

Oneness With God in a Crisis Regarding the Natural Man

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of recognizing and overcoming the natural man in order to go on with God and fulfill His purpose.

Scripture: Genesis 12:1, Genesis 13:14, Exodus 12:38, Exodus 15:13, Isaiah 41:8, Romans 6:6, Galatians 2:20

Topics: "Spiritual Pilgrimage", "Conflict with the Natural Man"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the spiritual pilgrimage of the Christian life, illustrating that the journey begins with a decisive separation from the world and progresses into a deeper conflict with the natural man within. He highlights Abraham's journey, where the initial call to leave his homeland leads to a new battle against the remnants of the old life, represented by Lot. The sermon stresses that true oneness with God requires not only leaving the world behind but also confronting and overcoming the natural self that clings to us. Sparks uses the story of Lot to illustrate the dangers of allowing the natural man to hinder spiritual progress, ultimately calling for a crisis of separation to fully embrace God's purpose. The message concludes with a call for self-examination and surrender to God's will.

Transcript

"Now these are the generations of Terah. Terah begat Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran begat Lot. And Haran died in the presence of his father Terah in the land of his nativity, in Ur of the Chaldees... And Terah look Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran, his son's son, and Sarai his daughter in law, his son Abram's wife; and they went forth with them from Ur of the Chaldees to go into the land of Canaan; and they came unto Haran, and dwelt there. And the days of Terah were two hundred and five years: and Terah died in Haran. Now the Lord said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will shew thee" (Genesis 11:27,28,31,32; 12:1).

We are seeing in these messages that the spiritual life is a pilgrimage, and that the Christian is on a journey which begins in the world and ends in the heart of God. God's verdict on the life of Abraham was: "Abraham, my friend" (Isaiah 41:8), that friendship meaning that Abraham had really entered into the heart of God. We are seeing that this spiritual pilgrimage has eight steps and stages, and we have already seen that the first major step is in these words: "Get thee out". It is a call of God which allows no compromise. There has to be a point to which we come when we step over a line and are out from the world into the

way of God. It is a very clear and unmistakable decision to be separated completely from this world unto God. That is where we were in our last meditation. The first decisive step is oneness with the heart of God in His repudiation of the world.

Now we come to the second phase in this pilgrimage, which is oneness with God regarding the natural man. When we have come to the great decision to go with God and to obey His call, everything is not finished: the battle is not all over when we have decided that this world is no longer our world. We find that the battle only takes on another form, and we are brought face to face with another issue. Our first crisis was concerning the world outside ourselves; the second phase in our pilgrimage is conflict with the world inside ourselves. Indeed, this issue is just with ourselves as ourselves, and this is the beginning of a new battle which may involve all that has gone before: if we fail in this battle we may just undo what we have done before.

It is the conflict with the natural man, and this natural man is a very deceptive thing. He can be a very religious and very zealous natural man.

I think that you will have heard the story about the great preacher, Charles Spurgeon, who had a college for training preachers. One of the subjects in that college was on how to preach, and every student was given a text from the Bible on which he had to preach a sermon. One student was given the sixth chapter of the Letter to the Ephesians: "Wherefore take up the whole armour of God", and then come all the parts of the armour. Well, this student got busy with his text. When the day came for preaching his trial sermon, he stood in the pulpit, pulled himself together and began to describe the armour. He represented himself as a soldier, and, in a very self-confident, strong way, he described the armour and himself as putting on that armour. He was going to make a great impression on his audience! He stepped forward, clad in all the armour, drew the sword and cried: 'Now where is the devil?' Mr. Spurgeon, who was sitting near him, just put his hands over his mouth and said: 'The devil is inside the armour!'

Now, that story does illustrate this point. We may have made the great decision to come over on to the Lord's side, to leave the world and follow Him, but it is just then that the real battle inside begins. There is an enemy inside, and that enemy is ourselves, what the Apostle Paul calls "the natural man".

