

The Character of Jesus Christ

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon explores the profound character of Jesus Christ as the foundation of His victory and authority in the universe.

Scripture: Revelation 1:12

Topics: "Spiritual Transformation", "Character of Christ"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the character of Jesus Christ as foundational to His victory and authority, illustrating how His divine nature combines power and purity. He describes Christ as the 'Son of Man,' embodying God's ultimate intention for humanity, and highlights the significance of His attributes, such as His discernment, righteousness, and the purity of His character. Sparks explains that the strength of Christ's kingdom is rooted in His goodness and holiness, which are essential for spiritual victory. The sermon calls believers to seek a deeper understanding of Christ's character and to allow the Holy Spirit to transform them into His likeness, as this is crucial for their role in God's eternal government.

Transcript

"I turned to see the voice which spake with me. And having turned, I saw seven golden lampstands; and in the midst of the lampstands one like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, girt about at the breasts with a golden girdle. And his head and his hair were white like wool, as white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire; and his feet like unto varnished brass, as if it had been refined in a furnace; and his voice as the voice of many waters. And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth proceeded a sharp two-edged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength." Revelation 1:12-16.

Revelation of Jesus Christ. We have already indicated that this whole book which bears those words as its title is gathered into one tremendous consummate issue; that of the government of this universe, heaven and earth, as determined by God, centered in His Son Jesus Christ. This book is the revelation of the processes and progress in the culmination of this world's history unto the final establishment of that government.

In that setting, this afternoon we were occupied with the victory of God's Son, as in this first chapter. This evening we take this short section, these four verses which set forth the character which lies behind that victory.

It's a mighty victory. We have seen His declaration of Himself as the Living One - Who became dead but is now alive unto the ages of the ages - sets forth the greatness of His victory. We have seen it was no small power that was exercised and exerted by the great Roman Empire for the destruction of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ. In the vision of that empire in the book of Daniel, it is rightly symbolized by iron. A symbol of great strength and power to break everything. And the great strength of that, the mightiest of the empires, was directed toward and concentrated upon, the extermination of the testimony of Jesus, which testimony was that He is Lord. That Jesus survived the exhausting of that mighty power and triumphed over death and is alive unto the ages of the ages, is no small testimony to the greatness of His victory.

Combined with the Roman Empire was the Jewish nation. It would take a lot of time to tell and describe conditions of the Jewish nation in the times of the New Testament. I myself have been very deeply impressed as I have read anew during the past week the account given by the great Jewish historian Josephus about the wickedness of the Jews at this time. He's a Jewish historian. He says that there never was anything so utterly wicked as the condition of the Jewish people in New Testament times. Terrible thing to say and he shows how that was, and it is only an exposition of what the Lord Jesus meant when He said "this WICKED generation" - this wicked generation of downright wickedness of those people. Not only in their crucifying the Lord Jesus, but their condition behind all their religion; their moral condition - using that word in its most general sense. And they, as we know, exhausted their malice to DESTROY the Lord Jesus and all that He represented. If Saul of Tarsus was really their representative and agent, he himself tells us in many words how utter he was in his determination there should not be left a relic of Jesus of Nazareth. He persecuted this Way unto the death, both men and women he cast into prison.

All that vicious, vehement hatred, malice, concentrated upon Jesus Christ as Lord. All that and what more? Behind it, around it and over it Satan and his vast kingdom calling upon all their resources to quench this Light, finish this Testimony, to blot out this Name, obliterate this Way. And He says "I am He that liveth, I became dead but I am alive unto the ages of the ages". What a victory, what a victory! We can almost say 'is there anything left over which He can triumph'? If He HAS done that, if our Christian faith is true, if what we declare as to the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus Christ is true at all, it's a far, far greater and vaster thing than we have comprehended. And that is the message here and as we have said before, that is the blessing of this book: if He can do all that, what cannot He do? That's hope for the end. But when we have said all that about His victory and much more that we could add to it of truth, this fact remains - the victory, the throne, the government of Christ and the Church is based upon His essential character. It is not just objective and official, that is, it is not just something that is done by the exercise of superior might - as might. It is something that is accomplished in virtue of His glorious character; it rests upon that.

