

The Answer to Disillusionment

by T. Austin-Sparks

God's ultimate purpose is to secure a people for Himself, and He chooses instruments to fulfill this purpose.

Scripture: John 12:36

Topics: "God's Purpose", "Vision of Christ"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the importance of recognizing God's ultimate purpose in securing a people for His glory, as illustrated through Isaiah's vision of the exalted Lord. He warns against the dangers of disillusionment that arise when we place our trust in human leaders, like King Uzziah, rather than in the infallible Lord Jesus. Sparks highlights that true ministry and purpose stem from a clear vision of Christ's glory, which sustains us through trials and disappointments. The sermon calls for believers to understand their role as instruments in God's plan, shaped by His purpose, rather than seeking personal significance. Ultimately, the vision of Christ is presented as the antidote to disillusionment and despair.

Transcript

"While ye have the light, believe on the light, that ye may become sons of light. These things spake Jesus, and he departed and hid himself from them" (or: "was hidden from them"). "But though he had done so many signs before them, yet they believed not on him: that the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spake,

Lord, who hath believed our report?

And to whom hath the arm of the Lord been revealed?

For this cause they could not believe, for that Isaiah said again,

He hath blinded their eyes, and he hardened their heart;

Lest they should see with their eyes, and perceive with their heart,

And should turn,

And I should heal them.

These things said Isaiah, because he saw his glory; and he spake of him." (John 12:36-41.)

In this double reference to the prophecies of Isaiah, there is very little difficulty in relating the former of the two to the Lord Jesus. Isaiah 53 is taken for granted by most as referring to Him. We know the content of that wonderful chapter. But it has not been so commonly recognised that, according to the words that we have quoted from John's Gospel, Isaiah chapter 6 is just as definitely related to the Lord Jesus.

That chapter, as we know, contains the commission of the prophet to go and do what is mentioned here: "Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest..." - and so on; and John says that Isaiah said these things, 'because he saw His glory, and spake of HIM.' That One, "high and lifted up", whose "train filled the temple", was, if this Scripture is true, none other than the Lord Jesus. It is a most impressive statement, this, that Isaiah said these things - not 'WHEN he saw His glory', although that is true - but 'BECAUSE he saw His glory'. The effect of the vision was seen in his utterance. What he saw became his life-work and message.

In this event, or crisis, then, in Isaiah's life, to which John refers, the prophet saw CHRIST'S glory. And so our occupation is to be with the vision of the exalted Lord: its character, and its effect or consequence.

GOD'S ULTIMATE PURPOSE: THE SECURING OF A PEOPLE

But before going further, I want to say something by way of bringing quite definitely into view what it is we have before us. It is something which needs to be said again, and with renewed definiteness and strength. It is a matter of the greatest importance that we should realise that, while the Lord is seeking to save people in this world, and to conform the saved to the image of Christ, He is all the time doing these things with the object of SECURING A PEOPLE AS A VESSEL FOR A CONSUMMATE PURPOSE.

The saving and the building up are not the ENDS to which God is working, as ends in themselves. They are but WAYS AND MEANS to an end. All through the ages - and this is a thing which, I should say, it is impossible not to see in the Bible throughout - God has been in quest of a people, with a view to making them a vessel and the instrument of a purpose which lies along the line of their salvation, and their constitution. If this truth, this fact, of an all-governing purpose is not recognised, there will always be a serious constitutional deficiency, weakness and limitation, in the Christian life and in the Christian work. There will be frustration and defeat in the Church, if it is not dominated by this outstanding reality, that God is doing everything in relation to a purpose.

So, while with all our hearts we are committed to evangelism, and committed with all our hearts to helping people in the Christian life, if we have any more of 'heart' to add to that, it is in relation to God having a vessel, a people - not individual Christians, as saved and growing spiritually, but a PEOPLE - to serve Him in relation to that full purpose of His heart.

God's purpose, of course, has many aspects and many phases. God has moved down the ages in what we may call a 'phasic', or 'phaseal', way. The different parts of the whole have required, for their introduction or their recovery, particular instruments and special emphases. That is perfectly clear in the instruments that God Himself has chosen. The prophets represent different aspects of God's purpose. They are all, shall we say, different voices in the choir. Jeremiah, for instance, may be the profound bass, the deep rumbling of God's judgment, yet from a broken heart; Isaiah may be the tenor, clear as a bird; Ezekiel may be the baritone, between the two and combining the two. I think you will find that there is some truth in those definitions.

