

Spiritual Israel

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the transition to a spiritual Israel characterized by grace and the work of the Holy Spirit, distinct from the natural Israel of the past.

Scripture: Philippians 2:9

Topics: "Holy Spirit", "Jesus Christ"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks delves into the deeper and fuller meaning of the day of Pentecost, emphasizing the introduction of a new age characterized by the order and nature of things different from all previous ages. He highlights the importance of understanding the spiritual significance behind the actions recorded in the book of Acts, which was written after the letters of the Apostle Paul. The arrangement of the New Testament books by the Holy Spirit places the book of Acts near the beginning to emphasize the centrality of the Person of Jesus Christ before doctrine, pointing to Him and His significance in all things.

Transcript

We are seeking to see what came in with the day of Pentecost, that is, the deeper and fuller meaning of what was introduced into this world on that day. We have been saying that it did mark a new day in this world's history. When we say 'day' we mean 'age,' a 'dispensation.' That is a big and difficult word: it simply means the order of things obtaining at any given time - that is a dispensation. What is the order and nature of things which was introduced on the day of Pentecost, as different from all other ages in the past, and as represented by the book which goes by the title of "The Acts"? Let me say again, that title, was never given to it by its writer. Many, many years after the book was written someone gave it the title of "The Acts of the Apostles," but Luke, who, wrote it, did not call it that. It is a very handy title, but it can be rather misleading, because it tends to confine attention to the things done, without an adequate recognition of the nature of what was happening, which is the important thing. That is what we are concerned with - the nature of things brought in to characterise this new age.

Now just another word. We have said before that this book of The Acts was not written until after all the letters of the Apostle Paul were written and in circulation. That is interesting, and, has a meaning. If you were to arrange the, New Testament in the order in which the books were written, you would have to change the common order completely and put Paul's letters before The Acts. That means something. It means this very thing that we are seeking to show - that all that is in the book of The Acts has spiritual meaning, is explained in the letters of Paul, and in other letters in the New Testament; and it would be very

interesting if you could take the letters first and read them, never having looked at Acts - read them carefully until you knew what was in them, and then for the first time pick up the book called Acts and begin to read it. What would be the value, of that? I think it would be this. When you came upon certain things in Acts, right from the beginning, you would say: 'Oh, I understand what that means now - that means what Paul has said here and here in his epistles. I can see that it is not just something that has happened, but it has a meaning and I can see what that meaning, is.' That would be the value of it; and I take it that that was the value to those who got the book of Acts afterwards. They had the epistles and were able in the light of them to say: 'We see the fuller meaning of all that took place at the beginning now, we know what that meant.'

Before we proceed further with that let us say a word to explain why the books of the New Testament are arranged as they are. We say that men decided to put the books of the Bible in their present order, but there is surely another factor to be allowed for. I think the Holy Spirit was behind that. Why, then, is the book called Acts where it is, near the beginning? For this greatest and most impressive of all reasons - that you must have the Person before you can have the doctrine, because all the doctrine comes out of the Person and points to the Person and comes back to the Person. You see, it is the Lord Jesus Who is in full view when you begin to read the book of the Acts - the Lord Jesus risen, ascended, exalted, glorified - and everything has to be seen in the light of Him, as belonging to Him, as revealing Him, as explaining Him. The Person first; everything comes from the Person. And that is why this book is where it is, and we would all agree that the Holy Spirit had a hand in that arrangement. He is always concerned with bringing the Lord Jesus personally into the first place.

Now let us go on to a further opening up of this that is before us. We took at the outset a fragment from one of Paul's letters - 1 Cor. 15:46 - as our key to this whole matter, and we again note that this was written before the Acts. It was written and it was known wherever that letter to the Corinthians may have gone or wherever what was in that letter may have been made known. It was already known that this was said - "That is not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural; then that which is spiritual." Now can you not see how, in the light of that, what I have just been saying would be very true? It had been said "first... that which is natural." That belongs to all that is passed, all that has been. God made a material and natural creation - that is first. "Then that which is spiritual" - now a new creation which is spiritual. God did numerous things which could be seen and handled, but He did them with another thought in them which was not always seen. The first creation was in the natural realm. Now it is all in the spiritual realm - "then that which is spiritual" - and if these people who had had the letters picked up this book of The Acts and read it in the light of the letters they would see at once that it expressed that 'afterward' - that God is not doing things now as He did them in past days. He is doing them in a new realm, on a new principle, on a new basis. It is spiritual now; the Holy Spirit has come, and everything is of a spiritual value and significance.

