

The Company on Mount Zion

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon explores the identity and significance of the company on Mount Zion, emphasizing their unique relationship with Christ as the Lamb and the transformative power of suffering in their lives.

Scripture: Philipians 3:10, Hebrews 12:22, Revelation 3:12, Revelation 14:1, Revelation 14:3-4

Topics: "End Times", "Christian Persecution"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks delves into Revelation 14:1-5, emphasizing the significance of the Lamb and the 144,000 who follow Him wherever He goes. He addresses the controversy surrounding the phrase 'firstfruits' and the importance of understanding its true meaning. Sparks highlights the exclusive fellowship with Christ as the Lamb that this unique company shares, marked by their utter devotion and capacity for suffering. These overcomers are described as a virgin people, symbolizing their purity and separation from the world's spiritual system. Their deep suffering leads to a profound understanding of God's love and a unique song of worship before the throne.

Transcript

"And I saw, and behold, the Lamb standing on the mount Zion, and with him a hundred and forty and four thousand, having his name, and the name of his Father, written on their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven, as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of a great thunder: and the voice which I heard was as the voice of harpers harping with their harps: and they sing as it were a new song before the throne, and before the four living creatures and the elders: and no man could learn the song save the hundred and forty and four thousand, even they that had been purchased out of the earth. These are they that were not defiled with women; for they are virgins. THESE ARE THEY THAT FOLLOW THE LAMB WHITHERSOEVER HE GOETH. These were purchased from among men, to be the firstfruits unto God and unto the Lamb. And in their mouth was found no lie: they are without blemish" (Rev. 14:1-5).

This passage goes to the very heart of all the divine purpose. There is a sense in which it is the key to everything in the history of God's thoughts and ways concerning man. If we understood this passage very many of our problems would be solved and our deep questions answered. So vital is the issue that is centred here, that unusual conflict has arisen about it -- and not only spiritual conflict, but unspiritual controversy also. We shall not get far until we have our ground clear, and for that is required real honesty, faithfulness, and courage.

There is a phrase here which conveys a very great deal in that realm of conflict and controversy. It is a phrase which is gravely suspect even among evangelical Christians, and, were it not in the Word of God, I, for one, would avoid it for that reason; but we cannot invest the apostle John with the suspicions which have arisen from a phrase which he has used. We must honestly seek to understand what he meant when he used such phrases. I refer to the phrase "firstfruits". "These were purchased... to be the firstfruits... unto the Lamb".

Perhaps the most helpful and profitable way of coming to an understanding of this phrase would be to seek to identify the hundred and forty-four thousand to whom it refers. Before we do that, however, that is, before we seek to identify this company, it might be as well if we tackled this adverse attitude, for there may be some justification for it. There is always justification for an adverse attitude when a particular ASPECT of truth is so enlarged that it becomes regarded as the WHOLE truth, and in this matter that has certainly happened in certain circles. Again, when such an exaggerated emphasis is allowed to divide the Lord's people and to result in an exclusiveness and superiority of mind, then there is justification for suspecting it and taking an opposite attitude, or at least an attitude of opposition. Further, when the emphasis is laid upon the wrong point, resulting inevitably in an unbalanced state, then the matter may rightly be open to question and in this particular matter that is exactly what has happened. Terms have been coined which at once betray emphasis upon the wrong point, such as the term "rapture" and with it that other word "selective". That is certainly placing the emphasis at the wrong point. When a phrase like that is used, we are off the mark. The conclusion drawn by those who have created it and who use it is that it represents schism in the Body. When the Lord has taken anyone into His presence in the joy and victory of His grace -- and He is doing that almost every moment of our lives -- we never charge Him with creating schism in the Body. If we did but know it, at this very moment from numerous places all over the world children of God are being called gloriously into His presence -- a whole group is going up at once, so to speak. We never think of the Lord creating schism in the Body by leaving the rest a little longer. The emphasis has been put upon the wrong point. Let us get this thing straightened out, because that is a false premise altogether.

