

Spying Out the Land

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon explores the significance of the second occasion of spying out the land in Israel's history and its relation to the letters of Paul, particularly Ephesians, and highlights the importance of prayer and revelation in understanding spiritual things.

Scripture: Psalm 119:18, Romans 8:14-17, 1 Corinthians 2:14-16, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Galatians 4:4-7, Ephesians 1:15-17, Ephesians 6:19, Philippians 3:20, Colossians 1:26-27, Hebrews 11:1

Topics: "Faith", "Divine Revelation"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks explores the theme of 'Spying Out the Land,' contrasting the first and second missions of the spies sent by Israel to survey the Promised Land. He emphasizes that the first mission, driven by self-interest, led to failure, while the second, motivated by the glory of God, resulted in faith and triumph. Sparks highlights Paul's struggle to articulate the 'unsearchable riches' of Christ in his letters, particularly Ephesians, and the necessity of spiritual understanding through prayer. He encourages believers to approach the Scriptures with a heart open to divine revelation, akin to the second spying mission that returned with assurance and wonder. Ultimately, the sermon calls for a deeper exploration of God's eternal purpose as revealed in Scripture.

Transcript

On two occasions, when Israel was contemplating entering the Land of the Covenant and Promise, spies were sent over beforehand. The first was disastrous because it was the decision of the people governed by self-interest, and although Moses complied and the Lord acquiesced, the secret motive was eventually betrayed. After long and deep discipline the principle of "the delight of the Lord" was present and faith triumphed. The spies can go with approval and blessing when the motive is that of the Lord's glory, not man's. We would believe that the move from First Corinthians chapter ten to Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, corresponds to that change from the first to the second spying out of the Land. May ours answer to the second as we contemplate the glorious Land!

Of the preliminary considerations these are some:

(1) Paul himself was--when writing--aware that what he had been shown by the Lord was beyond his power of utterance. The very phrase "unsearchable riches" implies this. It could be correctly translated "untraceable," or "unexplorable." Beyond tracing, beyond exploring, beyond searching out. Paul knew himself to be attempting an impossible task. He requested these believers in Asia to pray for him "that

utterance may be given unto me in opening my mouth, to make known... the mystery..." (Eph. 6:19). He was labouring to speak the unspeakable, to fathom the unfathomable, to comprehend the incomprehensible. The paradox of preaching the unpreachable characterizes these final Letters. If that was true of that man, what can we do more than behold at a distance!

(2) What Paul did and did not set himself to do. Paul--in these final writings--did not set himself to write a treatise on this or that theme, subject, or doctrine. There is all the difference in this respect between "Ephesians" and "Galatians" or "Romans." No particular threat to the faith led him--as in those Letters--to write this the greatest of all, although that may have been partly true of "Colossians." In "Ephesians" Paul is not "reasoning," arguing, debating. He is not setting down his "Philosophy of Christianity." He had a wide and rich knowledge of the philosophies and religious ideas of the world in which he had moved. But he is not minded to deal with these or to compare the other religions with Christianity. What Paul did do in this Letter to Asia and, through Asia, to all whom Asia touched (and unconsciously to us) was to make a mighty proclamation. Here we have a man making a proclamation. He is just giving out, with a heart too full for articulation, an "utterance." It is like an imperative broadcast for which the microphone is too small and inadequate. This is not something that he had thought out and was the product of his great brain. He attributed it to a "revelation" given him by the initiative of God. This that he is penning is a vital and, in a sense, a consummate presentation of the long process of God's self-disclosure, and it embodies God's full and final revelation of His eternal purpose. It is because it is of this nature that Paul falls on his knees and prays a special prayer for his readers (1:15-17). It is because of a fixed and unalterable law and principle which he has enunciated so clearly and emphatically elsewhere (1 Cor. 2:14-16) that spiritual things, things of the Spirit, can only be understood by spiritual people, people of the Spirit. We have to come on this later, but all that is before us in this Letter will be little or not more than written mysteries if we do not pray this same prayer on this same necessity before we go any further.

(3) The last Letters, being so inclusive in substance, naturally gather up in allusion, if not in restatement, many of the matters touched on incidentally in former Letters. So, in allusion, we have vital points in Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, etc. It would require much time and space to trace and tabulate the instances. Some great words will be indicative, such as "Redemption," "Spiritual," "Sons," "Grace," "Adoption," "Foreordained," etc.

(4) Our method will be different from that usually employed in studying these (and other) Letters. In order that Bible students may obtain a quick, easy and simple grasp of the books, the Letters are usually reduced by Bible teachers to outlines according to the content and subjects mainly mentioned. This is a very valuable and helpful method. So we have such helpful outlines and analyses (of Ephesians) as Dr. Campbell Morgan's *The Church*--1. The Heavenly Calling. 2. The Earthly Conduct, each of these two sections being divided into three more. Or we have Miss Ruth Paxon's *The Wealth, Walk and Warfare of the Christian*; or that little book by Watchman Nee, *Sit, Walk, Stand*. We have not an idea that we can at all improve on such, but that is not the method which we are employing, and we hasten to say so. From the following you will not be given a "bird's eye view", as we usually describe a general look at things; unless it is an eagle's eye which sees vast ranges from great altitudes. In this sense "Ephesians" does take up the eagle aspect of the Cherubim--mystery and heavenliness. Our method will be--as it were--to hover over some of the eminences rising from this landscape, or, to keep to our title, to stand and gaze with wonder at some of "the unsearchable riches of Christ" which are presented in these final writings, especially in "Ephesians."

This, then, is what we meant by "Spying out the Land." At most we can but glimpse the greatnesses which are embodied in this Letter. But if we could see them; free from all prejudice, bias and natural influences, we should return with the same wonder and assurance as did the spies of the second investigation.

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