In our previous meditation we got to the point of the spiritual seed of Abraham. In the early chapters of Acts, Abraham has quite a large place, and all that is said of him must be read in the light of the letters. But what is being said in the letters in relation to Abraham is that the true seed of Abraham is not that which is his natural seed, but that which is his seed spiritually by faith. What God is doing in this dispensation is to get a spiritual race. We said before that the seed of Abraham means a new race of people, a race of people taken by God and separated to be a peculiar people unto Himself. We have pointed out that this age sees that natural seed of Abraham set aside so far as concerns what God is immediately doing, but a spiritual seed is brought in, that is, a new race of which Christ (Who is not only

the natural seed but also the spiritual seed of Abraham) is the Head, the first. I will not stay with that. I have to say that because it links at once with the next fragment.

Israel a Royal Nation

You will notice here with the introduction of this book of The Acts that another phrase is used - "Ye men of Israel." That is the word of Peter on the day of Pentecost. Israel comes into the picture; not only Abraham, the seed of Abraham, but Israel. We said before - and this is what we are going to open up a little more fully now - that there is a difference between the seed of Abraham and the children of Israel in this sense, that the seed of Abraham is racial; the term relates to a race; and, while the children of Israel are of that race, the term "the children of Israel" belongs essentially to a nation. In the race sense, the seed of Abraham is Isaac. "In Isaac shall thy seed be called" (Gen. 21:12), and Isaac in type stands for the man of resurrection. By a miracle in a very true sense, Abraham received Isaac back as from the dead, and Isaac stands for resurrection. Now then, Peter says, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to his great mercy begat us again unto a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Pet. 1:3). You see, resurrection is a begetting, we are the children of God on the ground of resurrection union with Christ. That makes a race begotten in resurrection. That has to do with the term "the seed."

But when you come to "the children of Israel" you advance upon that; the term is not racial, it is national, and is connected with Jacob; not with Isaac, but with Jacob now, for it was Jacob whose name was changed to Israel, which name was taken over and given to this nation - "the children of Israel." But what is the particular significance? It is not birth, it is not just race that is involved. Israel is a prince with God. "Thou... hast prevailed," said the angel to Jacob on that night of Jabbok and Peniel. 'Thou hast prevailed as a prince with God' - that is the meaning of Israel. So this nation which includes the seed, which is the seed, means a corporate people - not so many individuals all born of one father but a collective people brought together in nationhood, who stand upon the ground of God's determination that they shall be the people who govern, who rule, who are in dominion. The prophecy concerning them was - "The Lord will make thee the head, and not the tail" (Deut. 28:13), and, while they were in right relationship with God, there was no nation on the earth that could stand before them. The mightiest nation of the then-known world and the mightiest king - Egypt and Pharaoh - simply went down because of God's destiny bound up with these people. No nation could stand before them. They were a royal nation in principle - that was God's thought. The children of Israel, sons of a prince with God who has prevailed - that was God's thought concerning Israel. It meant ascendancy above all the nations.

The Tragedy of a Lost Position

Well now, we do not find it like that in the beginning of the book of the Acts. Although it is - "Ye men of Israel" - there is the tragedy of a lost position and influence, lost spiritual life and power; but the Holy Spirit is come, and with Pentecost a new age is brought in, and with that new age a new house of Israel, a spiritual house of Israel. I am not saying that the Church is a spiritualised Israel. There is a great difference between a spiritualised Israel and the Church. I am not going to take time to explain that difference, but I mention it in case it should be thought that I am implying that. The Church is something unique. In the eternal thought and counsels of God it stands supreme, far above Israel after the flesh. There is, in one sense, no comparison between the Church and Israel. Even in the days of its restoration and glory which are to come, Israel will be but an earthly people; the Church will be something far above that. But what I am saying is this, that God has ever done His works, whatever they have been, with spiritual principles