I have no intention at all of seeking to give a specific interpretation to this Scripture or to propagate any particular teaching which would have any of these results. I do really want to get to the heart of this matter, because it is borne in upon me that it is of tremendous account to God and to His people at this time -- which is the time of the end. Sometimes it is necessary to suspect suspicions. Some of the most vital things in the interests of the Lord have at times been most suspect, and that is itself suspicious; that betrays something else. There is something there, or there may be something there that the enemy is very particularly against. There may be something there of such consequence as to stir up the depths of the human heart, perhaps in fear, or unwillingness, or even resentment, and that sort of thing can easily be passed on under a label, or it may represent the attempt to get out of something of great account to God because of what is involved in it. So I say, sometimes it is necessary to suspect our suspicions, to question our questionings, to sift our reactions. Let us remind ourselves that the popular is not necessarily the true. History is full of that. Lord Lister was very unpopular and had to fight a terribly lonely battle over his "theory" of antiseptics. He has been universally proved true. It has taken time. Florence Nightingale fought a desperate battle with all those in high places. She has been vindicated up to the hilt, although she was practically alone. The popular is not necessarily the true and the right, and these are things which we must remember when we are facing a matter like this, which as I say has become beclouded by suspicion and opposition.

But let us get closer. Surely all of us are prepared to believe, firstly, that to "follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth" is something of great and solemn importance, and secondly, that it is not everyone who will do it. Does that not settle the whole matter? It is of primary account to God and to us that this should be true: "These are they that follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth"; and that is something not to be suspected nor spurned.

The Heavenly Zion

But you see this is said to be true of a particular company. They are distinguished from others by this very characterization. Look at them, identify them, a company purchased out of the earth, not just from the earth or in the earth; it is out of the earth. Purchased to be firstfruits unto the Lamb, standing with the Lamb on Mount Zion, and you note the position is before the commencement of judgment. This company is in heaven, there is no mistaking that, and therefore it means that this is not the earthly but the heavenly Zion, this Zion is in heaven. This is the Zion of Hebrews 12 -- "Ye are come unto mount Zion... the heavenly Jerusalem". That is the Zion here. It is necessary to say that because there is another Zion in the book of the Revelation with another company out of the tribes of Israel. That is in chapter 7 and it is not this company. This is a heavenly company and they are singing in heaven before the throne. Heavenliness in signal degree is the character of these people. More than all others and before all others, these embody heavenliness.

Overcomers

Notice -- and this is a point of tremendous effect -- that the promises to overcomers in the early chapters of this book are found fulfilled in this company. The Lord had said concerning certain who would overcome that He would write upon them the name of His God and His own new name (Rev. 3:12). Here it is: "Having his name, and the name of his Father, written on their foreheads". These are the people who have overcome, and they are distinguished from the rest, even in the churches.

Government in Fullness

And then they are mentioned as a specific number, a particular company -- one hundred and forty-four thousand. This surely is not to be taken any more literally than is the word "Lamb". It is a number which carries with it a definition. Twelve multiplied by twelve. It is government, the number of government, and government carried to fullness. But you see again, it distinguishes them. We shall later come on a great multitude which no man can number, but these are numbered. They are a distinct and particular company.

A Virgin People

Notice some other particulars about them. "Purchased out of the earth... not defiled with women; for they are virgins". In that statement we must not read the literal meaning. It cannot mean that at all. It is in keeping with the whole of that particular meaning throughout the Old Testament and the New where God's elect people are regarded as a virgin people. Fornication in Israel was that of having spiritual relationship with other nations, the peoples of this world, and this is what is meant -- that there has been created and preserved an absolute separateness from that spiritual system which lies behind this world; there must be no link with it at all. That issue is a very live issue today. Go to China and you will see whether it is a live issue, whether you are going to surrender to the great fornication, the great red dragon. It is a life and death issue now, and these are they who have not surrendered, they have kept pure, have not been defiled. They "follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth". That is in the present participle, which means

