

Spiritual Enlargement Unto the Maintaining of the Testimony of Jesus

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of spiritual enlargement, fullness of the Spirit, and enlargement of vision and ministry in maintaining the testimony of Jesus.

Scripture: 2 Kings 2:15, 2 Kings 4:2-6, Psalm 78:41, Luke 4:16-21, John 3:34, Acts 2:4, Acts 10:14-15, 2 Corinthians 4:1, 2 Corinthians 6:11-13, Ephesians 5:18

Topics: "Spiritual Fullness", "Enlargement of Vision"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the theme of spiritual enlargement through the biblical account of Elisha succeeding Elijah, highlighting the importance of being filled with the Holy Spirit to maintain the testimony of Jesus. He draws parallels between the Old Testament stories and the New Testament, illustrating how God's call for fullness and enlargement applies to the Church today. Sparks discusses three key incidents: the widow's oil, Naaman's healing, and the sons of the prophets, each demonstrating the necessity of being empty vessels for God's abundant work. He urges believers to embrace a broader vision and ministry, free from limitations and exclusivity, to fulfill their calling in Christ. Ultimately, he calls for a deeper understanding of spiritual fullness and the expansive nature of God's grace.

Transcript

I want to take you back to the point where Elijah cast his mantle upon Elisha, which meant that Elisha was called, apprehended for that ministry of succeeding his master after the master had gone up to heaven. Then there were those journeys of the two, the testing out of Elisha, from Gilgal to Bethel, from Bethel to Jericho, from Jericho to Jordan, the passage of the Jordan, the ascension of Elijah in the chariot of fire, and the falling of his mantle upon Elisha, Elisha having already made the request that there might be a double portion of his master's spirit resting upon him. This verily came to pass, so that the sons of the prophets, when they saw Elisha return from the ascension scene said: "The spirit of Elijah doth rest upon Elisha" (2 Kings 2:15).

From there we take up some of the impressive incidents which were the outworking of that anointing, that double portion of the Spirit, which fell upon Elisha: that maintenance and extension of the testimony of the master in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is difficult not to see the correspondence between that Old Testament story and what we have in the New Testament: our Lord, Master and Head, through the Jordan (that is, through the Cross), ascending to the right hand, the majesty in the heavens, and His mantle falling

upon His waiting, expectant and committed servants, the Church, and from that time the wonderful things which transpired in the pursuance of the testimony of the Lord in and through His Church on the earth.

Now I am going back to the Old Testament story again, just to pick out of that considerable number of impressive incidents the three to which I have referred, and to add a little further word to them, reminding you that this is not just Old Testament history, Bible story, interesting and instructive as it is, but that we stand at this time in that very position. We are here as the Lord's vessel - a part of it - in this very place. It may be a small part, but it is a part of that vessel that is left here on this earth while our Lord is away, in order to maintain His testimony, or that He may maintain His testimony, here in this world until He returns. That is our wonderful calling, but that is our great responsibility, and everyone here is involved in that responsibility if we belong to the Lord. This ought to come upon us with great force. You and I, taking it individually, are entrusted with no lesser thing than the maintaining of the testimony of Jesus on this earth in His absence. That is our calling, that is our business, that is our responsibility, but, blessed be God! that is provided for abundantly by Him in the gift of the Holy Spirit.

There are just a few further words to say on these three particular incidents that we have lifted out from the larger number in the ministry of Elisha.

Enlargement Unto Spiritual Fullness

Firstly, the story of that widow who had just two sons and was in a state of great poverty. The creditors came and, she being unable to meet her liabilities, they were about to take her sons away, put them into servitude, and make them, by servitude, pay her debts, leaving her alone in destitution and desolation.

Elisha came to her, and she made her appeal to him, telling him of her sad plight, and he said: "What has thou in the house? And she said, Thine handmaid hath not any thing in the house, save a pot of oil" (2 Kings 4:2). 'That is all I have.' He said: 'Go to all your neighbours and borrow vessels, empty vessels, and borrow not a few.' Well, we can use our imagination if we like. We can see that woman hastening - and sending her sons - in all directions, collecting all the empty vessels that she could borrow, bringing them to the house. The prophet said: 'Now pour out.' You know the rest of the story. She poured and poured, every vessel was filled, until she had no vessel left. The prophet would have said: 'Go on! Go on!', but she said: 'There is not another vessel', and the oil stayed.

It is a wonderful story. It is an impressive story when we read it in the light of the so much larger revelation of the Lord's provision for maintaining His testimony. Of course, there are many things in that story which are instructive, but we are not going to dwell upon those details. I just want to put my finger upon the one thing which seems to include all the others, and there is so much in the New Testament that is related to this in principle and in spiritual value.

