

The Appeal of God's Full Thought

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of standing for God's full thought, which requires spiritual separation from natural affections and desires, and dependence on Christ.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:1

Topics: "Spiritual Separation", "Overcoming in Christ"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the distinction between the position of believers in Christ and their actual spiritual condition, as illustrated in his examination of the Corinthian church. He highlights that while some members were failing, others were overcoming, and the letters to the churches serve as an appeal to align with God's full thought. Using Levi as an example, he illustrates the necessity of spiritual separation from natural influences to truly represent God's will. The sermon calls for a commitment to God's full thought, which may require personal sacrifice and a rejection of worldly wisdom. Ultimately, those who embrace this path become instruments of divine revelation and ministry.

Transcript

Reading: 1 Cor. 1:1-10.

Two things remain to be said about this introductory section to this letter. One is that it represents the position of the Lord's people in Christ. Quite clearly all that is said there does not directly apply, so far as conditions were concerned, to the whole Corinthian assembly. But the letter is written to the whole assembly, and this salutation is addressed to the whole assembly, and therefore it represents a condition in Christ to which that of the church itself may not altogether correspond. What we are in Christ, and what we are found to be in our own spiritual condition may be quite different things. But what we are in Christ becomes the basis of the appeal to us as to the condition in which we may be found actually.

The other thing is that clearly the whole church at Corinth was not bad. While there were sections there to which the apostle had to write such severe things by way of rebuke, and admonition, and exhortation, the whole church was not in that state.

I suppose the same could be said of all the churches in the days of the apostle, that there were two sides to them. There was that side which was good and noble, and there was that which was subject to warning and rebuke. The object of the letters, almost invariably, was to seek to bring all into the full position as represented in Christ. We could say that there were those who were failing, who were in defeat, who were

doing anything but commending the Gospel and glorifying the Lord Jesus, while on the other hand there were those who were overcoming the very things which encircled them, and which in character were contrary to the Lord's mind. In all the churches there were the "overcomers" and the "undercomers"!

The appeal is always to the full thought of the Lord, and almost invariably, if not always, the letters are so introduced that the complete standard in Christ, God's full thought concerning the saints in Christ, is placed right on the threshold, and everything which follows moves from that and to that. It becomes the basis of the appeal, the basis of the exhortation, the basis of the warning, of the entreaty, the rebuke, the counsel, the instruction. It is all in order that that which is representative of God's full will for the saints might be expressed in all the saints.

The Example of Levi

Turn to Deuteronomy 33:8-11. Verse 8 reads, "And of Levi he said, Thy Thummim and thy Urim are with thy godly one..." (the margin has "him whom thou lovest"). Levi is an Old Testament illustration and type of the overcomer of the New Testament, and in these verses containing the blessing of Levi we have the foundations of the overcomer, the nature of the overcomer, and the function of the overcomer.

Levi is represented as expressing a very full thought of God. There is something about this statement concerning Levi, which puts Levi in a very honoured position, in a class by themselves. There is a contrast between the tribe of Levi and the other tribes. That contrast was brought out very clearly in the day of Israel's departure from the Lord, when Aaron made the golden calf while Moses was in the mount with God. You will remember how in coming down from the mount Moses heard the noise of the revelry in the camp and discovered the apostasy of Israel, the spiritual declension which had taken place. There had entered in something of the past life, the life of the world, the life of Egypt from which God had separated them, and they had taken a much lower spiritual level. As soon as Moses reached the camp and had taken in the situation, he immediately went and stood in the gate of the camp, and cried: "Whoso is on the Lord's side, let him come unto me." Then the sons of Levi went out of the camp to Moses, and Moses said: "Put ye every man his sword upon his thigh, and go to and fro from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay every man his brother, and every man his companion, and every man his neighbour." (Exodus 32:27). It was to be a complete slaughter, without respect of persons, and the Levites went into the camp and dealt with those with whom they were personally associated and with whom they had responsibility. Their attitude was so uncompromising for the Lord that it was possible for these words to be said of them: "Who said of his father, and of his mother, I have not seen him; neither did he acknowledge his brethren, nor knew he his own children..." (Deut. 33:9). For the Levites the Word of the Lord took a place above all natural relationships, affections, and considerations, so that everything which was in the realm of the natural life was subjected to the known will of God, and was not allowed in any way to influence where the question of the full thought of God was concerned. Were we to consider this thing purely on the human level we should say that these Levites slew their own hearts, in so far as their hearts were apart from the revealed will of God. They smote themselves in the realm of all their natural affections and interests, dominated by the full thought of God's will.