Notice our Scripture. The Lord had said to Abraham: "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will shew thee", and then we read that the whole of his father's house went with him! Terah, his father, took Abraham out. Abraham's brother went with them and so did his nephew, the son of his dead brother, and later we are led to see that the whole household went. They all went out with Abraham, and yet the Lord had said: "Get thee out... from thy kindred, and from thy father's house".

You see, in type the natural man had taken hold of the divine purpose. Terah and the family not only went out with Abraham, but they took him out. You are not, therefore, surprised that they did not get very far! They came to Haran and there they stayed, we are not told for how long, but probably quite a time. We are told that Abraham was seventy years old at that time, so quite a lot of time was lost.

This was the first delay in the progress of this spiritual pilgrimage. They came to Haran, and there they stayed until Terah died. Terah, it says, was a very old man, and "the old man" does take a long time to die! But it was not until Terah died that they were able to resume their journey. Terah was the main factor in this spiritual hold-up, but even when the crisis of Terah was passed, there was still something clinging to Abraham. It was this man Lot, who was a perfect nuisance all his life: this something of the old life which

continues to cling and is always threatening to hold up spiritual progress. The whole history of Lot reveals that which can limit the purpose of God. Lot ought never to have been there, and his presence is always a menace to the spiritual life. That will create the necessity for another crisis, for the last thing that belongs to that old natural life has to be cut off. Lot will have to go.

What is this man Lot? Well, you remember the crisis between Abraham and Lot, when their herdmen quarrelled amongst themselves and Abraham, who represents the spirit of grace, said to Lot: 'Let there be no strife between your herdmen and mine. Lift up your eyes and see the whole land. It lies before you. You choose what you would like and I will have what is left. If you go one way I will go the other.' So Lot lifted up his eyes and surveyed the whole country, and seeing the well-watered land around the great cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, he said: 'I choose that.'

So Lot moved his tent in the direction of the city of Sodom. He pitched it for a time outside the city, and then the attractions of that city drew him inside. He yielded to the call of the city of Sodom. Not satisfied with getting outside, and then getting inside, he had to become an important person in the city, and so we eventually find him sitting in the gate of the city, the gate being the place where all the important people met to discuss the affairs of the city. So Lot is at last an important official, and it was not long before trouble began. Certain kings made a raid with their armies upon the cities of the Plain, and Lot, with his whole family and all that he had, was carried away captive, and it was Abraham who had to go and rescue him. Then Lot went back into the city and became so much a part of it that when the angels came down to declare that Sodom and Gomorrah were going to be destroyed by fire, he was so reluctant to leave that the angels had to take him by the hand and pull him out.

Well, we are all ready to condemn Lot. We think that he was a poor sort, and not much good. But really he is only a type of the natural life in all of us. Anyone who really knows himself or herself knows that there is something like that in their natures. It takes the very mercy and power of God to get us separated from ourselves. Yes, this self-life is a terribly strong thing and will always gravitate in the opposite direction to the spirit. It will always work to keep us back from going on with God, and there has to be a very real crisis in this matter. That crisis came in the life of Abraham when Lot was separated from him. On the very same day that Lot decided to leave Abraham, and Abraham was separated from Lot, the Lord appeared to Abraham and said: "Lift up now thine eyes", and He showed him all the universe and said: "I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth" (Genesis 13:14-18). That is only another way of saying: 'Now we can go right on to the fulness of My purpose.'

The great crisis of separation between what is of the spirit and what is of the flesh has taken place, and that is the great crisis of the sixth chapter of the Letter to the Romans. You must remember that that chapter was written to Christians, not to people who were still back in Ur of the Chaldees, that is, to people who were still in the world. It was to people who had taken the first great step in decision for the Lord but had evidently not recognized all that that step involved. The Apostle Paul is not saying: 'You must be baptized as a testimony of the fact that you have come right out for the Lord', but: 'We were crucified with Christ. We were buried with Him in baptism.' That is what is meant when we were baptized. Our old man was crucified with Christ - but we have brought out Terah and Lot and all the rest with us. We have not recognized all that it meant when God said: "Get thee out!" There has to be this new crisis in our lives when we not only say farewell to the world but we say farewell to ourselves: "I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live; and yet no longer I" (Galatians 2:20).

