I AM THE TRUTH"

That simple clause, or definition, is so immense that it needs many hours! Men have been preaching on it for centuries. In effect the Lord Jesus is saying: 'I am set in a realm which has been deceived and led away from the will of God, from the Divine purpose. I am in a world that is now a lie in its constitution. I am the truth over against all that which is false in the human race, in the creation, in this universe.' If the will of God is all-comprehending, vast, and great, the lie of the devil is an immense thing, and it is something that has to be overcome in you, in me, and in the whole race. Truth has to be put into our constitution to destroy the lie that is there.

I dare not dwell upon that, but just indicate it in the connection with which we are concerned - the will of God. "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). We talk about 'conversion', and, you know, a fundamental factor in conversion, in turning round in the opposite way, is turning from what is false to what is true, coming INTO the truth of God, as to why we have a being in His purpose, why He is dealing with us as He is according to His great will, and what it all means. Do you and I not need every day to know the good of that conversion, the real and true meaning of God in Christ for us?

"I AM THE LIFE"

We have far too small an idea of that! There is a marvellous statement in the Letter of Paul to the Colossians, where he speaks of the life which God foreordained unto His glory. Before ever the world was created and man upon it, God's thought was centred in this thing called 'life'. It was in His eternal counsels. That is the battleground of the ages, and is the key to so much - what God means by life, the life of God's eternal purpose, the life of His all-captivating will, the life which the Lord Jesus is.

This is the day which is called 'Good Friday' and we were reading this morning of the Lord Jesus, having received the sentence of crucifixion, walking toward the Hill with Simon carrying His Cross, and the women of Jerusalem weeping and wailing for Him. I was impressed again with the way in which He turned to them and said: 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for Me. There is no need to weep for Me. You weep for yourselves and for your children, but not for Me!' What does that mean? That this Cross, toward which He was going, on which He was going so soon to be impaled, and all that was going to fall upon Him there, was not the end. The women may have thought so, but He knew that it was not. Even then tears for Him were not justified: "... who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross..." (Hebrews 12:2). The way of the Cross was life, not death. This was how He was going to secure that for which He had come, and which God had intended for man all down the ages, and from before the world was.

"I AM the way, the truth, and the life." Dear friends, we cannot get outside of that! If we comprehended what those three terms mean, that would be all that we need. They compass everything.

The New Testament, then, introduces this eternal will and purpose of God in a Person; but what is the rest of the New Testament about after the Gospels? It is simply the working out of these three things. All the rest of the New Testament is gathered into the way that Christ is, the truth that is in Jesus, and the life that is by His death and resurrection.

Having said that, we can come to our particular message for this time.

THE DIVINE LAWS OF REALIZING THE DIVINE PURPOSE

We must read some Scriptures to get to this:

"This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth, but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success" (or, as the margin says, "deal wisely") - (Joshua 1:8).

"And now, O Israel, hearken unto the statutes and unto the judgement, which I teach you, for to do them; that ye may live, and go in and possess the land which the Lord, the God of your fathers, giveth you. Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you" (Deuteronomy 4:1,2).

"These words, which I command thee this day, shall be upon thine heart: and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shall talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be for frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the door posts of thy house, and upon thy gates" (Deuteronomy 6:6-9).

"He answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4).

The Divine laws of realizing the Divine purpose of knowing, of doing the will of God, which is the ultimate thing in Christianity. Here it is perfectly clear that it is the law of the absolute government of the Word of God.

We have read from Joshua, and we have intimated already that the Book of Joshua is the resumption, after a nation's failure and perishing in the wilderness, of the Divine will and purpose, and moving forward now under that government. Right there at the beginning, the foundation of this new movement and all that is involved in it, all that it means against a repetition of the failure and tragedy that has been, is the meticulous observance of the Word of God. The Word and the will of God go together, and there is no progress in this great calling into which you and I are called in the mind, the purpose and the will of God except by the Word of God. There must be obedience to the Word, the cherishing of the Word, the binding of the Word upon our lives in all matters. I have said how meticulous the Lord was in that Book of Deuteronomy because, on the one side, there was the terrible tragedy which had taken place and, on the other side, the tremendous prospect. There, in chapter after chapter, He is saying: 'Remember what I said? Remember what I said! Call to remembrance all that I have said to you.' The law of prospect is the government of God's Word. The people had been forty years on probation in the wilderness, and the one thing that stood over that forty years was a testing of the heart as to the Word of God. Remember Deuteronomy 8:2: "And thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God hath led thee these forty years in the wilderness, that He might humble thee, to PROVE thee, to know what was in thine heart, WHETHER THOU Wouldest KEEP HIS COMMANDMENTS, OR NO." In other words: 'Whether thou wouldest obey His Word, and what place His Word had in thy heart.'