governing; and when He chose Israel after the flesh and constituted Israel a nation, He did so with spiritual principles and thoughts in mind, and it was because Israel never recognised those spiritual principles that the tragedy of their present setting aside took place. That is exactly what the Apostle is saying in the letter to the Hebrews. "Wherefore I was displeased with this generation" (that is, Israel in the wilderness), "and said, They do always err in their heart: but they did not know my ways." They had not an inner perception of God's meaning, of what He was after, why He was doing this and that. They did not see the spiritual meaning of their deliverance from Egypt, they did not see God's meaning in the passage of the Red Sea, and in His manifold dealings with them in the wilderness. "They did not know, my ways." All they were doing was simply moving in a kind of mechanical way: 'Well, the order today is to march so we march; the order tomorrow is to stop so we stop. Circumstances today are such-and-such; we do not like them, we do not want them... Now things are a little better; we like this; let us have as much of this as we can.' They were governed by how things affected them outwardly, moving according to a programme imposed upon them, with no intelligence, no understanding, no enquiry or perception as to what God meant by it all. "They did not know my ways," they erred in their hearts. That is the statement about their history through those forty years.

Now, God had a meaning, God had thoughts in it all. We have come to see something of those thoughts. It is not my intention to take up all the history of Israel in its typology. I am after one thing - that is, by all these means to try to bring home to you, with the Lord's help, this one fact - that in the day in which you and I live, because the Holy Spirit is the predominant factor, God is after a spiritual state of things in His people, He is after a spiritual people; not just a religious people but a spiritual people. I want to try and show you what that means.

Recovery Possible through the Grace of God

Well, the children of Israel were, as we know, firstly an elect nation. That word "elect" is used by Peter and by Paul of the Church. "...elect... according to the foreknowledge of God the Father" (1 Pet. 1:1-2); "Put on therefore, as God's elect..." (Col. 3:12). "Elect" - something which exists by the sovereign act of God and in the sovereign grace of God. That is a truth which lies behind Israel's history, but it is missed. It lies behind the Church which, in this dispensation, takes the place of Israel and (because it is a spiritual thing) far transcends the natural Israel.

An "elect" something chosen in the sovereign grace of God. That is the foundation of things. We shall never be allowed to get away from this fact: it will be brought home to us increasingly as we go on in the Christian life: however long we may stay here on this earth, however much we may come to know of the Lord and His things, however large may be our spiritual measure, the one thing which God will make us know more and more is that we have our standing with Him on the basis of pure grace; that even after fifty, sixty, or seventy years of the Christian life, it is a poor look-out for us, but for the sovereign grace of God.

We are so slow really to get the significance of that. He has given us Israel's history by way of impressing us with this spiritual truth. Israel never saw it, they erred in their hearts in this matter. If they had seen it, they would have been a broken people, but they were a proud, stiff-necked people because they never saw the grace of God in their existence; but the Lord has preserved their history for us. "Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning" (Rom. 15:4).

I do not know how you feel when you read the Old Testament. Read the story, the different accounts of the forty years in the wilderness, and then read the prophets. Do you find very much pleasure in reading

through the prophets? Do you enjoy Jeremiah? I cannot say that, just reading it as a record, I find very much delight in it. Then Ezekiel; then what are called the Minor Prophets. There is so much there that is not very pleasant to read. It is an awful story. Think of Hosea; there are beautiful things there, but, taking it as a story, an account of Israel's condition, how terrible!

It is the most awful unveiling of human nature - the persistence, the inveteracy of human pride and self-will and rebellion. And God has never for one moment sought to cover it up and say, These are my people, hide all that, do not let it be known, it is such a disgrace. He has opened it all up; there it is all gathered up. Stephen recounted to the rulers of Israel the whole course of things from the appearing of the God of glory to Abraham. He went through the history and brought it right up to the slaying of Jesus Christ.

He summed it all up in this - "Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Spirit: as your fathers did, so do ye" (Acts 7:51). That has been the story all the way through; and yet what beautiful things come out in the midst of that story, especially in that little book of Hosea! The broken heart of God which is never going to give this people up! "I have loved..." "I have loved...": and that is all there is to be said. 'My love is an everlasting love, when I love it does not matter what happens; I love, I go on loving.'

Israel's is an awful story right up to the death of Christ, and it is a tragic story since. We need not romance about it, it still goes on. But there is a day still for Israel in the purpose of God, because He has loved; and love is only grace in action. I say often to myself; If the Lord will bear with so and so, if the Lord will hold on to that, there is hope for me yet! I find that comforting. We may be as bad as Israel; we could hardly be worse. If the Lord can go as far as He has with them, He can go even to our length! It is the grace of God. Remember that.

