

# The Conflict of the Ages

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*The sermon explores the profound spiritual conflict between the Church and evil, emphasizing the power of prayer and the significance of suffering in God's redemptive plan.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 34:19, Luke 12:49-50, Acts 9:31, Acts 11:19 - 12:24, Acts 17:6, Romans 8:28, 2 Corinthians 4:17, Ephesians 3:10, Revelation 13:10

**Topics:** "The Power of Prayer", "Suffering and Triumph"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks explores the profound conflict between the forces of evil and the invincible power of God as illustrated in Acts 12. He emphasizes that the suffering of the Church, represented by the martyrdom of James and the imprisonment of Peter, serves a greater purpose in God's plan, drawing out evil for its ultimate destruction. The chapter encapsulates the ongoing struggle between Herod, a symbol of earthly power, and the Church, which, through prayer and unity, becomes a vessel for God's will. Sparks highlights the importance of understanding the 'cup' of suffering as integral to the scattering of the Gospel fire, ultimately leading to spiritual growth and triumph. He encourages believers to remain steadfast in prayer, recognizing that their struggles contribute to the advancement of God's Kingdom.

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## Transcript

Reading: Acts 12.

I came to cast fire upon the earth; and would that it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how am I straitened till it be accomplished!

(Luke 12:49,50).

In our first message we were mainly occupied with the cup and its consequence in the scattering of the fire, with a view to taking fresh account of the relationship between those two things: that there is no scattering of the fire, and all that that means of the progress of the Gospel and the growth of the Church, except in so far as the meaning of the cup is established as the foundation of everything, right at the very heart of the life of the people of God.

We are now going to look at the twelfth chapter of the book of the Acts, for this chapter is a microcosm of the history of the cup and the fire. That, of course, is true of the whole of this book: it is the cup, undoubtedly - the Church in suffering relationship with the Lord. But it is also the book of the scattered fire.

This chapter, as I have said, is a miniature of that whole great truth; indeed, it is a miniature of the struggle of the ages between the powers of evil and the invincible spiritual forces which eventually triumph. The tremendous amount of history and truth packed into this chapter never fails to move and stir us when we read it. I wonder whether there is a chapter in the Bible so pregnant with phrases and clauses, piled one upon another, every one of which could, without exaggeration, occupy our whole chapter.

Take some of these clauses, only a few of the many: "Now about that time..." What a key that is, and what a lot that key opens if you stay with it! We shall probably make use of it presently. "Herod the king..." There is far more in that than you recognize. "To vex certain of the church..." The vexation of the Church or the attempted vexation of the Church. "Killed James..." We pointed out previously that it was this James and John who came to the Lord requesting places on the right hand and on the left in glory, to whom the Lord immediately uttered the challenge: 'Are you able to drink of the cup that I drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism wherewith I am baptized?' And they said: 'We are able.' 'You shall...' 'And he killed James with the sword...' "When he saw that it pleased the Jews..." 'It pleased the Jews!' There is a lot in that. "He proceeded further..." And so we might go on. The whole chapter is full of phrases and clauses like that which are just packed with meaning.

Let us look at the message of this chapter. "Now about that time..." About what time? It is full of significance to put your finger on that and note the time. The answer is a very large one, but it has two main features. There is the answer lying within Herod himself, and there is the answer which lies behind Herod, much more deeply - the answer of Satan. let us consider the answer in Herod.

"Herod the king" (verse 1). There were six Herods in the Bible. All of them were Idumaeans in origin: they are gathered under that symbolic name of 'Edom'. That is, they were descendants of Esau, not of Israel. All that is very significant. This man before us was the first and the last of them properly to hold this title of 'king'. None of them up to him had officially held that title, and after he died the title of 'king' was taken away.

We are witnessing here the heading up of a long history. The prophecies of Obadiah should be read in order really to get the substance of this - this historic antagonism between the flesh and the Spirit, between heaven and hell, between Esau and Israel. There is a long history here, headed right up to this man who now takes the title of 'king'. What irony that the Jews should come to be ruled by a descendant of Esau and not of Israel, and that that ruler should be appointed by pagan Rome! It is something to think about. We are in the presence of a tremendous drama here, profoundly fascinating - but oh, how deeply instructive!