The probation of life is always the testing of a wilderness experience. The trials of the journey and of the experiences are, in God's mind, to see what is in our hearts, whether we really have a heart for the Lord

and whether, after all our professions and protestations, the will of God is really THE thing which governs our whole life. The Lord is trying us out on that - "Whether thou wouldest keep his commandments, or no". The testing is by the Word of God, and perhaps we know something of that daily?

So we come to Joshua, and a new phase begins on the other side of Jordan with a reaffirmation that the Word of God is to be kept always before the face, on their arms, on their foreheads, on the thresholds of their homes. The Word is always there to govern them. They were a called people, called by God out of Egypt, and called by His name, but the calling is not enough. We have all been called, but, after the call, comes the testing; then, when the testing has been proved, we are chosen.

THE RESULTS OF FAILURE TO OBEY GOD'S WORD

Everything in the Word of God turns upon this one thing: the government of God's Word. Where the Word of God was not honoured there was disaster, and because of failure to do what God had made known as to His will there was calamity. Again and again in the Old Testament we find disaster as the result of a failure to keep the Word of God always before them. Even Moses, who had sacrificed and suffered so much for those people, was at the last forbidden by the Lord to ask any more that he might go into the land. Why? Because the Lord had said something and Moses had not meticulously observed what He had said. 'Well,' you say, 'that is terrible! He is a hard God.' Ah! but you must remember that it was not just Moses - Moses has attained and obtained now, for he was with Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration - but it was the people for ever afterwards who had to learn this lesson: you cannot violate anything that the Lord has said without forfeiting and losing something.

Then we remember David bringing the ark up to Jerusalem and making a new cart on which to carry it. But there was a disaster on the way. The whole thing, about which they seemed to be having such a good time and feeling that they were being prospered and blessed of the Lord, turned into that threshing-floor calamity. Uzzah died before the Lord, and David was angry with Him that day. He turned the ark aside and went and sulked, nursing his grievance with the Lord. But he got over that, and we do get over these things! We have those bad times with the Lord, but when we get over them He is able to show us the meaning of what He has done. David went back to the Word of the Lord and found the Lord's instructions about the carrying of the ark. He had not said: 'Thou shalt make a new cart'. That was not in the Word at all, indeed, it was another heathen idea. Then David saw and said: 'Oh, it is written that the Levites shall carry the ark.' The tragedy of that day, with the all good intentions, was because the Word of God was overlooked and missed, but the Lord never overlooks His Word.

There may be many secret tragedies in our lives, many arrests in our spiritual progress, not because our motives were not good, but the best motives may just miss the particular thought of God, and He does not substitute a good motive for something that He has laid down as law.

This all sounds very terrible, but we must take it further, and this is where our hearts are really going to be touched. The answer to these failures was not just a sort of legal, mechanical way of observing some statement in the Bible. The issue was very much bigger than that! If you will look at every such instance in the Old Testament, the big and the small, you will see that it was always a matter of the Lord's presence. Do you remember Ai? What had the Lord said about the principles of spiritual progress? You know what He had said! The people came to Ai, and you know what Achan did. He violated the Word of God, and the whole of Israel was arrested in their progress, brought to a standstill and there was a scene of tragedy. But what was the real tragedy? The manifest presence of the Lord had departed! Is not the manifest presence

of the Lord everything? Oh, we do not want anything greater than that! Surely there is no heart here which is interested in anything in this life and all this world apart from the presence of the Lord! If only we know that the Lord is with us, what a lot of difference that makes! There may be a lot of victories, a lot of strength, yes, there may be conflicts, as there were with Joshua afterwards, there may be many problems and many difficulties in life, but if only we are assured that the Lord is with us, that is everything, is it not? I tell you that is my battleground all the way along. The devil is so cruel, using the very discipline of God meant to bring us into His greater fullness, using those trials as accusations against God, and making us feel that because of this situation and circumstance, this trial, this difficulty, this thing that is so hard, the Lord is not with us. Don't you listen to that lie! You will be absolutely worsted, ruled out of all the conflict and the possession if you take on that lie of the devil.