Grace Basic to Spirituality

And it has always got to be like that, the full consciousness that the grace of God is basic to everything; and that is the very essence of spirituality. Do you want to find a truly spiritual person? You will not find him proud, arrogant, self-sufficient, assertive. If you want to see the grace of God, you will see it in a Barnabas; and the name of Barnabas comes out particularly in connection with his letting everything go for his Lord's sake. "Having a field, sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet" (Acts 4:37). Everything has gone for his Lord's sake; he is holding nothing for himself. Grace is humility, selflessness. It is the result in our hearts of the realisation of how great is God's love, and of how much we owe to His grace - that we have nothing to stand upon but the grace of God. That is true spirituality; we begin there.

It is the great thing about the children of Israel. How will they really come into ascendancy? This is the point. Who is a prince with God? What is the true spiritual house of Israel, to prevail with God? It is that which consciously rests wholly and solely upon the grace of God. Do you want spiritual power and influence? Do you want real spiritual ascendancy? Do you know how it will come about? It will come about by your breaking, as with Jacob. It will come about by your self-emptying. The weakness of so many is their strength; they are not broken, they are not utterly conscious of their dependence upon God for everything. That is the secret of spiritual prevailing. That is very simple, but it is very important. So the Lord would lead spiritual people through very deep ways, emptying and breaking and weakening and undoing, and turning them upside down and inside out so that they do not know where or what they are. All that they can say is - Well, the Lord is gracious, the Lord is faithful, I believe God, and that is my only ground of hope. People who get there are in the way of knowing the power of God resting upon them. This

true spiritual Israelite, who had been a natural Israelite - Paul - said, "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me... for when I am weak, then am I strong" (2 Cor. 12:9-10). That is Jacob translated into spiritual terms. It is important. You feel the Lord is undoing you, breaking you, emptying you. Do not think, as the enemy would have you think, that He is against you; He is for you, He is seeking to do something to lead you on. The way down, is the way up, under the hand of God. Elect according to grace, His sovereign grace.

The Power of the Name of Jesus

In that connection, do you not think it is rather remarkable that in the Holy Spirit's governing of the arrangement of this record in the book of The Acts, so quickly - in the third chapter - we come upon the lame man lying at the door of the Temple? He had been lame from his birth and had been lying at the door for many years. Why at the door? Well, you say, people going in and out would see and take compassion. I suppose that was the strategy of these who put him there; but there is something else in it. The man was a parable. No lame man was allowed to enter into the privileges of priestly service in the house of God, according to the law of Moses (Lev. 21:16-21). He was under an embargo; he must stay outside. I think it is very wonderful that we come on that so soon, because the appeal is to "ye men of Israel" - that princely people who were called to the position of highest privilege with God; and how are the men of Israel after the flesh, naturally, at the time when those words are addressed to them and when these things are taking place in the midst of them? Oh, they are in the position of that poor man. They may not believe it; they may be thinking very much otherwise about themselves; but actually and truly their position before God is that of a poor lame thing, unable to stand up before God and enter into His presence. Outside - that is their condition. Here is this poor lame man, who is said to be more than forty years old (Acts 4:22), representing Israel still crippled despite their forty years in the wilderness, unable really to walk straight, or to walk in the Spirit at all, helpless, living a life of impotence, spiritual incompetency, still outside. A great psalm was sung when they came out of Egypt, including a reference to entering into God's holy habitation. He had brought them out to bring them in to His holy mountain (Ex. 15:1-18). After long years they are not in yet; they are still outside the door of His holy habitation.

Now it is a new day, but it is a spiritual Israel, and so Peter and John proclaimed the name of Jesus to this man, and then taking him by the hand, said to him, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." Have you got it? The spiritual Israel is that which stands in the authority of the name of Jesus, stands into all the power and virtue of that name. That is where your prince with God is, that is the Israel - one who prevails in the Name. Everything is in that name. We have a lot to learn about the virtue of the name of the Lord Jesus.

"Jesus, the name high over all,

In hell, or earth, or sky."

The all-prevailing Name constitutes an Israel after the Spirit indeed in spiritual ascendancy, and so this book of The Acts is just a record of their going forth for the sake of the Name, in the power of the Name. "In what name have ye done this? ...Be it known unto you all... in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth...." It was all "in the name." This is the new spiritual Israel - "in the name"; by the grace of God, in all the meaning of that mighty name.

