

The Continuation of the Conflict in Relation to the Individual Believer

by T. Austin-Sparks

The continuation of the conflict is a battle between life and death, with the enemy trying to get us to accept less than the real explanation of the conflict, but we can overcome by rising up in spirit and resisting the enemy, and by declaring life by faith in the Son of God.

Scripture: Matthew 27:46, John 10:10, Romans 8:37, 2 Corinthians 12:9, Galatians 2:20, Ephesians 3:16, Philippians 4:13, 2 Timothy 1:7, Hebrews 2:14, 1 John 5:4

Topics: "Victory in Christ", "Spiritual Warfare"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks addresses the ongoing spiritual conflict faced by individual believers, emphasizing that while Christ's work on the Cross is complete, believers must actively engage in discovering and living out the victorious life that has been deposited within them. He explains that this conflict manifests in various spheres--spirit, mind, emotions, and body--where the power of death seeks to suppress the life of Christ in believers. Sparks encourages believers to rise in faith against these assaults, asserting that true victory comes from a deep spiritual union with Christ, rather than from external circumstances. He highlights that the testimony of Christ's resurrection is proven through the expression of His life in believers, not merely through doctrinal statements. Ultimately, he reassures that even in times of deep darkness, the divine life within remains intact and powerful, urging believers to trust in this deeper reality.

Transcript

We are seeking to take a further step in the apprehension of what is related to this great and pressing matter, and are going to deal with the continuation of the conflict, with reference to its nature and its sphere.

THE NATURE OF THE CONFLICT

The work of the Lord Jesus in His Cross has now been set forth in two respects. On the one hand, we have noted there was that which was actually complete and final in His work; the fact that the Lord did destroy him that had the power of death, and also death itself. With regard to Himself, that is a finished work. His presence at the right hand of God declares that death, the grave, and Satan, have been brought to naught, and no longer have any power over Him. On the other hand, there is what we have called the potential work of His Cross, that is that Christ did something which in Himself is full and final, but which

has yet to become full and final in the saints; something which was for the saints, but which has still to become complete in their experience. It is potential, so far as the Church is concerned, although in Him, its Head, they have it in finality. As the result of the work of His Cross, and as the grand issue of His resurrection, eternal life is received already by those who believe. But while that life is itself victorious, incorruptible, indestructible, the believer has to come by faith to prove it, to live by it, to learn its laws, to be conformed to it. There is a deposit in the believer which in itself needs no addition, so far as its quality is concerned. So far as its victory, its power, its glory, its potentialities are concerned, nothing can be added to it. But the course of spiritual experience, of spiritual life, is to discover, to appropriate, and to live by all that the life represents and means. That is to say, the course of spiritual life and experience is the course of discovering and living by the values of that life which is within, and which is succoured from above.

It is important to recognise that as a discriminating word. We are very often inclined to think that the life of the Lord in us needs in some way to be improved, to be added to, when really what is required is that we should discover what we have, and, discovering it by experience, live according to it. This life is not something apart from the Lord Jesus, and we can never think of His standing in need of some improvement, nor of the possibility of something being added to Him to make Him complete, or more complete. We would never think like that. And this life is one with Himself. As the Apostle says, it is Christ who is our life, and our need is to discover what Christ is in us, and to live accordingly. So in a very real sense it is a matter of the life getting more of us, rather than of our getting more of the life. That, at any rate, is the way of its working.

This, in the ordering of God, has to be done in a world where death still rules and works; for in this world the destruction of death has not yet been made manifest. Death, like the devil, goes on, although Calvary still remains full victory. We are left in this world, and it is in this world where death reigns and works as a great energy that we, by this sovereign ordering of God, have to come to prove the values of the life which has been deposited in us, and to discover its potentialities. This is an experimental discovery. It therefore resolves itself into battle between that which is in this world and the life which is in the believer. It is the battle for life, not as to the forfeiture of that life - not as to whether death can take eternal life away from us, for that is not the question at issue - but as to the triumphant expression and the full manifestation of the power of that life. That is the issue. We may have eternal life, and yet that life may be pressed away in our very being without expression, without manifestation, without any triumphant issue. It may be there, but cramped and smothered.