they are following the Lamb because they always have been. It has become a habit, it is a disposition which has been born in them, created in them. They did it on the earth and they go on doing it, people who are not spasmodic in following the Lamb, who are not of those who go on one day and go back the next. They are continuously following the Lamb. It is an utterness of devotion to the Lord Jesus. They are the firstfruits unto the Lamb. Note the way it is put -- "Firstfruits... unto the LAMB". The Lamb has in them the first maturity of His Lamb character and work; in them He first sees of the travail of His soul and is satisfied. It is unto the Lamb, His satisfaction.

"Unto the Lamb"

It means this, that their conception of salvation was not one governed by personal interest, that they would be saved in order to be saved and enjoy salvation for themselves; but their conception was that it was all unto the Lord, it was for Him. That is a higher level altogether, and I beg to suggest that this is a discriminating thing. There are multitudes of people, Christians, who are glad to be saved in order to be saved, because it is a good thing to be saved for themselves; it secures a lot for them and it means heaven and glory; but the primary concern of these others is the glory of the LAMB. "Unto the LAMB". They follow wherever HE goes.

"The Fellowship of His Sufferings"

Naturally, it might be easier to follow the KING whithersoever He goeth. There were many in the days of His flesh who pursued Him wherever He went. You would always find them there. Oh, He said, "loaves and fishes"; to see His mighty works. But these follow the Lamb, and that means that they have a disposition to respond to the "fellowship of his sufferings", like the apostle who first used that phrase. For him it was not something to be shunned: "that I may know him and the fellowship of his sufferings" (Phil. 3:10); there was a disposition to share the sufferings of the Lamb. That issues in a specific kind of people, a particular company; and if we look at it in that way surely our suspicions and our fears are dismissed. Identify these people and the other ground gives way.

What all this means becomes clear as we look at it in its relation to all that is said about the Lamb. That is, you have got to comprehend the whole Word of God in connection with the Lamb in order to understand who and what these people are, for undoubtedly they are the people who have embraced, entered into, and become the embodiment of all that that phrase means -- the Lamb, His life, His character, His work.

What is here is this: firstly, a company marked out and distinguished by a peculiar fellowship with Christ as the Lamb. Underline the word Lamb, the name Lamb, with all that that means, and then see here a people who are in a peculiar relationship with Christ as the Lamb, and with what He means as being the Lamb. There is little doubt that there is a special honour given to this company. They are mentioned here with peculiar honour; their position is one of peculiar honour. The very tone in which they are mentioned is that of a people of very sacred and precious meaning to the Lord.

A Song Learned Through Suffering

They possess an exclusive secret. They sing a song, and no one could learn that song save the hundred and forty-four thousand. No one else had the faculty. How do they possess this exclusive secret? Oh, the answer goes to the heart of so much in our experience. You know that it is a true principle that you learn secrets through suffering that you learn in no other way. It is in suffering that we learn those things that no one else knows. We cannot explain them, we cannot teach them, or make others understand. We can only

say, "When you have been through what I have been through you will understand, you will know; until you have, it is all closed to you". These people have been a way in which capacity for something has been created.

"Firstfruits"

Again, that goes to the heart of things. They are a people with a capacity, which means something very great for the Lord. That is surely explained or contained in the phrase "firstfruits". A first thing is always a determinative thing, and it is a principle in the Word of God that the first mention of a thing in the Bible always has in it intrinsically all that comes out afterwards concerning that thing. These people, this company, have the intrinsic value; the capacity for giving has been created. The figure changes in this book of the Revelation at the end. There is the city, and right out from the throne there goes that which is for the health of the nations. The nations derive their values from what is at the very heart of things. The intrinsic values are capable of reproduction over and over again to the advantage of many more who have their centre in the "city". Firstfruits -- oh yes, they are not the only ones but they have the value in the first place, and they have it for the others. It is the power of impartation through capacity created in suffering.

