

The Abiding Vocation

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon explores the Church's role as God's eternal plan, emphasizing its spiritual nature and the call to bring light and life to the world.

Scripture: Romans 9:6, Galatians 3:16, Philippians 3:12, Hebrews 2:10, Revelation 21:2

Topics: "Church Ministry", "Spiritual Calling"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes that the Church of Jesus Christ, the heavenly and spiritual Israel, was not an afterthought of God but was eternally intended to be the Body of Christ. The Church is a spiritual entity, not an earthly organization, and is comprised of all who are born of the Spirit. The heavenly calling of the Church is to minister light and life to the world, just as Israel was intended to do in the old dispensation. The ultimate goal is for the heavenly Israel, represented by the Church, to bring light and life to the nations, maintaining their spiritual health.

Transcript

Before going further with our main point there are two things that I want to say in parenthesis.

First, I want to correct a possible misunderstanding. The heavenly and spiritual Israel, which is the Church of Jesus Christ, is not an afterthought of God. It was not brought in because Israel failed. Please be very clear about that. There are those who teach that that is so. They say that the Lord offered it to Israel, who refused it. He had to do something and so He got the idea of a Church. It was quite an afterthought, a kind of emergency movement of God. That is entirely false to the whole of the Bible, and it is one thing we are seeking to show in these days. We have said that everything in the Old Testament, including Israel, had Christ and the Church in view. It was all leading on to Christ and the Church, and they take up all the divine thoughts of the past and embody them in themselves. The Church is the eternal thing. It was in the heart of God before time was and was chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world. The Church is no afterthought of God: it is a before-thought. God's Son is no emergency matter. He may have come in at a time of emergency, but He was in view for this particular work from all eternity. The Church was eternally intended to be the Body of Christ.

Now I want you to keep that in mind in all that we are saying. We believe that if Adam had not been disobedient in unbelief he would have been 'conformed to God's Son'; but his sin meant that he forfeited the divine intention. In the same way Israel would have become incorporated into the corporate expression of Christ, but in unbelief and disobedience Israel forfeited that 'inheritance'. The Church

universal stood eternally over Israel. This is a very important matter.

The other thing that I want to emphasize is this: that this new Israel, the Church, is essentially a spiritual thing, as truly as Christ, here, now, is a spiritual matter. And Christ is here in this world by the Spirit. As truly as Christ is here - though no longer in physical presence and on a temporal basis (we can only know Him and have fellowship with Him spiritually) - so it is as to the Church.

There has to be a revolution in the minds of many Christians about this matter. That word 'Church' is taken up and put on to almost anything. Forgive me! I mean no offence, but we are dealing with very vital matters. We hear of, speak of, this church and that church - the Lutheran church, the Methodist church, the Baptist church, the Anglican church - and how many more? We speak of all these as the church. From heaven's standpoint that is a lot of nonsense. From heaven's standpoint those are not the Church. They may represent one or other aspect of truth, but not one of them has the whole of the truth, and when you put them all together they have not all of the truth. All the truth is in Jesus alone.

The Church is a spiritual thing. You cannot look upon anything material, or on people in the flesh, and say: 'That is the church.' You are only in the Church in so far as there is something of Christ in you. It is Christ in us that makes the Church. You see, the Church is a unity in Christ.

The Lord Jesus never looks upon so many loaves of bread all over the world when there is a gathering to His Table. I suppose that on the Lord's Day there may be thousands of loaves of bread being broken, and I do not know how many cups - but heaven never sees more than one loaf or more than one cup. The loaf is Christ, the cup is Christ, and by partaking we are united in Christ.

It is not quite certain whether the translators were correct - though there may be something in it - when they translated the words of the Lord Jesus at the supper. In the old version it says: "This is my body, which is broken for you" (I Corinthians 11:24 - A.V.) There may be very real truth in using that word 'broken'. Indeed, the Lord's body was broken, but the later translators have left that word out and have put: "This is my body, which is for you" (I Corinthians 11:24 - R.V.). Perhaps that later translation dismisses a false idea, for that word 'broken' has so often been taken to mean - 'Here is one piece, there is another, and there is another'; pieces all over the world. Christ is not divided. Paul said: "Is Christ divided?" (I Corinthians 1:13). No, Christ is not divided. There may be a thousand pieces of the earthly loaf, but the heavenly loaf is one, and that is how heaven sees the Church.

The church is a broken thing on the earth. It is broken into many pieces down here, but in heaven it is seen as one, and the sooner you and I see from heaven's standpoint the better. If this man or this woman is "in Christ", it does not matter whether he or she is in our denomination or not, whether he or she is in our sect or not. If they are "in Christ" they are part with all others in Christ.

Understand that the Church is a spiritual thing, not an earthly, temporal thing, and that is a very important thing for us to recognize; it is comprised of all who are born of the Spirit.