That which is true in the case of the individual believer can be equally true in the case of the Church, the collective company; it may have life, eternal life, and yet there may be no expressed testimony of its presence, or but a very limited manifestation. With this expression, this manifestation - not only with the possession of life but with the testimony to that possession - there are bound up no lesser issues than the resurrection and lordship of Jesus Christ. The testimony to the fact that Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead and is at the right hand of the Majesty on High in absolute lordship is bound up with an expression here - let us repeat - of that life which is His risen life. That is no small matter. The last Adam was made a "life-giving spirit" - life-giving, that is, life manifesting itself, life being transmitted, life expressed - and if that is not exemplified in and through the believer, and through the Church as a whole, there is something taken away from the testimony of the Lord Jesus. How is there to be the proof, the demonstration, the evidence, the final establishment of the fact that Jesus is alive from the dead, and is Lord? It is by the triumphant expression of His life in His own. It is not by a doctrinal statement. Christ is never proved to be alive from the dead, nor to be Lord, by doctrinal statements. Your statement of faith

may include the fact that you believe Jesus died and rose again, ascended to heaven, and is at the right hand of the Majesty on High, but how are you going to prove your statement? What has God given as the evidence of that? You may believe it; you may be willing to lay down your life for that faith; you may state it with tremendous emphasis, and yet you are not thereby proving it. You will never prove anything by saying: 'I believe with all my might that this is the case!' You will never prove a thing by standing up and declaring it as something which you believe. You will never prove a thing by saying: 'I believe in all the fundamentals of the Christian faith!' and calling yourself by some name which indicates that you believe in the inspiration of the Bible. Nothing is ever proved in that way. Reducing the whole matter to these two points - that Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead, and is Lord of all - you have still to prove your statement after you have made it. If you have appealed to the fact that the Word of God says so, even then you have proved nothing. Your proof can never be by argument, because what argument can build up argument can pull down, and what logic can construct logic can destroy.

How, then, are you going to prove that this is so? By the expression and manifestation of His risen life, that is all - but it is a mighty 'all!' That signifies that you are the embodiment of the thing which you declare - that besides the doctrinal statement there is the living expression. Thus the resurrection and the lordship of Jesus are bound up with this expression which is called the 'testimony'. The testimony is not a system of truth. It is that extra factor to the statement and presentation of truth which is the power of a life which conquers death. How, then, will you prove that Jesus has conquered death? The proof of it will be a death-conquering life that expresses itself in you.

This being the case, it means that the whole issue is one of a life-power by which Christ is attested. We do not put the life in the place of Christ, but we say that the attestation of Christ is by the life. We do not mean the manner of life, but the life-power, the impact of a spiritual force which emanates from Him as in the throne, the registration upon a spiritual realm of a greater spiritual power. That is the attestation of the Lord Jesus. Therefore the major weapon of the enemy will be death. Death is also a spiritual power. Thus it becomes a battle between two spiritual powers, the power of life and the power of death. The battle goes on, and will go on, until the Church becomes so vitalised by this Divine power that, in a moment, those who went into the grave, and those who are alive and remain, are united in a mighty resurrection-ascension to the Lord in glory. The battle between these two great spiritual powers will go on till then.

That is the battle in which we find ourselves. It is an intensifying battle, and we had better recognise it once for all. It is difficult to accept that sometimes, even though we assent to it mentally. When things become difficult we are surprised and wonder, perhaps thinking it strange that it should be so. But it must be recognised and accepted that this spiritual warfare between life and death will intensify toward the end, and it will reach its highest point of tension right at the point where the Church is about to be translated. That is undoubtedly made clear by the Word of the Lord.

