

Supreme Command

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon explores the critical role of Supreme Command in spiritual warfare, emphasizing the need for understanding, loyalty, and effective leadership.

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 10:3

Topics: "Spiritual Warfare", "Leadership in Christ"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the necessity of recognizing and adhering to the 'Supreme Command' in spiritual warfare, highlighting that our struggles are not merely physical but deeply spiritual. He points out that many of our troubles stem from a lack of understanding and application of spiritual principles, urging believers to seek wisdom and knowledge of the Lord. The sermon draws parallels between military strategy and spiritual leadership, stressing the importance of knowing our Supreme Commander, Jesus Christ, and being aligned with His objectives. Sparks warns against distractions and disloyalty that can undermine our effectiveness in the spiritual battle. Ultimately, he calls for a renewed commitment to the Lord's leadership and a collective effort to fulfill His divine purpose.

Transcript

"For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh (for the weapons of OUR WARFARE are not of the flesh, but mighty before God to the casting down of strong holds)" (2 Corinthians 10:3-4).

Although the Bible contains so much about the warfare of God's people, and although we as His people may have had much teaching on the subject, it would probably be true to say that we have largely failed to apply the instruction we have received--to situations, to circumstances, to happenings; and that this accounts for many of our troubles, individually and collectively. While there is much for which the enemy is not to be blamed as the first cause, but which is due rather to our own foolishness or unguardedness--our own faults-- yet there is still very much more that is attributable to his interest, to his interference, to his action. Our need today is not so much to be informed as to the reality of spiritual conflict--we know that to be a fact!--as to be more alive to the extra factor lying behind situations, the situations with which we are trying, with so little success, to cope. We try to cope with things, as though they were everything, and so often we miss their real underlying significance.

What we need, therefore, is understanding and wisdom --for wisdom means the ability to apply knowledge --wisdom as to this whole spiritual campaign, our warfare and its principles. But let me say at once: we are

not embarking upon a study of Satan, or demons, or demonology! It is a very favourite trap of the enemy to get people occupied and obsessed with himself, and, by the help of God, we are not going to fall into that. Our object is to study spiritual warfare itself, as viewed mainly from the Lord's side.

Let me here put in a brief word as to the origin, or occasion, of the messages here presented. Not having a great deal of time for general reading, I make it a matter of prayer that all my serious reading may be spiritually profitable and of value--whether it be reading a spiritual book or not. Just before leaving on a recent voyage to the United States, I was exercised in this manner, when a book came to my notice, and an extract from it arrested me. It was the record of the great South East Asia campaign in the second World War, and was entitled: Defeat into Victory. It is a heavy volume of 550 closely printed pages, with an added 23 for index. But having been arrested by this extract, I took the book with me and read it on the voyage, making careful notes. And as I read, I was more and more impressed that through it the Lord was leading me to something--that He had a message in it for His people.

There is enough in this volume to provide material for lengthy meditation. Much of it could be of real value, in this day particularly, to the people of God, and especially to those who have a sense of responsibility for the Lord's interests. For our present consideration we shall only pick out a few of the most vital and essential points; but, when I mention a few of the subjects covered in that volume, you will recognize its very great possibilities. Here are some examples: Supreme Command; Staff and Personnel--with all the order flowing therefrom; Loyalty Upward to the Top and Downward to the Bottom; Training; Provisioning; Diversity of Function in Unity of Object; Intelligence; Morale; Flexibility; The Great Objective --on the one side, of the Supreme Command, on the other side, of the enemy. The discerning will recognize that these ten points could provide scope for valuable consideration for a long time. If all that were translated and interpreted into spiritual terms, and the Lord's people were in possession of such strategy spiritually, what a tremendously efficient people they would be!

Now, it must be remembered that this is a volume of lessons learned, and that most of these great lessons were learned through defeat. That is, that the terrible story of the first South East Asia campaign--with its devastation, retreat, loss of tens of thousands of lives, and all that goes with that --became history because the vital factors mentioned were either absent or inadequate or in disorder. Surely this provides us with a field for instruction. Should not the people of God and their leaders learn from their defeats and their set backs at least as quickly and thoroughly?

Higher Direction

We begin with the main thing: 'Supreme Command'. And here the writer of this book uses an expression which I like very much. He calls it: 'Higher Direction'. That is fine! That gets us there! 'Supreme Command'--'Higher Direction'. In that connection there occurs the following sentence: 'The first step towards ultimate victory was the setting up of the Supreme Command, controlling all allied forces of land, sea and air.' What a statement that is when we carry it into the spiritual realm! The turning of a terrible catastrophe, tragedy, defeat into a glorious and consummate victory is here said to have had as its first step--perhaps its main step--the setting up of the Supreme Command. This will resolve itself into several quite distinct matters for our recognition. But this document proves in itself (of course in its own realm, here on the earth), beyond any question or room for doubt, that everything centres in and hangs upon Supreme Command, or Higher Direction.