Here is a combination of two things which, mark you, always go together with God; the combination of power and character, nature and strength. With God character is power and power is character. He seems to have written this large in the universe, in nature. It almost appears that He has established it as a law that these two things go together. You see all that God does combines these two things. You go into the alpine country; you are on the one side impressed at the massive and awesome strength of the mountains, the terrific force, volcanic force which heaved them up and the mighty strength that they represent as they tower over you. It's awesome! And yet as you stay to climb their massive slopes, in their crevices and on those slopes you find the beautiful edelweiss. The beautiful flower. The combination of strength... and beauty. Nature has done it - balanced these two things. Come to the English countryside, you see the massive towering oak tree and nestling at its roots - the beautiful violet. Just nature, not

arranged, quite spontaneous - strength and beauty, power and character - in balance and combination. And we could go on like that drawing upon creation for illustration. But you go back through your Old Testament, you find in the typology and the symbolism, all that comes from heaven, this wonderful balance of strength and character. And here it is! In all this and particularly in this passage before us, we have God saying, "If there is to be power, dominion, victory, ascendancy, might; there has got to be goodness and if there is goodness, that is the greatest might!" It's the nature of Christ that is set forth here which is the foundation of His Kingdom, of His Throne.

So you turn to this description or portraiture of Him. You notice the power lying in His eyes as a flame of fire; His voice, the voice of many waters, the sound of many waters; His mouth, out of which proceeds a sharp, two-edged sword; His countenance, as the sun shineth in its strength. All that is the symbolism of power! We go back again to character, His garment down to the foot, a girdle about His breasts, the whiteness of His hair and the purity represented by the refined brass of His feet. All that speaks of the other side, it speaks of His nature, His character.

Now it is that that we are going to be occupied with for the time at our command tonight. But may I remind you that we are here in the presence of One Who is called "THE SON OF MAN". We ought to be duly impressed with that. He is not here in this book called the Son of God, He is that, but for the purposes of this book, His title is that of "The Son of Man". We are familiar with that title in the Old Testament, in the prophets: in Ezekiel, in Daniel. And we are familiar with it in the gospels. In the gospels only, the title is used of Him eighty-five times; no fewer. In the Old Testament as applied to the prophets, it is 'son of man', in the New Testament as applied to Him it is THE Son of Man. What they were partially, He is absolutely. And we know that the very title itself, 'son of man' or 'The Son of Man', is related to God's full thought for His people.

In the prophets, as we have pointed out already today, their business was the recovering of God's full thought for His people; and so they were representative of that thought - son of man. And that very thought of God or those thoughts of God had to be wrought into their very experience and life and history and they became the embodiment of those thoughts, hence they were made a sign unto the people of God. And that is the essence of this very title: Son of Man - a sign of God's thought for His people. You come to the Lord Jesus and you find that in a full, and final and utter way, He is THE Son of Man in this sense: that He embodies to the full God's primal conception for man. What God ever had in His mind in conceiving the humanity idea, the manhood conception as a special and peculiar creation, that is realized and expressed in this One Whose title here just means that: THE Son of Man. THE One in Whom ALL God's thought AS TO MAN is realized.

We're in His presence here as you notice: "I saw one like unto the son of man" then the portrayal. We look all so briefly, inadequately, at the features of this Son of Man.

"I turned to see and having turned I saw one like unto the son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot." And of course there has been a division of opinion as to what that garment was. Dr Campbell-Morgan said it was the garment of the Governor. Other equally able expositors have said it's the garment of the Priest. I'm not at all concerned to take sides in that matter - it doesn't trouble us which it was. What we want to get at is the meaning of a garment at all; not what kind of a garment it was exactly, but WHY a garment at all, down to His feet. Whatever the robe was, whether of governor or of priest, it speaks of character; for garments always did from the beginning speak of character, they were the symbol of the man. That's true right up to date. The garments, the dress, betray the person. I won't dwell upon that

too much, it's dangerous ground! But nevertheless it's true. Right from the first garments that ever man wore, made by God Himself, garments have always been the symbol of the person, indicating what kind of a person, or sometimes, what the person thinks of himself or herself. That is character. I mean, in the days of the Lord Jesus they loved to wear long garments, and they wore their phylacteries, they pretended to be something but they were not, but that was their character; their character was a pretense but that was the people - revealed in the way they dressed. See the point.