When the Lord is moving in relation to His testimony, when He is really moving to do something, He does not do it - as we say - by halves. He does it abundantly. Now what I want especially to underline in each of these stories, or accounts, is this matter of spiritual enlargement. You will notice that that is the governing thing in every one of these instances: spiritual enlargement unto all that this testimony of Jesus requires.

If you like, you can put yourself into the place of those borrowed vessels. Let this meeting place stand for that widow's home, and we are all here as vessels, borrowed vessels, if you like. They must be empty vessels, as we shall see. But here we are. Now, so far as we are concerned, and so far as you find the Lord's people anywhere are concerned, the Lord's great thought is fullness, spiritual fullness. The Lord

does not believe in vacuums. He does not believe in leaving things empty. Look at His work in creation. The earth was without form and void. However, God's thought is not to leave anything empty and void, but to fill it, and you and I know how abundant creation is. How it spreads itself, spontaneously! You cannot cope with the fullness of the natural creation. But in the spiritual realm we have the higher thought of God, which is fullness.

On the Day of Pentecost the disciples were in an upper room, gathered together, and it says that these vessels "were all filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:4). Go through the book of the Acts and you will find that it is repeated again and again: "They were all filled with the Holy Spirit" (e.g. Acts 4:31), and you know that that was always the teaching of the Apostles. Paul says: "Be filled with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18). At the marriage in Cana of Galilee the vessels were empty, and the Lord said: 'Fill them', "and they filled them up to the brim" (John 2:7). The Lord's idea for His people is that they should be filled.

That, of course, is the first lesson about the testimony. You will never be able to maintain this testimony unless you are a filled vessel, full of the Lord, full of the Spirit, full of His Divine life. It is essential, but it is blessedly possible because it is the Lord's will and the Lord's provision. "He giveth not the Spirit by measure" (John 3:34). Fullness is His thought and His will. Are you quite sure that you are a filled vessel?

Now then: one thing is essential: before you can be filled by the Lord you have got to be emptied of everything else. 'Borrow empty vessels,' said the prophet, "not a few" (2 Kings 4:3). Before the Apostles could be filled on the Day of Pentecost they had to be emptied at the Cross - and they were emptied! Ask Peter how he felt on that day! Ask the two on the way to Emmaus how they felt! Ask Thomas how he felt at that time! I think the one thing they would all have said was: 'Utterly empty. Everything has gone.' But that is the kind of emptying that is necessary - the emptying of our own selves, our own self-confidence, our own self-strength, our own self-wisdom, our own self-will. Until that emptying of ourselves has been done there will be no fullness of the Spirit. "Empty vessels... not a few" - as many as you like.

And the other thing is just that it is we who put the limit on the Lord. The Lord never puts the limit on us. Elisha might have said to that woman: 'Come on, let us have more vessels. We can go on.' The Lord can go on if you will offer Him the facility, if you will make the provision, if you will give Him the opportunity, if you will let Him have what He wants - as many as you can bring. If only you will go on He will go on. The oil never stayed until the woman stopped. And the Lord never stops until we stop. If we are ready to go on, He will go on.

I repeat - we put the limit on the Lord. It is such a tragedy that we do so and limit Him. You know, that was the charge that was leveled against Israel: "They... limited the Holy One of Israel" (Psalm 78:41 - AV). It was a judgment that they did that, for they said: "Can God prepare a table in the wilderness?" (verse 19), and in doing so they limited the Holy One of Israel.

The Lord will go on while we are conscious of need and while we put no limit of unbelief or of any other kind upon Him. Fullness is His thought and intention, and you can have continual fullness. John's testimony, after a long life, when he was an old man of about ninety - and he had started with the Lord Jesus as a young man - was: "Of his fullness we all received, and grace for grace" (John 1:16). That is a long life of testimony, to be able to speak at the end about fullness.

Do not think that it is necessary, when you get old, that you should get empty. That is just the opposite of what the Lord intends. He wants fullness at the beginning and fullness at the end. This is what should mark our lives: that we have always got a margin of that which is of the Lord to draw upon.

Well, that is the simple, yet far-reaching first lesson of the Old Testament story. And you can read your New Testament again in the light of that.

Enlargement of Vision

The second incident was that of Naaman, the leper commander-in-chief of the Syrian army. You will recall the story, so I will not give you details. We will just take him up where he set out with his great retinue to visit Elisha with a quest for his healing, having been advised by the little captive servant maid in his home that there was a prophet in Israel, and if he would go to him she was sure he would heal Naaman, her master, of his leprosy. Well, he arrived with his retinue, and you will remember that Elisha did not even go out to meet him, did not make any fuss of him at all, and did not even see him. He sent his messenger, his servant, to find out what it was all about, and then gave his command: "Go and wash in Jordan seven times" (2 Kings 5:10). Poor Naaman had a lot of trouble over that! "Are not Abanah and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? May I not wash in them, and be clean?" (2 Kings 5:12). He had to get down very low, off - as we say - his high horse of personal importance and pride in order to receive. That is by the way, and you can take all these details in as we go on. That is not the message.