"About that time Herod the king put forth his hands to afflict certain of the church... And when he saw that it pleased the Jews..." (verses 1,3). Now why should Herod do this Jew-pleasing thing at that time? It might look just like a human story, it might seem to be something very simple, but we are in the unfolding of this much deeper thing. Satan, as we know, is very deep, but God is deeper still, and that is what is happening here. If you look back to the chapter before this, you will find that there was a great famine. "Now in these days there came down prophets from Jerusalem unto Antioch. And there stood up one of them named Agabus, and signified by the Spirit that there should be a great famine over all the world: which came to pass in the days of Claudius... Now about that time..." (Acts 11:27,28; 12:1).

The simple answer is this: the Jews were a very difficult people to rule. That is perfectly clear, of course; we know that. But add to the normal, usual, common difficulty a famine. You know there is nothing that

leads to revolution more quickly than famine and hunger. We are told later in the story that the people of Tyre and Sidon, in Phoenicia, were fed from King Herod's province (verse 20). It is a question of food, and it has become very acute. There is a seething and surging and a rising, and Herod must do something to get these people diverted from their troubles, get them preoccupied. Something must be done for them; there must be some diversion. He cannot provide the food and avoid the famine; it has come, it is a fact. Then, if he is going to maintain his position and hold these people and keep them in check, he must do something to please them. And there is your answer!

It sounds like a human story, a bit of trickery, politics, or whatever you like to call it; but that is one part of the answer. "Now about that time..." Why must he please the Jews? Well, that is the answer. How will he please the Jews? He knows their hatred for the Christians - that is a long story, too - and so he will "put forth his hands to afflict certain of the church." The Christians were being used to buttress up this ramshackle, false kingdom of Herod, to keep his throne intact. He is using them for his own ends. Well, that is only part of the answer - Herod's part. It is a very simple one.

But let us get behind Herod, because Herod is not acting alone. There is something more, something deeper. The deeper and the more real answer to the question is found in the satanic realm behind the man. Let us look at chapter 11 again, verse 19: "They therefore that were scattered abroad upon the tribulation that arose about Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, and Cyprus, and Antioch, speaking the word to none save only to Jews."

"They... that were scattered abroad upon the tribulation that arose about Stephen..." That is a profoundly inclusive word. There is something happening. Oh, what a lot has been happening! That takes us back to chapter seven - the martyrdom of Stephen. Stephen is stoned; that is the cup. It looks like an immense triumph for the devil. Stephen was a mighty man of the Spirit; there were tremendous hopes for the Church bound up with the life of that young man. Some have said, after reading his discourse and studying it, that he was the equal of Saul of Tarsus at least. And there he is, murdered. It looks as though Satan has really triumphed.

But what after that? From that very point there was a scattering of the believers far and wide, and they went everywhere, testifying. Saul of Tarsus is converted, and what a tremendous thing that is! Peter is led to the house of Cornelius, away up there in the north; and we know what happened there - the door is opened to the Gentiles. Things of the greatest significance are coming out of the cup, the cup of the Lord; out of the baptism and passion into which the Church has been baptized. Believers were constantly added to the Church (9:31,42; 11:21,34). The thing is growing. The fire is spreading; Satan's kingdom is being shaken. The kingdom of Satan is being stirred to its depths, and something must be done about it.

Someone tersely put it: 'The men that have turned the world upside down have come hither' (17:6). "Now about that time Herod the king..." You see? That is the explanation. Out of this baptism of the passion of the Lord into which the Church has been brought, the fire is spreading; but the enemy is moved - deeply moved. Herod 'puts forth his hand' - and there is a hand behind that hand - "to afflict certain of the church. And he killed James... with the sword. And when he saw that it pleased the Jews..." he proceeded further. I would like to stay with all those fragments, because there is a message in every one of them. Herod is carried on by his own momentum. Have a little success, and see what it will do for you!

However, we turn away from that for a moment to the other side - the aspect of this that we may call a drama indeed, that of the sovereign Kingship of the Lord. It is all summed up in three things: "Herod... put

forth his hands to afflict... an angel of the Lord smote him... But the word of God grew and multiplied" (12:1,23,24). That is tremendous, is it not? We begin the story with Herod putting forth his hands; we end the story with Herod eaten of worms and giving up the ghost. You begin with the Church a victim and martyr; you end with the Word of God growing and multiplying. This is the story of another King. It is the story of two kings pitting themselves against each other. It is, as I said at the beginning, the microcosm of this long history of the conflict between the forces of evil and those invincible forces of the Spirit, which always triumph in the long run.