But they are all parts of the one great choir, and they are all occupied with one theme; and the one theme of all the prophets, all the voices, all the instrumentalities of the Scriptures, is: God's full thought concerning a people for His Son, a people by whom His Son will administer His eternal kingdom.

We must honour every voice, and every note, and every instrumentality that God raises up. We must recognise that God has variety. In His sovereignty he has a right to choose and to use what He will. There is no place for any rivalries or jealousies. But it is very necessary for us, as one instrumentality among many, to know what our note is, and just where WE stand in this sovereign 'working of all things after the counsel of His own will' (Eph. 1:11).

So, the word at the commencement of these meditations is this. We are not here just presenting some special messages on some special subject, however good or valuable that might be. Our meditations are to be in relation to the whole purpose of God, and it is that purpose which must dominate.

Now, perhaps you do not recognise the point of that. It is possible - so possible, that it becomes in a very large way actual - to enjoy the teaching, and all the accompaniments of it, to enjoy the benefits and the values, and to say: 'Well, I find a great deal of help or blessing in that'; and yet not to have recognised the fundamental meaning of it, as to just why the help or blessing is found. Why do we find the Lord in it? Why the life? Why the light? Why all this that we are enjoying? It is not just something in itself. I venture to say that that very well might not be so, but for the fundamental purpose. It all springs out of that. And it is of the greatest importance that we should not just be deriving blessings and benefits, enjoying ourselves with the fruit, but should ourselves be part of the very ROOT of the thing, and the root of the thing should be in us.

So, if you can say to your own heart: 'Well, I have found blessing, I have found help; I like to read the messages; I meet the Lord in them', perhaps that may challenge you - and I hope it does - to ask yourself: Why? Why? Let me say again quite clearly: It lies in the very object for which this instrumentality has been brought into being by God Himself. We must understand that.

Forgive these solemn and somewhat fierce words, but we must get right to the heart of this. And so we are led to this vision which the prophet Isaiah had. We begin by taking some account of THIS instrument, THIS vessel - Isaiah himself.

NOT MEN, BUT INSTRUMENTS

We need to realise that, when we are reading these books - the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and others - we are not just reading history - either history actually, or history prophetically, predictively. You can read your Bible like that. You can be occupied with the phrase 'In the times of Moses', or 'In the times of the kings', or 'In the times of the prophets'... and so read it as history. Or you might read it as biography: Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah and the rest. But I want to impress this upon you - **YOU MUST NOT READ YOUR BIBLE JUST IN THAT WAY**. After all, what is the real value of the Bible if it is no more than history or biography? You must read your Bible - and I am thinking at the moment particularly of Isaiah - in the light of **INSTRUMENTALITIES IN RELATION TO ONE PERSISTENT PURPOSE**. The purpose is one right from the beginning; it persists all the way through the ages; and these people - these men, and this nation - are only in view at all, they only have their being, their place, and their name, because they are instruments, chosen and raised up of God, in relation to that one persistent purpose.

We must be very clear about this. We must have it very definitely in our minds, when we read our Bible, that these are not necessarily 'men', **AS SUCH**, at all. They have a great name - yes: Abraham has a great

name, and so has Moses, and so has David, and so have the prophets. They have a name, and we call them by their name. But we need to realise that it is not the office, but the FUNCTION, that gives the value and the significance to anybody in the Bible. God did not just choose an Isaiah, as a MAN; God chose an INSTRUMENT for His purpose, and that instrument, shall we say, 'happened' to be Isaiah. It is not something official; it is something which represents a spiritual function, an instrumentality.

In the workshop of God - and it is a very big one - there are numerous instruments. God has His design before Him. And in relation to that design - for different parts, for different aspects, at different times, in different places - He selects His instruments. It is in relation to that particular part of the whole. Well, it does not matter whether He calls that instrument by a certain name, does it? That really does not matter at all. If you were in a workshop with a master-workman, he might point to something and simply say, 'I want that', without giving it its name at all. If you knew the names of these different instruments, he might mention the name and say: 'Bring me so-and-so'. But he would very likely point to the thing and say: 'I want that for the moment; give me that.' It is the purpose that it is to serve, not the name that belongs to it, that gives it any significance at all.