Having at last had his pride overcome, and having come to see that it was either his pride, on the one side, or his healing on the other - he could choose which he liked - he came down on the side of healing, and went and bathed himself in the Jordan seven times, and was made whole.

Now, I say there are a lot of details in the story; it is full of instruction. But I want to get to our one thing, this matter of enlargement, the way of the enlargement of the testimony, and I want to take you over to the Gospel by Luke, chapter four. You will remember that the Lord Jesus had come to Nazareth, where He was brought up: "He entered, as his custom was, into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood up to read. And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Isaiah. And he opened the book and found the place where it was written, The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he anointed me to preach..." (Luke 4:16-18). There we are on the ground of the Holy Spirit. We have come right back to Elisha, to this double portion of the Spirit, this anointing of the Spirit: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me."

Now note! After He read the portion, stopping at a very significant point, He said: "Today hath this scripture been fulfilled in your ears" (Luke 4:21). And then He went on to say: "No prophet is acceptable in his own country". "Anointed... prophet" - we are in spirit with Elisha all the time. Now listen: "There were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet; and none of them was cleansed but only Naaman the Syrian" (verse 27). "In Israel... the Syrian", the outsider, the one of another nation. They saw the point in Nazareth and were filled with anger. They thrust Him out and took Him to the brow of the hill upon which their city was built, intending to cast Him over. Mark, in referring to this incident, said: "He marvelled because of their unbelief... and he could there do no mighty work" (Mark 6:6,5).

This is the point. The Lord deliberately struck a blow that day at the narrow prejudice and exclusiveness of Israel, and said: 'In the days of Elisha the Lord went outside of Israel.' Israel had plenty of lepers, but the Lord went outside of Israel to meet Naaman, the Syrian. The Lord's thought is not some little, narrow, exclusive, bigoted thing that thinks it is everything and has everything, as Israel did. The Lord's thought is as big as everybody who is in need, be he Syrian or Jew, or any other. Christ is big enough for all the nations.

That was the great trouble. You see, they were filled with anger when He struck at their exclusiveness and said: 'Really, what you people need is spiritual enlargement, to get away from this narrowness, this

littleness, this straitening of your Lord and making Him so much smaller than He really is. You need enlargement.' They were angry!

You notice that almost exactly the same thing happened when this same Holy Spirit made Peter go right away up north country to the house of a Gentile, Cornelius, the centurion. The Holy Spirit made him do it against his own will. Peter had said: "Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean" (Acts 10:14). But the Lord said: "Arise... go with them." The Holy Spirit was in charge, as sovereign. He is going to extend the bounds of this testimony, and is not going to tolerate this little thing, with its smallness and exclusiveness - shut in. He is removing the grave clothes. Fullness is His thought for all. Now Peter had to go because the Spirit made him go, and when he was there the Spirit let him know very effectively that this was what He was doing, because later Peter says: "As I began to speak, the Holy Ghost fell on them" (Acts 11:15). Well, when Peter got back to Jerusalem he went into a pretty hot fire! The Apostles at Jerusalem hauled him over the coals for breaking the bands of Israel, for forcing open the nations. All Peter could say, almost apologetically, was: "If then God gave unto them the like gifts as he did also unto us, when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I, that I could withstand God?" (Acts 11:17).

You see, that is what brought about the death of Stephen. That is why they gnashed upon him and stoned him to death. Why? Well, if you read Stephen's address to them you will find that it was all against their nationalistic limitation and smallness and prejudice, and Stephen gathered it all up in this one phrase: "Ye do always resist the Holy Ghost" (Acts 7:51). The Holy Ghost is for enlargement, and is against littleness, smallness, narrowness and exclusiveness, and if He is, we ought to be against it. To make Christ smaller than He is is to resist the Holy Ghost. There were many lepers in Israel, but to none of them was the prophet sent, but to Naaman, the Syrian. I think we should see the point of that.

Enlargement is the Lord's thought. Not only fullness of the vessels, but enlargement of vision to embrace all for whom Christ died, and to love all who are subjects of His grace.

Enlargement of Ministry

The third story is that of the sons of the prophets coming to Elisha and saying: "The place where we dwell before thee is too strait for us. Let us go, we pray thee, unto Jordan, and take thence every man a beam, and let us make us a place there, where we may dwell" (2 Kings 6: 2).

Here is the question of enlargement again, from another standpoint and in another way. What is it this time?

Well, first, enlargement is the vessel being full, and all the vessels being full.

Secondly, enlargement is the enlargement of vision, the end of all personal and collective introspection. It is a most fatal thing to be turned in upon ourselves, and all the time to have a narrower vision than the Lord's vision.