Here, whatever the garment was officially, undoubtedly it was symbolic of the Person. It does not say so, but I have no doubt that in the light of things which follow in this book, that it was a white robe... it was the white linen... that would be true of priest or of governor. And we know from this very book the white linen is the righteous acts of the saints and we know from the Old Testament typology, the white linen garments always spoke of the character of righteousness in the presence of God, covering the unrighteousness of man that no flesh should appear before Him. And here, right in the very first thing, describing this Person, the Son of Man, you have Him enfolded and enwrapped in a character of spotless purity. And it is that that gives Him His regal position, it is His holiness, His purity. It is enough to say that and leave it.

But this robe is girt up with a golden girdle around His breasts. How full of significance! Well, a girdle is always the symbol of strength. Gold in the Bible is always the symbol of what is precious among minerals or metals; precious. And the breasts are always the symbols of devotion. And if you put those three things together, what a wealth they contain. Here this One is characterized by a passionate devotion to that which is precious to God, of pure gold. The strength of this One, the strength of this One is that He is girded with this passion for what is precious to God. That runs right through this book, it comes right out at the other end with the City, it is an underlying, fundamental thing, and as I repeatedly say, it is the key to the throne. His throne is established in His character, by His character and all, ALL victory is that, where God is concerned. This is going to be a very searching thing through this book, it's going to be a very deciding thing everywhere in the churches. We shall meet it again when we come to the churches in the will of God. It's a deciding thing as to the rise and the fall of the Church and the rise and the fall of individual Christians, and the rise and the fall of nations - their character. "How much of the character and nature of Christ is there?" is going to be the deciding thing, come back to that again. Well, there it is: the strength of devotion to what is precious unto God. Remember that; that is the secret of spiritual victory in any life.

"His head, and His hair, were as wool, white wool, as white as wool". What is it? Well, here we have another combination, purely of age. We get this figure in the book of Daniel and it's the "Ancient of Days" that describes this one. You get age - if you like - eternity. It's not always true that white hair is the mark of age, but usually it is. The symbolism is a very common one, it speaks of that which outlasts time, that which transcends time, that which is not of time but which is of eternity. And it speaks of purity. And seeing that this is His head and His hair, the strict and exact interpretation of the symbolism, we have the permanence, the endurance, the time outlasting power of truth, of purity. Here are His judgments, His thoughts, His mind, and there is nothing impure in His thoughts, nothing unclean. How exact the Word is; "white as white wool", both to doubly emphasize the utterness of this purity and cleanness.

Dear friends, though we may not be very much enamoured of the symbolism, the truth behind all this is tremendously important. The fact is again that His kingdom which is an everlasting kingdom, is that because His judgments are right and because it is founded upon absolute truth. It is a mind that is freed of everything of mixture and duplicity; what is contrary to God. The apostle Paul writing to the Philippians said "Whatsoever things are PURE, think on these things" that's the mind of Christ. That's the mind of a

character of Christ "let this mind be in you... whatsoever things are pure, think on these things... whatsoever things are lovely" for here it is; that is what He is like! A mind, that is, the mind of Christ, not our mind, is something that is a very strong thing where God is concerned. If we can only get the viewpoint of the Lord, if we can only see as the Lord sees, if only we can get the mind of the Lord about a person or a situation; we're in a tremendously strong position. Let me put that the other way, so much of our weakness and our failure and our breakdown is our WRONG mindedness, isn't it like that? We've got the wrong attitude of mind, we haven't the singleness of mind for the glory of God, we're affected by how things touch us. Well, He was never like that, He was never like that. And that character of right judgment of absolute truth, absolute truth - was the strength and is the strength of His government, of His kingdom.

Let these things come out of the Bible and out of this high symbolism to us as spiritual lessons, spiritual instruction. Do you want to go on and go through and endure and abide? Do you want spiritual strength? For that is not something that He can give you, that He can give you as from the outside. Oh, how we ask for power, how we ask for strength... It is only something that He can do IN us; He will make us strong by making us good. What a lot that explains of His dealings with us! So often when we ask for strength He puts us through an experience that is going to change something in us of our character, our attitude, our mentality; that is His way.