Do you see the point? In the workshop of God, the instrumentalities, and the purpose for which they have been brought in, are the things that matter. It is not the labels that you put on them, not the names that you give them - that is man's way of doing things. It is the purpose that they serve. And as for Isaiah - well, we must call him something; he must be known by some name, because he served the purpose; but it is not his biography, it is not his place in history - it is his spiritual function, his spiritual purpose, the SPIRITUAL PRINCIPLE that he embodies, that is THE thing. Men try to make names for themselves, get a reputation, be placarded as of some importance. God is not a little bit interested in that: all that matters to God is the purpose that they serve. Our names are written in heaven, and that is the very best place for them. Men want to have them written up large on earth. God writes our names in heaven. We may not know our name until we get there. But, when we have enunciated the principle, we do not forget that Bible names were so often a synonym for the bearers' work.

Now, when you come to this sixth chapter of Isaiah, you meet with a man. But, before long, you find yourself not in the presence of the man Isaiah at all: you find the man falling down, dropping away, as it were, and crying: "Woe is me". It is the exalted Lord who is in view: everything now is focused upon Him, everything now is related to Him. All is concerned with Him - "the Lord, high and lifted up". And all purpose is centred in Him, not in Isaiah or anyone else. He comes to dominate the situation.

A TRANSITION FROM EARTHLY TO HEAVENLY

That may sound like a simple statement. But as we go on, we shall see that it is a fact of the greatest significance. Isaiah says: "In the year that king Uzziah died I saw the Lord..." When we come to that presently, we shall see that this marks a tremendous transition. From something that was big, great, important, dominating, fascinating in this world, there is now a transition to something far greater - to Heaven itself.

The meaning of it all is - THAT WHICH IS ABOVE. The whole explanation of Isaiah or of any other man - be he one of the 'major' prophets, be he any great name in the Bible - is that Throne, that exalted Lord. And so the Apostle John wrote: 'Isaiah said these things because he saw HIS glory'. He said 'these things'. It was not just that Isaiah said SOME of the things that are contained here, in the commission of the Lord. The whole life of this man, and ALL his ministry, right on to the end, right to the end of this book,

came out of his having 'seen His glory'. What a law that is for life, for ministry - 'because he saw His glory'!

We shall have more to say about that when we speak of the results. But what we are to be impressed with, right at the outset, is this: that it is not the men, not the instrumentalities, that matter; it is the purpose. And, from Heaven's standpoint, WE are greater or smaller, according to OUR oneness with that purpose. OUR significance is in proportion to OUR vital relationship with that purpose: that is, that His glory should fill the whole earth. That is, as you know, a part of the statement of the seraphim in the vision: "the whole earth is full of his glory" (Is. 6:3). As you will see from the margin of the Revised Version, the Hebrew is literally: 'the fullness of the whole earth is his glory'. The earth is the place for the fullness of HIS glory. That is God's purpose for the place of His Son. So the man must go out, become insignificant, and cry 'Woe!' Any instrumentality that does not correspond to the glory of Christ must fall down and be adjusted.

'Because he saw His glory' - that explains Isaiah. The Lord never chooses persons AS SUCH, whoever they may be. The choice is governed by purpose. God does not choose anyone just as a person. He does not even choose instrumentalities as things in themselves. There is a sovereignty about God's choice. Very often He chooses something that is altogether without reputation, or standing, or acceptance; something altogether rejected by men. He has His purpose in view all the time.

And if He does choose a man like Paul, with great natural gifts and abilities, He will deal with that vessel in such a way as to make him know - whatever other people may say about him or think about him - that before God he is nothing. It is not what other people say about a person: it is what that person knows himself or herself to be in the presence of God. There is no man, I think, who was more in agreement with Isaiah in crying: "Woe is me", than the Apostle Paul. For indeed he did cry that - 'Woe is me' - "O wretched man that I am!" (Rom. 7:24). It is not that God is looking for big men or important people, AS such. He needs men, He needs women, He needs people; but He is looking for an instrument - an instrument that is in perfect harmony with the purpose that He has in hand.

INSTRUMENTS SHAPED TO THE PURPOSE

That carries us a bit further. The instrument must be one that is shaped according to the purpose. It has had to be forged and formed in fire; shaped to the purpose for which it has been sovereignly chosen. And that means a long secret history between God and His vessel. You cannot just go out and preach 'truths', give out in a second-hand way about the things of God. The Lord have mercy upon us all in this; it explains so much. But when real purpose IS governing, the thing has got to go through us, and we have got to go through it. The instrument has to be shaped and formed according to the purpose of its election.