Now we come to the sons of the prophets. What is this? The testimony is again involved, and it is involved in the matter of service. You see, they are the sons of the prophets, and now it is the question of service amongst the Lord's people: an enlargement unto service for the testimony of Jesus. I think the best way in which we can get at this is to come right over to our New Testament at once.

We have two letters in the New Testament - of course, we have several twin letters in it - but we have this set of twins in the Corinthian letters, and I need not tell you what is in them. I think everybody knows what is in the first letter to the Corinthians! It is a sorry state of no testimony in the city. Oh, what an appalling spiritual smallness there is in the Corinthian church in that first letter! The second letter? Well, it is the enlargement of ministry, isn't it? "Therefore", says the Apostle, "seeing we have this ministry" (2 Corinthians 4:1), and he gives much light on what the ministry is. I am not going to deal with those details, but it is all a matter of enlargement unto ministry. The cry of the Apostle to the Corinthians is this: "Our mouth is open unto you, O Corinthians, our heart is enlarged... be ye also enlarged" (2 Corinthians 6:11,13). 'Your trouble is that you are too small, too little in yourselves, and too petty in your spiritual life and your spiritual measure.'

What was it that made them small and destroyed their ministry? Well, read the first chapters again and you cannot miss it. "Each one of you saith I... I... I... are ye not carnal... after the manner of men?" (1 Corinthians 1:12; 3:3). And then he speaks about the natural man - "Now the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God... he cannot know them" (1 Corinthians 2:14). He is under a veto, an embargo, a limitation. Live on the ground of the self-life, whatever form it may take, intellectually, emotionally, volitionally, or in any other way, and you will be a little person spiritually. You will be a petty person spiritually, all tied up, limited, and you will have a very small testimony. But "he that is spiritual judgeth all things" (1 Corinthians 2:15).

It would seem that between the two letters something happened, that they had escaped from the littleness of the natural life and the natural ground unto something more of the Spirit. They had become enlarged in their spiritual life, in their hearts and in their minds, enlarged by the power of the Holy Spirit - and then you have the ministry: "We have this ministry" ('We have this testimony') "We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the exceeding greatness of the power may be of God" (2 Corinthians 4:7).

Oh, we need this basic work to deliver us from ourselves! That is it, isn't it? In every form, in every way - our self-estimates, our self-will, our self-strength! All that, and then the place of our habitation will be enlarged, we will build something bigger, and the testimony will go on and there will be a ministry.

I know how simple, perhaps elementary, are the things that I am saying, but they are basic, and very important.

The Place of Jordan

In closing I want to remind you of the place that Jordan had here in the life and ministry of Elisha. He started at Jordan with Elijah; it was at Jordan that he came into his ministry. Naaman had to go and wash seven times in Jordan before he came into the enlargement that the Lord was bringing about. The sons of the prophets went to Jordan to cut down wood, and it was there that the axe-head came off and went to the bottom, and the iron was made to swim.

Well, here you are. 1 Corinthians is the natural life which goes downward. 2 Corinthians is the spiritual life of resurrection which comes upward. There is no service in our downward gravitation, is there? We are no use to the Lord like that! Get down, and you are no use to the Lord at all. Follow your own natural life and you get out of the Lord's use. But when His Divine resurrection life comes in by the Holy Spirit, the iron swims. That which would otherwise always go down is made to rise. The power of His resurrection is at work. It is the reversing of our natures, bringing us into the life of the Spirit and the ministry, and the testimony goes on.

May the Lord write these lessons deeply in our hearts and make us really understand His thought for every one of us: His spiritual fullness - nothing less. That is your birthright - to have of His fullness. There are no special classes for this. It is for all - "they were all filled". That is the Lord's thought for you and for me - to be filled. It is His desire, and He desires that we should have our vision continually enlarged. Oh, God save us from becoming smaller in any way than the thought of the Lord Jesus! The Lord save us from becoming exclusive, shut in, tied up with limits that He does not put upon things! Christ is so great. We need never fear that we shall out-measure Christ, especially if we live in and walk by the Spirit. We shall not find that the Spirit's way is cramping, closing in. The Spirit's way is unto Jerusalem, Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth, the fullest bounds of Divine grace. And our testimony - it is only another word for ministry - ministry sometimes seems very professional. We think of the ministry as being that of some special body of people. Call it 'testimony', and then we are all in it. Our testimony will be effective, will be released when we are ourselves delivered from what we are naturally. Do you know yourself? Oh, the terrible limitations there are in our natures and temperaments! We are all made in one way or another, and there are terrible limitations in our make-up. The Holy Spirit can lift us free of ourselves and our natural make-up, and enlarge us with the enlargement of Christ.

May it be so!

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