The presence of the Lord is the battleground. What can we do without His presence? How can we get on without it? What would our meetings be but for His presence? If only we are able to say after our prayer-meetings: 'The LORD was with us. He was there and we knew His presence.' That is life, and that is strength.

Now all that in the Bible, as you see, hung upon this Word of God. He is with us according to His Word, on the basis of His Word and He is only with us as His Word is in our hearts. So the Apostle says: "Let the word of God dwell in you richly in all wisdom" (Colossians 3:16), and that is the Presence of the Lord. He stood back at Ai and in the incident in David's life because of the defaulting over His Word. And it is always like that.

THE TRUSTEE OF THE WORD

The Holy Spirit! You see, He is present as a jealous Trustee of the Word, will and purpose of God. I thank God for that! You are probably thinking: 'This is rather oppressive, rather heavy, exacting, demanding and rather hard!' Oh, yes, that is true and right, BUT the Holy Spirit...! For what has He come? Why is He here? Why is He in us? He is, as I have said, the jealous custodian of the Word of God. He is very watchful. He is referred to as the "seven Spirits of God" (Revelation 3:1), which means complete spiritual knowledge, discernment and perception. If I may put it in this way, the Holy Spirit is here in trust with the will of God, in trust with the purpose of God, and, therefore, in trust with the Word of God, for these things all go together. The known presence of the Holy Spirit, and the working of the energy of the Holy Spirit are all in this connection - to bring us, by way of the Word of God, to the end to which we have been called. The Word of God is the ground of the Holy Spirit's activity. You see that illustrated here in the Old Testament. The Spirit of God is in charge. He is the Captain of the hosts of the Lord. In the New Testament the Holy Spirit has come to dwell within in order to keep us on the line of the Word of God, and if we are sensitive to Him, without perhaps knowing the particular Scripture that applies, we shall know that something is not right. We are just out of adjustment with the Lord. There is something that does not say: 'That is right and good and proper.' There is a sort of pause in us. The Holy Spirit knows why that is, and if we will seek the Lord about it and turn to His Word, He will just put His finger on something; and we say: 'Why, that has been there all the time, but here my situation just contradicts it.' So we are tested by the Word as to the heart, and the Holy Spirit has come for that. It is the ground for His working.

Let me say to young Christians, out of a long experience, that, although you may not understand a great deal of the Bible, and you may not seem to enjoy it, READ it! Even if it is labour, read it, work at it, get down to it. You know, you have a tape recorder inside you! We have a lot of tapes in the office of messages spread over many years. Sometimes one is asked for and we look it out, and just occasionally I

want to hear a bit of it. Then I say: 'Did I say that? Oh, yes, it is coming back to me now from somewhere far away. Yes, I did say it.' Have you tried to remember something, someone's name, some person or some particular thing, but it has gone? 'What WAS that person's name? When was it that THAT happened? Where was it? Oh, I give it up!' Do you? If you understand anything about psychology, you won't give it up. When it happens with me my folk say: 'He has gone away!' I cannot let go of that thing until I have remembered it! I am not looking anywhere for it, but I set my mind to recover it, and then the point comes where I feel utterly defeated. But I have learnt something, and I let go. Later on, the thing just comes floating into my mind. Where has it come from? My tape recorder, speaking back after perhaps many years. Have you had that experience?

The Word of God is like that. I am so glad that in my early Christian life I set myself to a systematic study of the Bible, book by book. I did not understand it all, indeed, there are many things today that I do not understand, but in those days I could often have closed the book because it did not seem to mean anything. But I worked at it; I analysed the books without spiritual understanding, but I worked - and am I not glad today! If I have any spiritual ministry today it is the Holy Spirit working upon what is there. The Word is there, and the Spirit works upon it. In times of need it becomes more than the Word - it becomes the life.