The Cause of Failure at Corinth

Here is our link with what is before us. When you come to the first letter to the Corinthians and the second chapter you find that is the principle underlying what the apostle is saying about the natural man and the spiritual man. God's full thought at Corinth is represented in the introductory words "...sanctified in Christ

Jesus, called... saints." That true, full thought of God is violated, destroyed in Corinth, because of these natural elements which are governing the lives of His children there. They have not slain the natural wisdom, the natural mind, the natural heart in its affections and its desires. The devotion to all that God has set before them is not such that every merely natural influence is set on one side. The apostle is obliged to say all that he does about the natural heart and mind governing because there are merely natural considerations influencing these people and keeping them and the assembly back from God's full thought. The result is that you have a situation revealed later in the letter which corresponds to what happened while Moses was in the mount: that is, a departure from God, spiritual declension, idolatry, sensuality, and all such things, for we do not know all that happened when Aaron set up that molten calf. It is necessary to look into the Bible a good deal more fully to have a true inkling of what happened at that time. Read Acts 7, and you will have a little more light upon it. The narrative in the Old Testament immediately connected with the incident is very brief and incomplete. You must remember that there was distinct gross sensuality associated with the worship of the molten calf. They stripped themselves of their clothes, and their behaviour was most unseemly in that worship. It was a real drop into heathen debauchery. It was a terrible situation.

In Corinth you have a very serious and bad situation of sin and spiritual declension revealed, and in both cases the cause is the same, namely, the coming into the realm of the things of God of the natural man, the old man. Levi put all that out. The natural affections and the natural mind were entirely cut off, with God's full thought in view. That is the overcomer. The Levites left that sin, that state, and went out of it, outside of the camp, and first of all spiritually separated themselves from it, and then from a position of spiritual separation dealt with it. That is always the way. You can never register an effective blow against corruption while you are involved in it. You have to be spiritually apart from it before there can be an influence registered upon it.

A Positive Attitude Against Evil Essential

This is an assembly principle. No assembly can deal with evil in its midst until it has spiritually separated itself therefrom and repudiated it. Whenever unrighteousness is known to be in the midst a stand must be taken where that is recognized as evil and an uncompromising attitude adopted toward it.

We cannot on the ground of sentiment, or through any kind of natural consideration, be in any way involved in that. That is evil. God is not in it. God is not with it, and therefore we must spiritually be apart from it. Until that utter cleavage, that utter separation in spirit and in mind, has taken place, there can be no dealing in spiritual power and authority with evil. That is to say, evil will obtain, will hold, will maintain its grip, until there is a spiritual separation from it. The Levites separated themselves, and then from a position of spiritual separation dealt with the thing. That is God's order. That is the overcomer, the one who is spiritually apart, and who, being in that place of separation with God, is a mighty, effective testimony against evil, not in word but in power, even when that evil is amongst the Lord's people.

Levi is an excellent illustration of New Testament things, and we can see the Levitical principle at Corinth just as we see it elsewhere, a SPIRITUAL separation in a day of SPIRITUAL declension. It must be a spiritual thing. It is not enough that it should be merely a geographical thing. You can separate yourself from other Christians, and be yourself a carrier of the same kind of trouble, and have nothing but repetitions of the same thing. It must be first of all a spiritual separation, whatever else may become necessary, whatever else may follow. It is a matter of the heart.

What is this separation? In other words, what is it that characterizes the overcomer? It is heart separation unto the Lord for His full thought, whatever it may cost. That may mean an uncompromising attitude toward your own sentiments, your own natural reasoning about things. God's full thought demands that there shall be no argument whatever in favour of a thing which is against God.

The Reward of Faithfulness

Then note what follows. We have seen the nature of the overcomer, the nature of the Levite; but what follows when that state obtains, when the Lord has a people whose hearts are circumcised in that way? The Word in Deuteronomy says: "Thy Thummim and thy Urim are with him whom thou lovest." (RV margin) We will not stay to go into details with regard to the Thummim and the Urim (Lights and Perfections), but we know they were the means by which Israel got to know the mind of the Lord, and that is sufficient for our present purpose. So the Lord puts Himself in a special relationship to the Levites, and that special relationship is for the purpose of making Himself known to them, in order that through them He may become known to others. That is what follows. "They shall teach Jacob thy judgments, and Israel thy law: they shall put incense before thee, and whole burnt offering upon thine altar." (Deut. 33:10).

The overcomer, then, becomes the instrument and the vehicle of divine revelation, divine instruction. Come to 1 Corinthians again, and mark how over against the natural man you have the spiritual man. And both these terms, let us note, have to do with believers in the assembly. "Now the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him (in other words, he has no Thummim and Urim). But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, and he himself is judged of no man. For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he should instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ" (1 Cor. 2:14-16). The spiritual man, who has discriminated between the natural mind and the mind of the Spirit, is the man with whom the Thummim and the Urim are found, the knowledge of the Lord.

So then there is a great and privileged position to be occupied by those who, setting aside the whole of the natural life in its judgments and its affections, will at all costs stand for God's full thought. This great and privileged position is that of being God's vehicle of illumination to others. How are we going to be those who teach Jacob the Lord's ordinances and Israel His law? How is this ministry going to be constituted? It never comes by mere studying. A minister of revelation is not merely one who has studied the Bible very thoroughly, and all relative books and subjects, and has become very highly versed in Scriptural matters. Such are not the instruments of divine revelation, of making God known to others. Those who will fulfil such a ministry of revelation, where it is not they themselves who are revealing God, but God revealing Himself through them, are those who have come clear of the natural mind, and of all that which is represented by the term "the natural mind". Such are in the place of the spiritual man, with God's full purpose dominating their hearts and mind. They are standing for that -- and it costs and they are paying the price.