Is that not true to principle? You know it surely, most of you, in your own experience, that if you have been able to help anybody, it is because you have gone through something to create in you the capacity for helping them. It is not that you are passing on information. It has come out of something that God has deeply done in you through experience, and, moreover, painful experience. That is the way in which these first govern. They govern by capacity and ability to give, to impart. They have an exclusive secret, which no one but these can learn. The implication here is that they have gone a very utter way and are in a very utter position to serve the Lord.

God's Satisfaction First

We are not told here what they fully represent as to God's purpose, but we are left to view them in the light of His fuller revelation. When we take up the fuller revelation of the meaning of the Lamb, then we shall begin to understand what this Lamb company is, these who follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth. We may do something of that later, but here we may mention one or two things. These people, in the first place, represent God's satisfaction in a peculiar way -- God's satisfaction first. They have given God the inheritance that He seeks in the saints, they have answered to God, and that is something. It is no small thing that He should have that upon which His heart has been strongly set. God finding His own satisfaction -- surely they represent that.

But here is a remarkable thing. They sing -- and note how their singing is described. "As the voice of many waters, and as the voice of a great thunder". What a volume! "The voice which I heard was as the voice of harpers harping with their harps: and they sing as it were a new song before the throne". What is there remarkable about that? These are people who have known suffering in no ordinary way. These are people who have gone with the Lamb -- always meaning suffering and sacrifice -- and they are singing their very heart out in such volume, such impressiveness, that the apostle finds it difficult to discover words to convey this singing. What does it mean? Oh, they have come to see that all the suffering was infinitely worthwhile. They have come to see that after all the Lord was not against them as they were tempted to think. After all, it was not this and that and the other thing which the enemy tried to make out to be the meaning of their sufferings. No, there was something in this of unspeakable value and significance. I know there are some people who sing to keep their courage up; there are some people who sing, well, perhaps,

without any specific purpose -- but these people here are not singing without meaning and purpose. They sing now because they are wholly gratified with the ways of the Lord. It must mean that. They follow the Lamb, they have gone the way of the Cross in a very deep way, and the people who have gone most deeply into the Cross and the sufferings of Christ are the people who sing loudest in eternity. They have discovered the love of God through suffering, in a very full way. They sing before the throne. We have often been before the throne complaining, murmuring, despairing, perhaps in bitterness and rebellion. At the end -- for those who will follow THE LAMB whithersoever He goeth -- is a song which is unique, something altogether beyond the knowledge and understanding of others.

After all, there is no room for suspecting this. It is something very precious to the Lord. As we said at the beginning, it would solve so many problems. One of the problems besetting many of us is why it is that the Lord takes us such a peculiarly difficult way. The Lord does not seem to take other Christians that way, and they seem to have an easy time, comparatively. Why should we have such a difficult time? That is one of our problems. Others can do all sorts of things and still be Christians and be saved, but the Lord will not allow that with us. Others can get away with quite a lot and remain happy Christians, but somehow or other the Lord does not allow that with us. He is leading in a very hard way indeed. Here is the explanation. It lies right at the heart of these verses in Rev. 14, something that the Lord's heart is set upon. If only we could by grace find the right attitude to take toward the peculiar, the unusual dealings and ways of God with us, and the sufferings through which the Lord leads us. If we could take the right attitude, that attitude would be this -- the Lord is after something of peculiar value to Himself, we should then see some new meaning in Paul's word -- "To you it hath been GRANTED in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer in his behalf". "It has been given to you to suffer". Perhaps it is a trust with which the Lord cannot trust many. It is doubtful whether the Lord could trust many of His own children with suffering beyond a certain measure.

We must leave it there for the moment. If what has been said is true, if the Lord has something of peculiar value represented in these people, will that not explain all the prejudice, all the distortion, all the fear? May that not be the reason? May the Lord give us grace to accept nothing less than that which will most fully satisfy Him.

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