THE SPHERE OF THE CONFLICT

We speak in the first place about the individual believer. We must remember that this life of the risen Lord, as linked with the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of life, resides in the very deepest part of our being, in our spirit, or in what the New Testament calls "the inner man". Therefore the most spiritual people will find that the conflict of life rages around and upon their spirit. There is a direct assault upon their spirit in order to get their spirit weakened, shut in and pressed down, so that somewhere in the depths of their being they feel that they are unable to breathe, so to speak. They cannot actually locate it, but they are conscious

that right within there is a locking up, a pressing, a hemming in, a suffocating of spirit. One of two things will result. Either their spirit will be pressed out under this weight of spiritual death, and they will go under; or else they will have to call earnestly upon the Lord that they may be strengthened with might by His Spirit into the inward man, and then exercise faith on the ground of their prayer and seek to assert their spirit against this thing.

The trouble with a great many of the Lord's people is that they do not rise up in spirit and, in the name of the Lord, meet and resist that thing which is threatening to crush the very life out of their spirit. There is an accepting of things; there is a consenting; there is a passive attitude; or else there is a getting into an awful swirl of questionings doubtings, arguments and discussions with the devil, going round in an eternal circle of introspection and self-analysis, when really in such circumstances believers ought in their spirits to rise up in faith in the name of the Lord to resist this thing and refuse to have it, calling, in His name, upon the energies of the Holy Ghost. We shall never get through until we learn how to do that. If the enemy finds that he can hold the situation by keeping us in that circle, that awful going round of debate, argument, discussion, of analysing, of questioning, of doubting, he will keep us going round; he will whip us up like a circus horse to keep us running round all the time, while we never get beyond the point where we started. If you keep going back there all the time, not making one fragment or fraction of real spiritual progress toward victory, you can go on so indefinitely.

Another favourite method of the enemy is to try to get us to explain this thing along lines which are less than the real explanation, to draw in other things which he would like us to believe may account for it. The things may be numerous and various. If we settle down to accept such an explanation, it will prove our undoing. While there may be much that he can use and play upon in natural conditions, and while it may be true that he is making the most of all that is available of our own human weakness, and perhaps our physical condition, and our constitution, our make-up, and our surroundings, nevertheless ultimately it may not be a question of anything in nature at all, but a matter of being strong in spirit. You may take it as one of the settled things that there is no hope for anybody in the direction of those natural conditions. If you start working from the circumference to the centre, you are working the wrong way, and you will not get through; you will be held on the circumference until you are dead. The enemy will not let you reach the centre from the circumference. You must start at the centre and work outward. The key to victory is our spirit-union with our risen and reigning Lord.

There are other realms, of course, in which this death battle goes on, and where this assault of death is made upon the believer. Sometimes it is upon the mind. There is a darkening, a numbing, or something like a paralysing of the mind when you turn to consider the things of the Lord. At other times you may be quite clear and free, and your mind have little trouble in working in ordinary things, but immediately you come to spiritual things, to the things of the Lord, you discover that your mind is becoming overclouded, and is not functioning. It is being paralysed; there is a darkness and a death creeping over it. The enemy does make assaults upon our minds; there is no doubt about that. He attacks our soul: not only the intellectual side, but every side. The enemy makes an assault upon the emotional side, to dry up and freeze our feelings, so that we are totally incapable of giving any response or of exercising any kind of heart function in relation to the Lord. The same is true in the realm of the will. There are times when it seems we cannot make a decision, and cannot will in the way of the Lord. The will comes under assault like that.

Death breaks upon us in each of these spheres, and the experience is more or less common to us all. It is a battle. As is the case with the spirit directly, and also with the soul, so it is with the body. There is no

doubt at all that the enemy makes assaults upon the bodies of the Lord's people. I do not say that every malady, every sickness, every physical weakness, every bit of natural tiredness is the direct work of the devil. Of course, historically it is the outcome of his work, but immediately it need not be the direct work of the devil, and we are not saying that it is. We should find ourselves in great difficulties were we to teach that. But there are direct attacks of the enemy in the spirit of death upon the bodies of the Lord's people. Where there is a weakness he may fasten upon it, add to it, and seek to cripple us altogether through our weakness when, although that basic weakness might remain, we need not be crippled by it. That has been the history of the Lord's people. It becomes a question as to whether the enemy is going to use that thing to undo us altogether, or whether, in spite of it, we are to be found proving the power of a life which triumphs over it, and carries us on.