The Cost of Faithfulness

Do you think that while Levi shut their eyes as it were to what they were doing it cost them nothing? You do not cut off your own children without feeling it, your own kin, without suffering yourself as much as they suffer. It was no mere cold, unfeeling brutality which governed Levi. It was, if we may use the word, the stringing of themselves up to a point where jealousy for the one thing prevailed, namely, God's honour. God's glory must get the better of natural feelings in this matter, and it costs to come thus right out from the realm of nature. It costs to stand in that position where Christ is your wisdom, and Christ is your

strength, and you have none of your own. You might have strength in nature; you might have wisdom in nature; you might have position, reputation, influence amongst men; there might be all that in the realm of nature, but you deliberately look beyond that realm. You have to be a fool for Christ's sake, and a weakling for Christ's sake, and altogether outside of the camp of this world for Christ's sake. You might have had reputation and influence had you gone the way of nature, but God in His full desire and purpose and thought has become dominant, and you have cut this other thing off; you have repudiated it. And now from this world's standpoint, and from your own estimate of your natural state from your position in Christ, you know that you are a fool, that you are a weakling, that you are nothing, of no account at all, but you are for God. Christ is now your wisdom. Christ is the only strength you are ever going to count upon. Christ is everything. You do not get there without feeling things keenly at times. It is very often brought home to you what a position like that means of suffering and reproach. To the natural man, to the flesh, weakness, dependence, is no pleasant thing. To the flesh competence, ability, capability are the things which gratify, and which we love. It is a terrible thing to feel ourselves so utterly dependent, but it is glorious to see the Lord coming in all the time, and being the full resource. Yet we know that the sense of dependence has to be maintained. It is along that line that God gets His full thought.

It was because there was not that basis, that foundation fully and finally established at Corinth that God's full thought was not expressed and represented by the whole assembly there. The overcomer is the one who is in that position where Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, and everything in between. When you get there, or when God gets an individual or a company there, then there follows a ministry in and by which He is revealed.

That is the kind of training for ministry that the Bible speaks of. It is not a pleasant training, but it is the best, the most effective. We can give out a lot of information, a lot of knowledge, which may please and gratify the mass of people, and they may think it to be doing them great good, but in the day of the test, the day of the fire, when the question is, How much of Christ has entered into the very fabric of the being? We shall see that information does not do that, book-knowledge does not accomplish that. But a ministry of revelation will do that, if it is revelation from God; not our revealing of God, but God showing Himself through the instrument. That is true ministry, and that is preparation for ministry. It will explain some things to us. When we have handed ourselves over to the Lord our real preparation comes along the line of the destroying of the natural fabric, and the constituting of Christ as life, as wisdom, as strength, as everything. God's most powerful instruments in the history of this world have always been those who have gone out in fear and trembling and much weakness.

Are you prepared to accept a life like that? There is something for the Lord in an instrument like that. It is first of all vocation, ministry which is realized. Please do not make a technical thing of that word "ministry," and think of it as applying to platforms or public meetings. If you are wholly for God, standing for God's full thought on the ground we have just mentioned, you will be the means of God coming to other lives, no matter where you are. It is not a question of what you are going to say to them. You may be troubled often as to what you will say, or as to how you can say anything in the position in which you are, in that you feel that people would not listen to you, would take no notice of you. The question is not what you are going to say. God very often says His loudest things through most silent people. God can register an impact of Himself by your presence. It is not always a matter of words. It is a question of the Lord expressing Himself through those who are standing with Him in this way: that is ministry.

"They shall teach Jacob thy judgments, and Israel thy law: they shall put incense before thee..." If you like to paraphrase that, you may make it read like this: They shall prevail with Thee in prayer: they shall fulfil a

holy and effectual ministry of intercession. "They shall put incense before thee (the Revised Version margin says "in thy nostrils" -- that is God smelling a sweet savour), and whole burnt offering upon thine altar (that is surely setting forth the ground of full acceptance). Bless, Lord, his substance, and accept the work of his hands (here is a blessing!): smite through the loins of them that rise up against him, and of them that hate him, that they rise not again." The Lord is on the side of those who are utterly for Him. The Lord will watch over them because His own interests are bound up with them. Sooner or later it will be seen that they are the Lord's anointed, and no hand can be reached out against them without being answered by God in God's time. Levi had a very close relationship with all Israel, and all Israel owed their standing before God to the Levites. The overcomers are appointed of God to lead the way for the rest into His presence.

May the Lord show us that what He needs, what He desires, what He is seeking to have in His people, is that state of heart which is content with nothing less than His whole thought. The people who are going to count for God are those who pay the price, even if it means going outside the camp bearing His reproach, who accept that cost, and go with the Lord, even against themselves in all that is of nature.

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