We have taken a lot of time before we come on to our particular point. We are doing this: Along one side we are tracing God's ways with the old Israel, and along the other side we are seeing that He takes the spiritual laws of that old Israel and perpetuates them in the new Israel. What He did in a temporal way with the first Israel, He is now doing in a spiritual way with the new Israel.

Our last word was that God's glory in Abraham reached its climax in sonship. Sonship in death and resurrection as represented by Isaac. Sonship is the climax of God's glory.

We are back in the Letter to the Hebrews now. What is the climax of that Letter and of all God's movement as contained in it? It is found in one fragment: "Bringing many sons unto glory" (Hebrews 2:10). That is the climax of the glory of God. As it was in a temporal way with Abraham, so it is in a spiritual way with the new Israel.

But the idea of sonship did not begin with Abraham and Isaac. It only came out in them. It went right back before them - it was God's cherished secret from before times eternal. That secret has been lost in Abraham's seed after the flesh, but is taken up in Abraham's Seed after the Spirit.

You probably know that the Letters to the Romans and the Galatians are concerned with this very thing. The Apostle is saying just this in the Letter to the Romans, chapters nine, ten and eleven (all one section really). "They are not all Israel, which are of Israel" (Romans 9:6) - 'All the natural children of Abraham are not Israel. Israel is only the spiritual children of Abraham.'

When you go into the Letter to the Galatians that is explained very carefully, and Paul reduces it to this one thing. He refers to the promise made to Abraham: "In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 22:18).

This is the thing that got Paul into a lot of trouble. He said: "(God) saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ" (Galatians 3:16). It is not the many natural children of Abraham, but the spiritual children - and that is Christ and the companions of Christ.

Isaiah cried: "He shall see his seed... he shall see of the travail of his soul" (Isaiah 53:10,11), and this heavenly Jerusalem is the spiritual seed of Abraham, which is Christ and the 'born from above' ones.

The Letter to the Galatians teaches that the rest have gone. Even all the other children of Abraham are now set aside, and God recognizes only His spiritual children. This is taken up in this phrase which has governed our whole time: "Wherefore, holy brethren, companions of a heavenly calling... we are become companions of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning... firm unto the end" (Hebrews 3:1,14).

This spiritual and heavenly Israel is called "companions of a heavenly calling", and we will dwell upon that heavenly calling for a few minutes.

What was God's intention in this world concerning the first Israel? It was that they should mediate light and life to the nations. That was their divine calling - that the nations should receive life through their light; that they should be the channel of divine light and life to the nations of this world. We could take quite a lot of the Old Testament to show this, but we are going to use only one illustration.

You notice that all the sons of Israel were focused in one son. (Of course, when we speak of Israel now, we mean Jacob.) That son was Joseph. If it had not been for him that whole nation would have perished, and not only the sons and families of Jacob, but all Egypt. In a sense that world would have perished. God's strange, sovereign dealings with Joseph brought him, through death and resurrection, to the throne. Then his brothers came to Egypt and he made himself known to them. They went down before him in utter shame, began to apologize and try to excuse themselves. Poor, miserable, wretched fellows they were! But what did Joseph say? "Be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither: for God did send me before you to preserve life" (Genesis 45:5). Life and light came not only to all the families of

Jacob, but to Egypt, the world, through Joseph. He was the inclusive representative of all his brethren. God made him like that, and he sets forth this truth that God intended all Israel of old to be a minister of life and light to the whole world. That was Israel's calling and what they were intended for in the old dispensation. They were just down here by God's appointment, right at the centre of the nations, in a position of ascendancy, in order to mediate light and life to the nations. Abraham's seed was intended to do that, but that seed failed God, and instead of fulfilling their calling, they contradicted it.

We need not dwell upon their failure. It is a dark and terrible story. And for the last nearly two thousand years they have been where the Lord Jesus said they would be: "The sons of the kingdom shall be cast forth into the outer darkness: there shall be the weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 8:12). That is the story of the earthly Israel, as a nation, through all these past centuries. Thank God for all those who have escaped from the outer darkness, who are not weeping and gnashing their teeth, but are rejoicing in Christ Jesus! But that is where the nation went, and the last stroke of that was in A.D. 70.

That is the dark side. But God had not finished with an Israel. He still had in view a 'Prince with God', for that is the meaning of the name 'Israel'. This heavenly, spiritual Israel to which you and I belong is called into the vocation of Joseph. God has transferred that in a spiritual way to us. We are here in this heavenly calling, this spiritual vocation to minister light and life to the world. That is to be our heavenly calling now, and that is why the Lord Jesus said to His new Israel: "Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations" (Matthew 28:19) ... 'Begin at Jerusalem... Samaria... all Judaea... and unto the uttermost parts of the earth... and wherever you are your heavenly calling is to bring light and life from above.'