This was something that seemed to have been overlooked, or had at most been regarded as optional; but now, here is this overwhelming weight of evidence and proof which says that it is absolutely essential. This Higher Direction, this Supreme Command, is not mere idealism, it is not just something official--it is vital. In this case it was clearly demonstrated that the saving of multitudes of lives, of months and years of time, of honour, liberty, and victory, all hung upon this one matter. Lives were lost, time was thrown away, honour besmirched, liberty sacrificed, victory turned to defeat, and possession turned to loss and nothing, because of the absence of this Supreme Command, this Higher Direction.

And in the light of two thousand years of history, no one will think it exaggeration to say that that is largely the story of the Church: lives, souls, lost; time given away; the honour of the Lord and His Church dragged in the mud. Liberty, victory, fulness?--no, there has not been a great deal of these. And may it not be traceable to this same thing: an undervaluing of, or maladjustment to, the Higher Direction, the Supreme Command? It proved, in the war, to be essential and vital and not open to any option; and in the Church there must be One over all, above all, in all, and through all, and only One in that position.

Mutuality Of Understanding

The matter of the necessity for Supreme Command is analyzed, and one thing that comes out of that analysis is this: there must be mutual knowledge and understanding between the Supreme Command and the Forces. Here is a quotation: 'A Supreme Commander, if he is wise, will see that his troops know him'. Much is said about that. The Supreme Commander is not just a name, a figurehead; some remote person somewhere, with his hands upon everything, someone talked about. He is personally known. This book shows how the Supreme Commander made it his business to get down among and be known to his troops, to have a personal touch; he knew his people and they knew him.

This is a simple but profoundly wise statement. What does it carry with it? It carries with it the basic principle that the Lord's first need is to bring us to know Him. Before we can do anything, we must know the Lord. There is no victory without that. Our knowledge of the Lord will determine the measure of our progress in this warfare. The fact is that it is so often for want of that knowledge that we are held up or defeated. To put that the other way round: it is so often just when we come into a new knowledge of the Lord that we go on in a new way of victory. The Lord takes infinite pains to get His people to know Him.

This takes us back into the New Testament. In his letter to the Ephesians--that great battle letter (for such it is)-- Paul puts tremendous weight upon the word 'know'. Right at the beginning, he prays: "that ye may know what is the hope of His calling"; "that ye may know... the riches... of His inheritance in the saints"; "that ye may know... the exceeding greatness of His power" (1:18-19). "That ye may know..."! That word 'know' is a governing word in this whole matter of our warfare. Tried warrior that he was, Paul laid the greatest stress on knowing the Lord. "That I may know Him...", he wrote elsewhere (Phil. 3:10). He said that that was far more important than all the other things that are regarded as important by men. He contrasts that knowledge with all that he had had previously--a great world wealth of inheritance. 'But', said he, 'I count all that as nothing--as refuse--that I may know Him'. That made Paul the warrior he was, and from him has come so much for the Church militant.

'The Commander, if he is wise, will see that his own troops know him.' If that could be said of a mortal man here on this earth, our Supreme Commander is no less wise. It is the utmost wisdom--we say it reverently--on the part of the Lord to ensure that our knowledge of Him is ever on the increase.

The Marks Of A Supreme Commander

In the next place, let us look at the characteristics required of a Supreme Commander, and their effect upon his forces.

(a) He Has A Clearly Defined Objective

Firstly, the Supreme Commander should have a clearly defined objective. We ought to know, from the New Testament, that our Supreme Commander has that; but it is of infinite importance that we know also, with Him, what that clearly defined objective is. That this is not so, accounts for so much of our weakness, resulting in such loss and delay. How many of God's people could express in a few words, from the New Testament, exactly what is the supreme objective of the Lord? Let us challenge ourselves: could we do that? On half a sheet of notepaper, could we put down what the Lord's supreme objective is? If not, we are at a loss, in limitation, in this battle. Think what it would mean if a sufficient number of the Lord's people were solidly bound together by a clear and unquestioning apprehension of the Lord's ultimate objective! He has made this known to His forces; we have it in His Word: "To make all men see..." (Eph. 3:9). Do you remember what it is they are to see?