"His eyes were as a flame of fire". Well, all we need to say here is that these eyes, symbolizing His discernment, His discernment, His real discernment and perception and grasp of things and seeing into things and seeing through things and arriving at RIGHT conclusions, was due to the fact that His mind is what we have said it is, like that. You know dear friends, discernment is a tremendous thing in the Christian life. Oh, what a lot of mistakes we make, for want of real spiritual discernment... If only, if only we had this spiritual discernment, if we were able to perceive, to recognize, to discern, to understand the meaning of things; what a lot we would be saved. There is a great deal of strength in spiritual discernment. There is! People who are always making confusion and messes because they lack real discernment, they are in a state of weakness, unable to see the meaning of things, see through, beyond appearances of what is on the outside. Because His Spirit is what it is, His mind is what it is, He is able to rightly discern everything. Oh, we are going to come onto this when we come to the churches, seeing through and seeing things as they are truly, no deception can come through those eyes. No, He is in the mighty strength of clear discernment, His eyes are as a flame of fire, there is nothing but truth there, no falsehood, no carnal-mindedness (to use Paul's phrase) therefore He can see. The pure in heart shall SEE God. Shall see! See... What we see depends on the state of our heart; His eyes as a flame of fire were that because of the purity of His heart.

"His feet were as varnished brass as though it had been refined in a fire". How meticulous is the description. Well, feet simply, we know, represent a man's ways, a man's goings and a man's quests - what he's after, what he's aiming at, and toward which he's moving; the object of his movements. That's just the symbolism of feet everywhere in the Bible; the goings of a man. And here we have brass, varnished brass refined in a fire. Brass is always in the Bible, as you know, the symbol of strength and the fire is always the symbol of purging. Then brass becomes righteousness, the strength of righteousness which has come out of the fire. Righteousness, the Old Testament says, is the girdle of His loins and the foundation of His throne. Here again, the quest, the objects, the interests, the movements, the ways, the goings of the Lord Jesus are always PURGED ways, CLEANSED goings, no self-interest in this - nothing but the pleasure of God. "I come to do Thy will O My God". His ways are all tested in the fire; purged of all unworthy motives.

"His voice was as the sound of many waters". This is very beautiful. The sound of many waters! What is the sound of many waters? Not of much water, but many waters; all coming from all directions, and this way and that way and the other way, rivers and the rivulets are all coming, converging and blending and harmonizing. And this one has its note and that one has its note, the other one has another note and yet in their converging and coming together they form a beautiful harmony like a choir of many notes. The sound of many waters. Diversity in unity, unity in diversity.

Now, you say that's all a beautiful picture and it sounds all very nice; what do you mean? Go back to your gospels and sit and listen to the Lord Jesus or follow Him with open ears, listen to His voice and you will hear sometimes the note of deepest sympathy and tenderness... His kindness. Where a situation calls for that note, it comes - gentleness and kindness and sympathy and understanding - "Leave her alone, for my burial she's done this" and many other instances of the sympathetic, understanding, kindly voice... But we dare not take the time for it all. But you will find sometimes there's a sharp rebuke like a clap of thunder and out they go, convicted, from the oldest to the youngest. They've been smitten as with a flash of lightning from His mouth. There's sympathy, there's judgment, there's condemnation... oh, there's every note in His voice, and He's a combination of them all. His voice is the sound of many waters. You and I have heard that, sometimes we have heard His voice of sympathy and consolation, sometimes we've heard His voice of rebuke, sometimes of exhortation and encouragement. It varies but His is the voice as of a sound of many waters. You're going to come up against that when you come to the seven churches, you will find there are seven notes in His octave. For the churches a wonderful harmony, as a voice as the sound of many waters.

"And out of his mouth proceeded a sharp two-edged sword". Our letter to the Hebrews chapter four verse twelve interprets that for us: "the word of God is quick, powerful, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the dividing of soul and spirit, joint and marrow, laying bare the thoughts and intents of the heart". Two-edged sword - discriminating, dividing, putting things in the place to which they belong - that belongs there and that belongs there and you're to put those things in their right place and don't confuse things and call something by a name that does not belong to it. Dividing asunder - a sharp two edged sword. This is His character; that He cannot have confusion and mixture and contradiction; two things that do not agree. That is the character of the Lord Jesus and mark you, there's a great deal of spiritual strength in that. One thing that God has always hated is mixture, is mixture: is contradiction in the same place, speaking with two voices at the same time. God hates it. If there's one thing about God that is true it is that He is of one mind. He is perfectly clear as to what He means and what He wants. Two-edged sword divides, puts things where they belong and there's a good deal of strength in doing that, dear friends.