At the beginning the Church almost settled down in the earthly Jerusalem. They were very slow to move away from there, so the Lord took a big hammer and brought it down on the Church in that city. Then they were all scattered abroad; and the Lord said: 'I have finished with this earthly city. The new Jerusalem is above, and the new, heavenly calling is to all the nations.'

That is the heavenly calling of the spiritual Israel now, but that has to come to fullness afterward. That fullness is represented at the end of the Bible - "the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God" (Revelation 21:2). No, this is not a material and political world-center. This is the Church. These are the companions of Christ represented in the symbolism of a city, and the last word about that city is this: "And the nations shall walk amidst the light thereof... and on this side of the river and on that was the tree of life... and the leaves of the tree were for the health of the nations" (Revelation 21:2,4, 22:2). Did you notice that I changed a word? Our translation says "for the healing of the nations", but that is not correct. The nations will not need healing in eternity, thank God! But they will need their spiritual health ministered to.

Most of us here do not need saving. Remember, by the way, that the word 'salvation' in the original is the word 'health'. It is being in a state of good health. That is the meaning of the word 'salvation' - being in spiritually good health.

The nations then will be those that have had the Gospel and have responded: "The earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Habakkuk 2:14), but right at the centre of the nations will be the Church, and through the Church light and life will go out to maintain the health of the nations.

So, when everything has been said and done, and you have gone right through the long, long story, at last you come to the end in the last chapter of history in the Book of the Revelation: and the last picture is of a

heavenly Israel ministering light and life to the nations.

Perhaps some of you Bible students and you people who are interested in doctrine are troubled now with a question, in view of what I have said. 'Does he mean that the Church is one thing and that there are a lot of people who are not of the Church? In other words, is the city one thing and are the nations another?'

I am not going to enter on any argument over that, but I am going to bring you back to this Letter to the Hebrews for your answer. It is one little word of two letters: 'IF!' "We are become companions of Christ if..." : "Whose house are we if...". In one sense the whole Letter circles round that little word. It is not now a matter of salvation and getting into heaven. It is now a matter of that instrument of eternal vocation for all the rest. This is the height of the heavenly calling. I leave you to answer the question by studying this Letter again. It does seem to say that everyone will not be the city. If everyone is the city, where is the country? No, the city is the center, the seat of administration, of government and of light. The whole country derives its values through the city. It does seem that that is the truth that is here. It is possible to get into heaven but not be of the city.

If you have trouble with that and you disagree with me - I can only say to you: 'Go back to the Word.' I cannot understand this Letter on any other ground, unless we admit that the warnings relate to salvation and not to inheritance. Why is it shot through and through with this urgency to go on? I do not believe that if you do not go on you forfeit your eternal life or sacrifice your salvation, but I do believe that if you do not go on you will forfeit your inheritance, and that is the teaching of this Letter as I see it. Why, the whole of the New Testament, after the Gospels, has this one object: to get Christians to go on, and to go on to full growth.

God put something into the very constitution of Abraham which had two effects. It made him a very discontented man. He was possessed of a holy discontent. He saw the land and God gave him flocks and herds in abundance, but all the time he was going up and down the land saying: 'This is not it. There is something more than this. I can never be satisfied with this.' In a right sense Abraham was a most discontented man.

On the other side, he had a vision of what ought to be. The New Testament calls it a heavenly country. (See Hebrews 11:16.) He was looking for a city "whose builder and maker is God", and no city on this earth answered to what was in the heart of Abraham. Do you think I am exaggerating? Do you think I am making that up? What did Jesus say to the old Israel? "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day; and he saw it, and was glad" (John 12:56). Abraham saw right down the ages. He had a vision and nothing in this world could satisfy that vision. His heart was ever hungry and so he was a man who never settled down on this earth.

"Let us go on", says this Letter to the Hebrews. 'Let us not settle down, and let us never be satisfied with anything less than God's fullness.' That is its message.

In the end it is represented as a race. We are running a race and the goal and prize lie ahead. Let us not stop in the race and turn aside! "Let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus..." (Hebrews 12:1,2). "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day;" "Looking unto Jesus". Let us never settle down with anything less than God's fullness. "Wherefore, holy brethren, companions of a heavenly calling."

Where the Holy Spirit really has His place in a heart, that heart will be a 'going on' heart. It will never settle down to anything less than God's fullness.

There are two different kinds of dissatisfaction. There are those poor, miserable people who are never satisfied with anything. They are always discontented, and in a wrong way. We are not appealing for such people! But this spiritual discontent, this that says: "Not that I have obtained, or am already made perfect... but one thing I do, forgetting the things which are behind... I press on toward the goal unto the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:12-14), is the nature of a truly Holy Spirit-governed life. It will always be pressing on to something more of the Lord. Such are the true heavenly seed of Abraham, the companions of a heavenly calling.

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