And I am not thinking only of individual instrumentalities. It is equally true of collective instrumentalities - a people. If they are vitally related to the purpose, they will go through the truth, and it will go through them. They will not get away with mere doctrine, mere mental grasp of things. They will go through it. And they will either draw out, because it is too hot and too difficult, or they will yield, and allow God to form according to the purpose. To be a part of such a people, such an instrument, such a vessel (and it does not mean that you need all be in the same place, but wherever you are), means that God is going to keep very close accounts with you in the light of purpose. And this thing is going to reach into your life, wherever you are; and you are going to have experiences - strange experiences - that you would never have, but for that purpose.

When the Lord chooses vessels - be they individuals, or be they collective - they may go through experiences of very deep perplexity, of great disappointment, of much disillusionment, even to the point of

utter hopelessness. It was true of the prophets, it was true of Paul. Everything may at times appear to be hopeless, and that is no exaggeration. The measure of your vision will determine the measure of your experience. To see in great dimensions is to have experiences of great heights and GREAT DEPTHS. Paul knew what it meant to 'despair of life'; to touch great depths of death in order to touch the greater depth of the power of his resurrection.

GOD MAKES ALL PROVISION

But note: although such vessels or instruments may go that way - and I am keeping close to the book all the time - He meets those vessels with what is necessary for the fulfilment of the purpose of their election. Here is Isaiah: I ask you, why five chapters of tragedy before chapter 6?

Why was the vision given? It was given because the situation, from every human standpoint, was a hopeless one. Man could well despair when king Uzziah died. The tragedy of king Uzziah! We will speak about him again in a moment. And the state of things in Uzziah's day! It brought this prophet to utter despair. And then, just think what it is that he has to do: 'Make this people's ears heavy... close their eyes... lest they should see and hear, and understand and believe, and return...' (6:10). What a life-work! What a hopeless prospect!

To be able to face a situation like that and go through with it, a man needs some vision of a throne above. This vision was God's meeting of the need of a chosen vessel, in relation to His purpose, in a day when things were as dark and as well-nigh hopeless as they could be. Yes, God meets the need, which arises out of the very situation to be dealt with; God has His provision, and He makes it. Sometimes, with our biggest questions, our most awful disillusionment, our deepest despair and hopelessness, we seem to touch bottom, and we say: 'Is it possible, this great purpose of God concerning the Church? Is it really possible?' And then the Lord gives a new opening of the eyes of our heart concerning His Throne, His position above all, His glory, and we go on again - until it all comes back, and we touch bottom once more! That is the history of such a vessel.

THE PERILS OF BLESSING

Now, all this is contained in this incident in chapter six. Isaiah's life, up to the time of the vision, had been entirely related to king Uzziah (otherwise known as Azariah). Perhaps for at least twenty-five years - the last twenty-five years of Uzziah's life, out of the fifty-two years of his reign - Isaiah was completely under the shadow of this man. You can read about it in 2 Chronicles 26. What a beginning Uzziah had! - a grand beginning, a great beginning; so full of promise. Everything seemed to be set fair for a glorious period of history. Isaiah was brought up in that. The triumphs of Uzziah brought the nation and the kingdom, geographically, almost back to the limits of Solomon's reign - that is, to the limits of the covenant made to Abraham. It was a wonderful reign.

As I say, there is no doubt that this young man - you can see from his writings that he was an idealist - was under the fascination of this great man, this wonderful man, Uzziah; he overshadowed everything for him. Isaiah's life was wrapped up with that of the king. God blessed Uzziah, and prospered him, and gave him victory, and gave him territory: "his name spread far abroad, for he was marvellously helped..." And then... and then... tragedy of tragedies - read it: "But when he was strong, his heart was lifted up so that he did corruptly, and he trespassed against the Lord his God; for he went into the temple of the Lord to burn incense upon the altar of incense" (2 Chron. 26:15,16).

How much we could say about the perils of prosperity, the perils of popularity, the perils of blessing - even God's blessing! And how much we could say about the unsafety of the best of men. How unreliable we are - I mean 'we men'! How dangerous it is for God to entrust us with blessing! There is much in that. The point is that there came this moment, this turning-point in Uzziah's life, when, with all the good that there had been, with all the blessing and enlargement that God had given him, he assumed something - and then he presumed.