But here a pressing question arises. When you think of the beginning - that he killed James with the sword, and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also - the question that clamours for an answer is: Why does God allow this kind of thing? Why did He not intervene before James was killed with the sword? Why did He not stop this thing before Peter was thrown into prison? Ah, that is another key to another large history, is it not? The mystery of God's permissive will: God allowing His servants, His so useful servants, to be killed or cast into prison; allowing the Church to suffer like this. Why does God allow it?

The answer lies deep down within the cup. If you get deep enough into the cup, you will find the answer. Let me put it the other way - it is deep within the Cross. God, in the mystery of His will and His ways, uses the Church as He used Israel, to draw out the evil forces to their own destruction. 'God moves in a mysterious way...' Is it the Church, or is it the forces against it, that are destroyed eventually? You see the answer in history. It is here in this chapter, in representation. Here you have Israel in Egypt. What a tremendous extending of Pharaoh - drawing him out, drawing him to the limit of his own resources to give an answer through the magicians, and then going on and going on, further and yet further, all Pharaoh's resources are exhausted, and then God smashes him. The sum total of his whole resource is broken and destroyed - and God has used a suffering people to draw it all out.

That is the story here. In the mystery of God's ways the Church suffers, but its suffering comes from the enemy, whom God is drawing out by means of the Church - drawing him out and extending him. And when his cup of iniquity is full, God will smash him beyond repair. That is the issue of Herod. It is the Church that has brought this about. It is the sufferings of James and Peter and the Church in these days that have accomplished that. But is that not found right in the Cross? Look at the Cross! Is the Cross the extending of all the powers of evil in earth and in hell? It is that! When you see Him there on the Cross, dead, and know how it is brought about, and all that has gone to bring it about - the whole story of human and satanic malice and spite - you ask: Is there anything more that they can do? No! What is the answer? The scattered fire! That is the answer. It is in the cup, it is in the Cross; it is an integral part of this whole matter. The sufferings of Christ which abound unto us, unto the Church, are working Satan's undoing - and for us a 'far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory' (II Cor. 4:17).

Why does God allow it? Wait, if you can, in patience and in faith. "Here is the patience of the saints" (Rev. 13:10; 14:12). Do you remember that word? If you can wait, you will see that, on the one side, your suffering, or your sufferings, wrought havoc in the kingdom of Satan, brought him to an end of his power: they drew him out, they were the marks of his coming out. On the other side, the sufferings have worked glory for you. And in the meantime there has been spiritual increase, spiritual progress, scattered fire.

God uses the work of Satan for Satan's undoing. But it is the Church and it is the saints who are the instrument. It is in their soul that this battle is fought out. "Now unto the principalities and the powers in the heavenlies... made known through the church the manifold wisdom of God" (Eph. 3:10). Something is

happening in the unseen.

The progress of the Word of God is a costly thing. It involves much suffering - it involves the cup; but that is His way. Here, then, we see God using Satan's work - on the one side for Satan's own undoing and overthrow, and on the other side for the progress of the Word, for the Church's advance and for the glory of God. And that is wrapped up in this anguish of fellowship with His sufferings.

You and I have had a good deal of difficulty in understanding why Paul should long to know the fellowship of His sufferings. It is one of the most difficult prayers for us to pray, is it not? But Paul knew this secret, that that is the way of the progress of the Gospel, that is the way for the destruction of this that is set against it: the fellowship of His sufferings; for that is the heart of the Cross of the Lord Jesus Himself.

And all this is inherent in the cup. The cup ceases to be an object, it ceases to be just a thing: it becomes something living, something potent. That cup is a mighty force in this universe. When you and I come to the Lord's Table next time, may God give us some larger conception of what a tremendous thing is there, touching every realm in His universe. It is the representation of something living. This blood speaks, this blood tells, this blood counts. Blood is vital; it is a terrific force in this universe. When we take the cup, and thereby accept the baptism, the passion, let us recognize that in faith we take also the tremendous victory that it sets forth. It is costly!

Let us now see where this was all wrought out. On the one side, Herod - wicked, wicked Herod, with all the cruelty of his long history, going back to Esau; the Jews, delighted that action was being taken against the followers of Jesus; the prison, the chains, the strong guard within and without - four quaternions of soldiers. These are things that represent great forces and great difficulty - all the things which are against. They are not just words; they are tremendous things, all of them, viewed from the natural standpoint. That is on the one side. On the other side, "an angel of the Lord": and Herod, and the Jews, and the prison, and the chains, and the guard, are as nothing.