PAUL'S THORN IN THE FLESH

The Apostle Paul always comes to our help in these matters. Paul has placed it on record that, because of the greatness of the revelation which came to him, lest he should become exalted above measure there was given unto him a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet him, to smite him in the face. For this thing he besought the Lord thrice, but the Lord said: "My grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). We have good reason to believe that the weakness was physical weakness; I find it difficult not to believe that it was malaria. There is every reason, I think, to believe that to have been the malady. Paul's journeys were oftentimes in places which were infested with the malarial elements, while he was without any of the modern helps to overcome them. And when you remember that the complaint affected his eyes - anybody who knows anything about malaria knows of those sharp pangs through the eyes which in the long run do interfere with the organs of sight - it all points strongly to malaria. We are not arguing that it was so, but we find difficulty in believing that such was not the case. But, whatever it was, here is something which from time to time laid hold of Paul, and it seemed that he never knew when this thing was going to overtake him. His "thorn" was undoubtedly physical weakness, and it is called "a messenger of Satan". The whole direction of it, from the enemy's side, was a working of death. In relation to that, Paul speaks of death working in this mortal flesh. It was all in the direction of death, death, death; he was facing and fighting death all the time. But the point is, that while the devil most clearly had to do with this physical state, as the statement shows, and the Lord Himself permitted it, it did not work out in death. On the contrary, the course of that man's life is the course of a continual triumph over that death and Satan. That the power of death does assail, and that the Lord does not all the time prevent the devil from attacking these bodies, is manifest. But that does not mean that the Lord intends us to die! You might think the logic to be that if the Lord allows a messenger of Satan, whose effect is death, surely the Lord means us to die. There is no justification for such an argument. Quite the opposite is the case. The Lord had a very salutary purpose for everything in the case of the Apostle, and this working of death was expressly used to keep the man spiritually alive; for had he not had the thorn, his spiritual life would have been smitten with a blight. Hear his own words: "Lest I should be exalted above measure..." Find the man exalted above measure, and you find the man of poor spiritual life, for his spiritual life has been blighted. Find the man who is kept humble in this way, and yet triumphant in a way which is not explained on a natural ground, and you will find the man who is a giant in spirit.

Yes, the enemy does attack the body. He impinges upon what is already there and seeks to intensify it. He seeks to cripple the saints. But the whole of this word, especially in relation to the life of the Apostle Paul, is one great declaration that even in the presence of a natural handicap, a natural weakness, or something with which the devil himself has come in at a given point in the permission of God, there is a life which can

carry us on to the fulfilment of a great Divine purpose which need not be curtailed because of natural conditions. Get hold of that! Do not sink under your condition and say: 'Because such and such is the case with me, then the Divine purpose in its greater dimensions is impossible!' That is despair, not faith. The Apostle's declaration was this: "... that life which I now live in the flesh I live in faith, the faith which is in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself up for me" (Galatians 2:20). It was life by faith in the Son of God. And what a living it was! What a life it was! Indeed, in his case it was a life triumphant over ever-present death. You must remember that the ministry of Paul to these Galatians was occasioned by "an infirmity in the flesh", i.e. a physical sickness, affecting his eyes (4.13-14).

It was a battle. Read the second letter to the Corinthians, and you will see the traces of the battle. Paul had just emerged from that desperate situation where he despaired of life. He had been laid so low with this thing, whatever it was, that he never expected to recover. But he came out. He bore the marks of the battle with death (Galatians 6:17), but he continued on his course long after he wrote the second letter to the Corinthians. Some of the most glorious things found expression after that. Let us believe in the possibilities of the Lord's life within us, and disclaim all the arguments in our own state, or which the enemy would impose upon us by reason of how we feel and how things appear. We must all take this to heart.