It is like so many things, and so many people - yes, so many instrumentalities: a good beginning, bidding fair to accomplish some great thing for the glory of God, with much Divine blessing, and much Divine enlargement; and then... at a certain almost imperceptible point, it becomes something in itself, and begins to trade upon its position, upon its reputation - even trade upon the blessing of God! There comes in a secret pride of having become something - of course for the Lord, and by the blessing of the Lord; assuming that the blessing of the Lord overlooks secret sin, and presuming upon that; spiritual pride creeping in. That is the history of Uzziah; and that is the history of many a greatly blessed and used instrumentality of God.

THE HOLINESS OF GOD

Uzziah, then, presuming upon his position and God's blessing, as we see, committed this presumptuous act: he went into the Holy Place, where the Altar of Incense was, to offer incense. The high priest, with eighty other priests, implored him, begged him, warned him, telling him in most definite terms that that was neither his place nor his office. The priesthood saw through the act to the spiritual significance - presumption. And then, as he stood there, censer in hand, ready to offer the incense, with his anger rising, God smote him! The leprosy broke out upon his face, and the priests made haste to thrust him out of the Temple; and from that day to the day of his death he lived in a leper house - a leper!

What about Isaiah? - the man who had been living, fascinated, under the shadow of all the preceding glory; to whom Uzziah had been the very model, the life dominating his whole horizon? Here is his idol shattered! He knows that that man is in a leper asylum for the rest of his life!

Do you see the significance of this vision? "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord..."

For a ministry like this, to serve God's full purpose, you must be horizoned by nothing less than that One on the Throne. You must have no other vision; no fascination or heart-captivation with that which, under testing and under trial, will break down - and will let you down. It is very necessary, in order to fulfil this purpose, that we get away from earth and from men, and get to the only Man - the Man in Heaven. Everything for Isaiah was saved by that vision. How he might have been shattered! How devastating this whole thing would have been finally for this young man, if he had not seen Another, whose glory eclipsed the human glory which, up to that time, had been the greatest glory of which he knew. Such a vision is a tremendous thing for our deliverance in the day of disillusionment.

DELIVERANCE IN DISILLUSIONMENT

For we shall all undoubtedly suffer much disillusionment as we go on. There may be great Bible teachers, and great figures in the Christian world, whom we admire. I have done that: I have been a young man, and have done my hero-worshipping of the great Bible teachers, the great leaders, the great Christian statesmen, and so on. And I have lived to know that you dare not put your trust in men - in "princes". You will find, sooner or later, that, at best, that is not safe ground. And while, in many cases, it is not a matter of

sin, yet, in many cases, the Lord does allow these 'idols' in the end to pass out under a shadow.

The point is that you may come to a time when you are disillusioned, when you discover the human weaknesses and defects in those you thought were absolutely trustworthy and reliable. And many people today are out in the shadows, out in some backwater, in their Christian lives, because of becoming disillusioned or disappointed with certain Christians, or certain things. They looked for, and thought they had found, perfection, and they discovered they had not.

Now this is a contingency, a possibility, that we have got to face. If we have not really seen the Lord Jesus as the answer, if our anchorage is not firmly in Heaven with Him, we shall be shattered in that day, and our faith will break down. What we need is this seeing of the exalted Lord and His glory; and this seeing is essential to our salvation, not only as believers in God, but for those of us who are Christian workers, in order to get us through. If we have not seen the significance and the meaning of the Man in the Throne, we shall just go to pieces under the duress of disillusionment and disappointment.

That does not mean - God forbid! - that we should develop a spirit of mistrust about servants of God, and be always looking for their faults, watching where they are going to break down. God forbid that there should be anything of that. At the same time, whatever we may think about God's servants, let us remember that they are but frail vessels, and that, if we are to go through and fulfil God's purpose, it is necessary that we should have seen the only infallible One, the only One who can really be relied upon never to disappoint. The Lord Jesus will never be the occasion of a disillusionment - never!

Now, you see, Isaiah had been related to Uzziah in this way: enamoured, fascinated, captivated. And then he became involved. Disillusioned, stripped and denuded, in such a day he needs something: he needs saving, he needs rescuing, he needs hope; he needs, in the midst of the wreckage, to see purpose. The purpose has not gone; it is not all in vain, not all hopeless. The God who had called him in relation to His purpose, met his need; and so the vision was his salvation - and his ministry.

We leave it there for the time being. Let us remind ourselves that we are not talking about Isaiah, we are not talking about Uzziah; we are not talking about the prophecies of Isaiah, we are not talking about the vision that Isaiah was given. We are talking about Another, whom John says Isaiah saw: 'he saw HIS glory' - the glory of our Lord Jesus.

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