Where is it wrought out? In a prayer meeting, as it were right in between those two. Between the forces of hell and of heaven was the Church at prayer. The thing would not have happened otherwise. Those forces of evil would not have yielded to the heavenly authority of the ascended Christ through an angel, if it had not been for what was going on in that room. "But," it says, "prayer was made... of the Church..." But... But... Away all the forces! Calculate them, take their full strength and meaning, and then put one word over it all - 'But'. 'The Church prayed...' And in response to that the angel - and all the other was as nothing.

The Church at prayer. What do you think about that? It says that "prayer was made earnestly," but that English word does not really convey the force of it at all. The Greek word means literally 'extendedly', 'stretched out'. The Church prayed in a stretched out way; the Church was extended. Satan was extended, heaven was extended, and these two powers came into collision because the Church was extended. It will never come about in any other way; it is just like that. What a tremendous thing is wrapped up with the Church at prayer!

As I dwell upon this story, many, many thoughts that are not in the story crowd into my mind. How different it might have been if the Church, instead of getting together and focusing upon the situation in oneness and in prayer like this, had said: 'Oh, if only Stephen had not said those things! If only so-and-so had been a little more discreet... If only...!' and a thousand other things of blame: blaming one and another and holding people responsible for this and putting it down to that, and that, turning in on themselves until they

had got a whole situation of questions and reproaches and recriminations, and a 'case'. And the whole thing is sabotaged! Dear brothers and sisters, whenever this kind of thing happens we must look deeper. Behind all that is the strategy of Herod to frustrate the scattering of the fire. When the devil can get us turned in on ourselves and on our own problems, and upon one another's faults and weaknesses and failures, and so on, he has defeated the whole business of the Lord. You may pray and pray and pray, but if there is the contradiction of division in the background, you pray in vain. The Lord will not come in.

They prayed as the Church in this 'stretched out' way. There is no other thing in mind; they are of one mind and heart. They are concentrated upon a satanic issue. There is a lesson in that. Oh, how our prayer is paralysed by a thousand and one things which, if we only knew the truth, are not really the trouble - they are things that Satan has got hold of. There may be faults. Was any one of the Apostles faultless? There may be weaknesses; but if only you are on the Lord's business, the Lord takes action.

It has been said concerning the disciples' disputing with Rhoda about Peter, that they had prayed and prayed and prayed all night, and then when their prayer was answered they did not believe it; and some people have said that they could not have prayed in faith. But there are other points of view. Some of us pray with all our might about a dear brother now in prison. I beg to suggest that, if someone came to us and said: 'Brother... is at the door!' we should say: 'He can't be!' We should want a good deal of verification - not because we did not believe that the Lord could do it or would do it; but, somehow or other, when the Lord does the very thing that we ask for, our breath is taken away and we cannot believe it. Have mercy upon these believers, and do not impute unbelief. The fact is, that, though they may have prayed like that, and though there may have been faults and weaknesses, they were on the business, and they were one in it, and the Lord moved in.

How much came out of this! They saw through the whole situation and got to the real issue; they pushed aside all other considerations, and out of their travail something was born. You remember what follows after chapter twelve. In the previous chapter (11:19-30) Antioch had come into view: and now from Antioch Paul and Barnabas are sent forth, and on and on you go. The fire is scattered to the ends of the earth - out of this: The Church prayed.

It is a wonderful story, but I find much difficulty in seeking to convey it. It is so true to life. There is always so much room for the mystery of God's ways. Why? Why? Why? If you stay with the 'why's' of God's wisdom, you will be paralysed. Let me recall what we were saying at the beginning of our first message. Here is a law enunciated, declared, established - that there is no scattered fire without the cup, and that cup is always a mystery. It always expresses itself in ways concerning which you can say: 'Why this...?' 'Why that...?' 'Why does He allow this...?' Those 'why's' will paralyse you if you have not reached the established, settled position, that the cup has come to stay; it will be with us to the end.

But, in the mystery of suffering permitted by God, and in all that that cup means in a crucified Son of God and a crucified Church - in all that is the way of Satan's undoing and the establishment of the heavenly Kingdom. May God settle it in us, and give us grace!

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