LIFE IS DEEPER THAN OUR CONSCIOUSNESS

We close by referring to this one point. We must seek always to believe in the fact that this Divine life, with all its tremendous potencies, is far deeper down than surrounding conditions and circumstances, than our own physical life, and than our own soul-life. Unless we grasp that, hold that firmly, we have not the ground of victory. When we feel that death is working with such tremendous force in the realm of our bodies or our souls, and everything in this sentient life of ours speaks of death, we are too often in danger of surrendering the whole position. I believe that this thing which is of God is deeper than our mortal being. I believe that it is possible even for children of God, being truly born again and possessing eternal life, to lose their reason and go into an asylum, and yet to have no change made in the deepest fact and reality of the being in relation to the Lord. We touch that point to indicate what we mean - that if our rational life is the sum total of our life, then it is a poor look-out for us. If our sanity, our natural mental balance, is the ground of our being children of God, then some from time to time would have real reason to doubt whether they were born again. And if that is true in the mental, it is true in the physical. This life of the Lord is far deeper than this mortal life of ours.

I am going to say something which may, to some, sound very terrible. It may perplex some, but it may help others. It is this: it is possible for a true child or servant of God, living in true fellowship with Him and walking in the light as far as they have it, to pass through a time of deep and terrible darkness. At such a time it may seem as though the Lord has left them and that Satan has taken His place of government. Prayer seems impossible or useless, and the Bible closed. Evil seems triumphant. The promises of God never to leave nor in anywise to forsake seem to have failed. Things may seem to be even worse than that, and one's salvation may be brought into question. Such has been the experience of some of the most saintly, devoted, and God-used servants of the Lord. Abraham had it (Genesis 15:12). Jeremiah knew it (Jeremiah 20:7). David knew it (Psalm 22). Job knew it. Our Lord Jesus knew it (Matthew 27:46). Dr. A. B. Simpson had this experience near the end of his wonderful life for God. And so it has been with others.

What is the explanation? With all my heart I do not believe that this seeming forsakenness is true, however real it may seem. In many cases it is because those concerned have done so much damage to

the kingdom of Satan that he has rallied all his forces to quench their life and testimony. Or it may be that the enemy has discerned the potential value of a life which will be a menace to his interests. But, whether either of these explanations be true or not so, the fact remains that, where the Lord Jesus truly is, the battle for life often assumes most serious forms. Sometimes it is a devastating and desolating experience.

We need to remember that these are spiritual forces, and spiritual forces stand at no physical barriers. We have a soul, a great nervous system. Children of God for many reasons, and very often after a time of pouring out spiritually, will find their nerves are all a jangle, and they feel anything but good and holy. But are you going to say that that means that after all they are not children of God, and that it is all a myth? Do you mean to say that Elijah was no longer the prophet of the Most High when he cast himself under the juniper tree and asked the Lord to take away his life? He was still the servant of God, still as true to God as ever. We are not trying to excuse our weaknesses, but trying to get to the heart of a situation. That does not argue that the Lord has forsaken, that the Lord is not there, and that such are not the Lord's children or His servants. It indicates that the enemy has made them marked men or women because of something he is trying to destroy in the life. If you get into that realm, do not accept the suggestions of the enemy or seek to interpret things in the light of circumstances.

If you do not understand this that we are saying, do not strive after an explanation, and please do not put your own construction upon it. There are some who know what it is to have such an assault upon their being, their physical and nervous life as to make them feel that they are lost. I do not believe that it means that they are lost, and it is because some people accept that suggestion from the tempter that they sink into darkness. Oh, that many of these people who feel this thing upon them could know what we are trying to say, that it is for the spirit to rise up in faith and refuse the argument of the seeming! The seeming is sometimes so terribly real. People who have not suffered sometimes say to us: 'It only seems to be so; it is not really so!' And we reply: 'You do not know what you are talking about! It is more real than anything else to those concerned.' But the Lord will teach us as we go on not to accept that as the final thing. There is something deeper than that. The Lord is deeper than our physical feelings. The Lord is deeper than our soul.

Let me say here what I have said elsewhere. There are times and situations when ordinary lines of communication with a child of God are suspended. They are in a state of unconsciousness. It is useless to speak to them, for they can make no response. But if you pray, so often there is a response, not in words, but deeper than natural consciousness. You touch something deeper; it is the spirit, and spirit responds to spirit. We have known this to happen, even to the point of a hand-squeeze, or a facial glow. It is the mystery of Divine life.

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