They are the two first steps into the new age - the grace which hath appeared, and the name of Jesus which is above every name. I can imagine those saints at Philippi receiving Luke's record in The Acts and

reading these chapters about the Name, and saying, 'Well, Paul wrote to us some time ago and said, "God... gave unto him the name which is above every name; that in the name of Jesus every knee should bow" (Phil. 2:9-10). Oh yes, we know about that name!'

Deliverance from the Self-Life by the Cross

The spiritual Israel is that which is delivered from its incapacitation through the flesh. It was the flesh predominant in Israel in the wilderness which kept it out of the land. It was the self-life asserting itself in all kinds of ways which simply crippled them. It was living unto their own interests that did it. Believe me, in the measure in which we are actuated at all by personal, natural or worldly considerations, we are spiritually crippled. That is unfortunately the story of the Church today. What is called the Church today has got very largely into the condition of Israel in the wilderness, and that is why Paul takes that very thing and uses it against the flesh that is in the church at Corinth (1 Cor. 10:1-12). There is a warning. It is taken up quite a number of times, as we know, in the letter to the Hebrews. "They failed to enter in..." (Heb. 4:6); the flesh prevailing, the Spirit was quenched, resisted. The truly spiritual people of God are those who have been delivered from that handicap of a predominant self-life through the Cross of the Lord Jesus; who have passed through the Jordan, baptised into His death and into His resurrection. That is the kind of people that the Lord is after - those who can go up and possess, before whom the forces of evil will give way, a people truly crucified to the flesh, a spiritual Israel indeed. This lame man came into the good of that; he rose up and leaped and walked and entered with them into the Temple, leaping and praising God. What a change! Yes, it was a new day, a new dispensation had arrived for him, a dispensation of Jesus Christ known in the power of the Holy Ghost. When we say the Lord is seeking today, in this dispensation, to have a spiritual people, we mean this.

Inward Government by the Spirit

Now, you can be a Christian, you can decide for Christ, you can give your life to Christ, to be His henceforth, and then everything of the Christian life for you may become something outward. A Christian 'goes to Church,' and reads the Bible, and prays; a Christian believes certain things - the inspiration of the Bible, that Jesus is the Son of God, and so on. This is what Christians do, and you may do it all. That is very largely the Christian life for multitudes. It is simply the entering into an already framed and moulded and fixed system of things - what you do or do not do because you are a Christian. That is not what the Lord is after. If you are what the Lord is after, of course you will believe in the inspiration of the Scriptures, and that Jesus is the Son of God, and you will pray and read your Bible; but you will not, by that alone, be what the Lord is seeking. What is He wanting? He is wanting you to have the Holy Spirit dwelling within you as your personal Teacher, to be as real to you as any human adviser or counsellor could be; that you may know in your own heart that the Lord Jesus by the Holy Spirit is telling you this and telling you that, and saying, Yes, to this, and No, to that, and you are increasingly coming to know that the Lord Jesus is not only a living Person in heaven, but a living Person in your own heart, and you are learning from Him inside. He may tell you through His Word, but you know it is more than mere words in a book; there is a living Person Who is saying something to you. You are increasingly coming to understand the mind of that Person, really gaining intelligence about the things of God. That is a spiritual person, and there is all the difference between just being a Christian in the way of things outward, and walking by the knowledge of the Lord in your own heart. I have said that simply for the sake of younger people, but there is not one of us who can do without that reminder. This is the age of the Holy Spirit's government. It is not, What is the thing that is usually done? What is the accepted thing? What do Christians do? What is expected of us? It is not that. Never for a moment are we, in the first place, to take our cue from an established Christian

order and system; we have to go to the Lord. If everybody who came into the Church came in on this ground - that every step was something which the Lord Himself had ratified in their own hearts: they had not just taken it and accepted it because they were told they ought to: it was a living issue between themselves and the Lord - what a living Church there would be! That is the heart of what the Lord is trying to bring us to - we live in a spiritual age requiring a spiritual people, which means knowing Christ after the Spirit, by the Spirit, and knowing Him so increasingly.

We leave it there for the time being. The Lord has yet far more light and truth to break forth from His Word than those who know most ever imagined. Do not close yourself up and say that you know all truth, that you have got it all! You do not know anything yet! There is no one on this earth who really knows anything more than the beginnings of what there is to be known of Christ. It is going to take us eternity to know Him in His fulness. But He can give His fuller light to those who are spiritual, who are taught of the Spirit and alive to the Lord for Him to reveal more to them. May we be after this kind, a true spiritual Israel.

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