(b) He Has A Clear Plan For Reaching His Objective

Secondly, the Supreme Commander should have a comprehensive and detailed vision of how he will reach that objective. Our Supreme Commander, without any doubt, has a detailed vision of how He will reach His objective, and therefore we need to be instructed in that in like manner. In other words, we should know, with the Lord, where we are going and what we are after. Are we 'beating about the bush', as we say; are we going round in circles; are we just experimenting? What proportion of all our efforts and expenditure is achieving anything really effective? It is the need of the people of God to be moving together in the integration of a single vision--the vision of the objective and of how God intends to reach it. This is not knowledge beyond our possessing. We have the documents in our hands, if only we would study them and pray for spiritual illumination on this matter. As God's people, we need to be deeply exercised as to how the battle is going. We must first of all know what is God's supreme objective--not just what is incidental or subsidiary; and then, if God has given any light in His Word as to the principles, the ways, the means, by which He intends to reach that end, we must make it our business to know these things also.

(c) He Has Command Of Adequate Resources

Thirdly, a Supreme Commander must have command of adequate resources to carry the campaign through. That is searching. We need, of course, have no question on that score so far as our Supreme Commander is concerned. We can and must be perfectly at rest on that matter, deeply and quietly and finally assured that He has all the resources at His command for seeing this through. The book to which I have been referring has a long and terrible story to tell of disaster resulting from inadequacy and insufficiency of available resources. There is, as we have said, no question about the adequacy of our Lord's resources, but we surely need to come into the good of that. Again we refer to this great battle document, the Letter to the Ephesians: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who hath blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ" (1:3). Paul had a wonderful apprehension of the resources available for himself and the Church in Christ. It was that apprehension that called forth some of his most joyful superlatives: "O the depth of the riches" (Rom. 11:33); "the unsearchable riches" (Eph. 3:8); and others.

A further point of vital importance is this: that, while the Commander may have all these resources at his disposal, it is a terrible thing if something gets in between the Commander and the Army, so that the supplies for the latter are not forthcoming. Of course, that opens up another great subject --that of Communications. But for our warfare there must be no gap whatever, whether of doubt, misapprehension, distance, or anything else, between what is there with Him and in Him for us, and what we are knowing of these resources. Again I say that much weakness and defeat, individually and collectively, is due to the needless poverty of God's people, who seem to be drawing upon and enjoying so little of their inheritance. Many do not know of the resources available. No wonder the enemy is having so much of his own way!

(d) He Has The Confidence Of His Forces

Fourthly, the Commander must have--'A staff and Army having implicit confidence in him, and willing to subordinate all personal and sectional considerations to him--absolute confidence in his judgment, his wisdom, his generalship, even when his ways are not understood.' If men can talk like that about one another, when stating the essentials of a victorious campaign on this earth level, surely that is something that we ought to understand and carry over into the spiritual--'A staff' (what is the spiritual equivalent of this?) 'and Army, having implicit confidence in the Supreme Command, in His understanding, in His wisdom, in His judgment, in His generalship, even when His ways are not understood.'

Sometimes He commands and His commands are difficult to understand; sometimes His ways are really "past finding out"; sometimes it almost seems that what He is doing, or essaying to do, will prove completely disastrous. Nevertheless, when we cannot or do not understand, when His ways run counter to our best natural judgment, then is the test: have we implicit confidence in Him? When He seems to be doing nothing, when He seems to be absent from the field, when His ways are so strange and mysterious, have we implicit confidence in His judgment, His wisdom? It is a test, is it not?

But remember again, that that whole campaign, both in its first phase of disaster and defeat and in its second phase of glorious full victory, hung upon that--a willingness in all concerned to subordinate all personal and sectional interests to the Supreme Command and give him unquestioned leadership. And a like unquestioned devotion on our part is surely called for. Nothing could serve the enemy's purposes better than for us to have a question about our Commander's leadership, a doubt about His generalship, His wisdom; that would just sabotage the whole campaign. They are words easily said, perhaps, but that is the subtlety of the battle we are in. Very often the battle has to be won inwardly before it can be won outwardly, and the inward battle circles around this question of implicit confidence in our Lord, unquestioning devotion to Him, the subduing of everything to His Lordship. Until we are settled on this point, we are a weakness in the Army, and we shall not be in the way of victory.

(e) He Has The Loyalty Of His Forces

Fifth, the Supreme Commander must have the absolute loyalty of all concerned. Much is made of that. Moreover, there must be not only loyalty to the Supreme Command, but loyalty also to all appointed by the Supreme Command, and loyalty amongst all ranks--loyalty, in fact, to the whole 'outfit'. What a vital matter this is! May not the explanation of a great deal of painful history be traced to some measure of disloyalty on our part--if not to our Lord, then to one another, to the Lord's people? There needs to be a new loyalty all round, upward and downward, and a committal to the Lord's supreme purpose: which means that anybody and everybody in that purpose is our comrade, and we are committed to him and to her.