Young Christians, do not give up the Bible because it is difficult. Work at it, and the time will come when you will say: 'Thank God for that hard labour over the Bible!' One of the greatest, if not the greatest, Bible expositors of this last century said to me once: 'Sometimes it is such a weariness in my work with the Bible that I almost wish there was no Bible there!' Well, he laboured at it, but the fruit of his ministry is all over the world.

The Spirit works upon the Word. Give Him His ground. It is the ground of spiritual progress by the Holy Spirit. There may be an unconscious control of the Word in the sense that you may not know exactly what a Scripture is, but you know there is something that has got hold of you. That is the Spirit working. The thing is written inside you by the Spirit. The new covenant is written upon the heart.

That is the beginning; but what does this mean after all? It may still seem objective to you, just things said, but spiritual progress in the will of God unto the full purpose of God in our calling means that demands will not be made without a very meticulous observance of what is in the Bible.

Why this word today? Oh, it is born out of a tremendous amount of exercise over recent years! Why the weakness of Christianity today? Why the weakness of so many Christians? Why the slowness of their spiritual progress? Why the failure of so many? I put my finger upon a large number of things that are here in the Word of God, as clearly to be seen as anything can be, and I look at those Christians and find that in their behaviour, in their appearance, in their conduct and way of going on, in their relationships there is just as clear and definite a contradiction of what is here in the Bible as anything could be. The Bible has something to say about anything that you can think of. If I mentioned some of the things that the Bible speaks of, you would be surprised: 'The Bible says something about THAT?' Yes, it does! What is the meaning of the tragedy of so many marriages? That is a practical point! Then you go behind and ask: 'Why did the marriage take place at all? On what ground? A fascination? An infatuation? An emotion? An impulse? A desire to be married anyhow?' It is a tragedy, because that marriage was not based upon a real spiritual relatedness. The first thing was not given its place, because there were other interests. The Word says precisely: "Be not unequally yoked with unbelievers" (2 Corinthians 6:14). Are you going to make spiritual progress if you violate that? No! There will certainly be tragedy sooner or later. I take that as

an example, but I could mention many other things that I am seeing in Christianity today.

I am trying to be faithful with you young Christians, because I am deeply concerned for you that you do not miss God's best, God's fullest, and so I say that that depends upon your having the Word of God in you, so that the Holy Spirit can touch something and say: 'Now, what about this?' I want to be serious on this matter, because it is a pressing issue in Christianity today. The Christianity that is being produced now is a terrible caricature of Christ. Young Christians, having God's fullest and best depends upon your being serious about the Word of God.

There is the other side, of course, and what a blessed thing it is to feel that there is no impediment, no restraint with the Lord, that there is a clear way, and that the presence of the Lord is very real! Heaven is opened! I know of nothing more blessed in all life than those times when there is no cloud between the Lord and myself, and His presence is so real and so wonderful. I wish it were always like that! We sing the hymn:

"These were but seasons, beautiful and rare;

Abide with me, and they shall ever be."

Well, that is the wrong way of putting it! It should be:

"Let me abide with Thee, and they shall ever be."

Deviations bring a cloud, but there is nothing more precious in all human history than this joy of the Lord, this peace of God, this sense that the Lord is for you, not against you. You have days, hours, weeks of spiritual ecstasy, and so it is worth it to be obedient and let the Lord's Word rule in your heart, as the Scripture says.

When the Lord Jesus was dealing with the devil in the wilderness, He was dealing with an evil person, but He was dealing with very much more than that - He was dealing with the whole issue of life and death. The devil was trying to get Him, coerce Him, tempt Him, constrain Him, compel Him to take a way which was out of the will of God and would mean premature death, a death which would be death and not victory. The Lord Jesus was dealing with this whole issue of life and death, so underline and encircle the word: "It is WRITTEN, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God." Put that in the positive way, ruling out the negative clause: 'Man shall LIVE by every word that cometh out of the mouth of God' - and that is God's thought.

Suffer this personal word: I was very near to despair a little while ago, especially in the realm of ministry. I went to the Lord, and He turned me to a Scripture which hit me like a sledgehammer: "Preach the word, be instant in season (that is very easy!), out of season (when everything says: 'This is not the time'), but preach to reprove, rebuke, exhort" - and here we are!

If you have had too much reproof, too much rebuke, well, I exhort you: Give the word its place. The Holy Spirit will do the rest and you will go on the way with unimpeded progress.

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