Now most of you know all about that. You know the teaching of Romans 6 and perhaps you know it so well that you are not very interested in hearing about it again. It is not for me to judge you, but if you really have passed through this crisis, it never becomes a thing without interest. It stands out in your life in such a way that it is bigger even than your conversion.

Now, let me get this matter quite straight so that there is as little confusion as possible. It must be recognized that we are dealing with a situation which is due to an imperfect apprehension of the meaning of the great crisis of the Cross: the crisis which really involves and includes everything from the initial step to the final step; from the basic 'out' to the ultimate 'in'. With God all that is present and implicit at the beginning. With God the journey from Egypt to the Promised Land was no more than eleven days; but with Israel it took a generation, a lifetime. On the 'out' side of the Red Sea the song contained a clause which supposed that they had already come to God's Holy Habitation (Exodus 15:13) but, while that was present and inherent with the Lord, they had a way to go before it was realized. That delay was due to "the mixed multitude" (Exodus 12:38), that is, mixture in Israel, two things which are from two sources. This is a parable.

It is Lot and Abraham, one of the flesh, the other of the spirit: of faith and not of faith. With God, these two things are fully and utterly separated in the death and resurrection - the Cross - of Christ, but with His people it is a long history of many applications of the principle through a crisis and a process, or a series of minor crises.

Perhaps we have not been sufficiently aware that the New Testament in its teaching books or letters, as well as in its history, stands wholly related to these two aspects, a basic, all-inclusive crisis, and a process marked by many particular applications of that content; progressive illumination and successive challenges. This is the explanation of the whole evangelical convention movement in the last fifty years and more. It is based upon the imperfect understanding of the fundamental implications of the Christian life. Therefore the two things implicit in true spiritual conventions are illumination and challenge, resolving into a further crisis.

These crises created by the conflict between the natural man and the spiritual man in us all are represented in the case of Abram by Lot, Egypt (Genesis 12:9-20), Abimelech (Genesis 20), Hagar (Genesis 16...), all of which represent outcroppings of the natural man in his own wisdom, strength, effort and weakness. These will come up again in these studies, but they are recorded for our instruction in what has to be brought back to the initial transition. Abraham was called the Hebrew, and that means: the Man from Beyond, that is - beyond the river (Euphrates). A river lay between his old and his new realm.

The Christian has a river, like the Red Sea or the Jordan, which is a dividing line; and spiritually it declares what does and what does not belong to each side. According to Romans 6, that dividing line is the Cross of Christ, and baptism is there said to be the believer's spiritual acceptance of that great divide. The point is that the Cross goes with us throughout our lives and challenges the presence and action of everything belonging to the 'beyond' as not to be tolerated here. This history of denying our selfhood is the pathway which brings us ever nearer the heart of God. Every fresh expression of Christ's victory over the world is a further step into the heart of God. As His 'being made perfect through suffering' meant a progressive and final repudiation of the world and the self, so that He arrived at last in the heart of His Father, attested and declared "My Beloved Son", so every believer is called upon to make the same spiritual pilgrimage to the same most blessed destiny. It is the way of the continuous

"Not I, but Christ",

but this way of His Cross leads right on into God's heart, when and where He will say "My friend".

We may have come out for the Lord and may be working for Him, and yet there may be something of that self-life which is holding up our spiritual progress, something of our natural life which has come out with us. We are not willing to let it go. We argue for it and say: 'There is no harm in it. Other good people do it', but that is not good enough for the Lord, and many Christian lives are under arrest for they are not just going on fully and freely with the Lord into all His purpose because there is something like Lot in the life.

We are here that the Lord may get a full, free way in every life. Let us say: "Search me, O God, and know my heart: Try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any way of grief in me" (Psalm 139:23,24).

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