"And His countenance was as the sun shineth in its strength". Of course the countenance is the sum of all the features isn't it? It is the expression of the person. It is possible, of course, to hide yourself behind an expressionless countenance but in the main, generally the countenance is the betrayal of the person behind it; the expression of the life within. And so the countenance here is the sum of all His features. When you sum up everything and what you have to say, there is no darkness at all. There are no shadows here; it is as the sun shineth in its strength. In Him was light - in Him was light! In Him is no darkness at all, there is no variableness with Him, neither shadow cast by turning, by changing, by being of two minds; He is all Light, no darkness, no shadows.

Now dear friends, we've said all this but we've got to sum it up. We have set out to show that the end of it all is not only Christ in the place of absolute sovereignty and Lordship and Kingship and dominion, but His Church with Him, His Church with Him. If the City means anything it is the Church with Christ enthroned! If

we are to come there, let us not make it too objective and far off, belonging to some remote or near future time, let us see that He's at work upon this thing in us now. Paul has given it in the revelation entrusted to him, has told us that we were foreordained to be conformed to the image of His Son. The Holy Spirit had this in view when He first drew you and me to the Lord Jesus. And if He has meant anything in our lives at all, this is the thing that He has been engaged upon and is engaged upon: to conform us to the image of God's Son, working into us the character of Christ, with a view! With a view; oh, I wish I could remember this always, I wish you could remember it always, when He's trying to do something inside in the life, in the nature, in the character to change it, when He's dealing with something which is not Christ and hammering it and battering it and shattering it; giving us an awful time because of what we are in ourselves. It is not just for destruction, He is seeking to make room and way for the Lord Jesus in our characters! That out of this shall come something that is more like the Lord of patience, of love, of thoughtfulness and generous impulse and all that that is Christ-like, to bring that in. Ah, but not that THAT is an end in itself... because it's that kind of person and that kind of Church that is going to be His instrument of government in the ages to come. Christ loved the Church and gave Himself for it that He might present the Church to Himself, a glorious Church not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing. That is the governmental vessel and instrument at the end, it's a thing of character and its character is taken from the Lord Jesus. The whole thing begins with the Church. When we have said that, we have just got to the end of the contemplation of Himself personally. As the Lord leads us on in this, we shall see how all this is brought down to the seven churches and that everything there is tried, tested and dealt with on the basis of this personal portraiture of the Lord Jesus.

Now does this throw some light upon what He's doing? All that He is allowing in our lives and all that He is working at in us... why is it? If we suffer we shall reign, and it is through the suffering, the tribulation that we're going to come to the throne and through much tribulation we shall enter the kingdom, and come to reign together with Him. It is necessary for us to see the Lord Jesus - the revelation of Jesus Christ, that we should see Him.

I suggest to you, I urge upon you, dear friends, that your constant and earnest prayer shall be: "Show me Christ. Let me see the Lord Jesus, not objectively in some vision, but by the Holy Spirit let me see what Christ is. May He make me more and more uncomfortable as to myself but then ever remind me that the work of the Holy Spirit is to reveal Him and then make me like Him. For we shall be like Him as we see Him as He is." That must be our prayer.

May the vision of Christ break upon our hearts and see His glory and His beauty; see what God desires and is working at where we are concerned and all again, all again, with the Throne in view. For whether it be a literal throne, whatever the reigning means, I think we are learning just now that government and ascendancy is a spiritual thing, it's a spiritual thing. This Stone that wrecked the Roman Empire was cut out without hands. That simply means that the kingdom of Christ is a spiritual kingdom, not made by man, it's a much more powerful thing than all the kingdoms and dominions that man made whether they be Nebuchadnezzar or the Caesars; a spiritual kingdom is a far more powerful thing than all [kingly] systems. That is the truth that you and I have got to learn; the transcendent importance and power of spiritual life and spiritual character.

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