The Spiritual Parallel And Application

Now these five characteristics of a Commander, embodying as they do the great strategic principles of this campaign, must be interpreted and translated into spiritual strategy. There must be the supreme value of a focal point of confidence and co-ordination. This is exactly what was established in the resurrection, ascension, and exaltation of the Lord Jesus: "...made Him to sit at His right hand... far above all rule, and authority... and every name that is named" (Eph. 1:20-21). There is the Supreme Command, the Higher Direction, the focal point of all confidence and co-ordination. Paul said much about this matter of co-ordination in the Head. Everything is "fitly framed"; every joint 'makes supply' (Eph. 4:16); everything works harmoniously together and makes its contribution, when it is focused in the Head, and when He is "Head over all things to the church" (Eph. 1:22-23). I know I have changed the metaphor from the Army to the Body, but the principle is the same.

But although it was in the ascension and exaltation of the Lord Jesus that this focal point of all confidence and relatedness was established, it only came into operation on the day of Pentecost. The ascension and exaltation of Jesus is, in fact, the explanation of the presence of the Holy Spirit (John 7:39). Pentecost, after all, is the counterpart of Joshua's experience before Jericho. Joshua, lifting up his eyes, saw a man standing with his sword drawn, and he "went unto him, and said unto him, 'Art thou for us, or for our adversaries?' And he said, 'Nay; but as captain of the host of the Lord am I now come' " (Josh. 5:13-14). Joshua prostrated himself, took off his shoes, and worshipped--he went down before that One. That represents Pentecost in its outworking. The Captain of the hosts of the Lord has come to take over. The Holy Spirit is here in the Name and function of the exalted Lord. Which raises the whole question of how far the Church and every individual--the Army and every member of it--is under that one government of the Holy Spirit. That, and that only, will ensure a victorious campaign, a turning of defeat into victory.

The Challenge Of 'The Supreme Command'

This matter of the Lord being in His place has a very wide application. There are quite a number of people who recognize and accept the leadership of the Lord Jesus, in name and phraseology and profession, but who in themselves are a definite contradiction to it. There are quite a lot of 'free-lances' in this war--people moving on their own in an unrelated way--who strongly, yes, vehemently declare, 'Jesus is Lord': but, if they only knew their own hearts, they are lord of their lives, of their ways; their likes and dislikes and preferences govern. Yes, there are those who, while acclaiming Jesus 'Lord' and speaking about 'surrender' (a great word, 'surrender!'), are nevertheless strong objectors to any kind of discipline, any kind of government, control or direction. They repudiate all that sort of thing; they say: 'I am free in the Lord!' The Lord's own appointed under officers are either ignored or insulted, or at least not honored.

This is just playing into the hands of the enemy. All wisdom is against it, and we have a mighty weight of evidence in the Word of God that it is not God's mind. God has, first of all, His Supreme Command, His Higher Direction, but He has also under that Command His 'subordinate staff', if we may use the term--His ordered system of delegated spiritual responsibility; and this must be recognized. If it is not, the Army is held up, and the enemy is given just what he wants. Moreover, there is complete confusion and frustration in the ranks.

There are, on the other hand, those people who have put legalism in the place of the Holy Spirit, who have substituted legality for light and love, made it the Supreme Command, constituted a system the final authority. As we know, Paul encountered this legalism in the battle; and, if we may judge from the letter to the Galatians, it was this that drew out his fighting spirit more than anything else. 'Let him be anathema! I repeat: Let him be anathema!' (Gal. 1:8-9). This was directed against anyone who would put a system in

the place of the Holy Spirit.

Others are like the Corinthians who, in their spiritual disorder and weakness and defeat, were actuated solely by natural preferences, natural judgment and natural choices amongst men and things. Their selection and allegiance is according to human thoughts and judgments, likes and dislikes. If such considerations get their way, 'Corinthian' conditions will prevail. And let us remember that Paul headed up the whole Corinthian situation into the threat of a repetition of what happened to Israel in the wilderness, with all those armies of the first generation (1 Cor. 10:1-11). They perished there; 'and', says Paul 'that is the way you are going, unless you see to this one thing, that Jesus Christ is Lord. You must not be governed by your own preferences, your likes and your dislikes, your judgments and your choices. Unless you give the Holy Spirit His rightful place, in charge of your soul with all its activities, that is the end to which you will come--you will perish in the wilderness!'

May the Lord find us recognizing the "Supreme Command": obedient to Him, and loyal both to Him and to one another.

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