

# The Cry of the Prophets for Holiness

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the critical need for holiness in the life of believers as a response to the prophetic call in the new dispensation of the Holy Spirit.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 119:75, Ezekiel 43:12, Matthew 16:18, Luke 1:35, Acts 2:16, Acts 5:3, Acts 13:27, Hebrews 4:15, Hebrews 9:14, 1 Peter 1:12

**Topics:** "The Role of the Holy Spirit", "Holiness"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the urgent call for holiness as expressed by the prophets, contrasting the old and new dispensations. He highlights how the early church was challenged to move beyond traditional mindsets and embrace the revolutionary work of the Holy Spirit, which requires a deep commitment to holiness. The tragic example of Ananias and Sapphira illustrates the severe consequences of unholiness, as their deceit brought spiritual death and arrested the work of the Spirit. Sparks urges believers to confront their own unholiness and recognize the broader implications of their actions on the community and God's purposes. Ultimately, he calls for a sincere pursuit of holiness, aligning with the nature of Christ, to avoid the peril of spiritual stagnation.

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## Transcript

"For they that dwell in Jerusalem, and their rulers, because they knew him not, nor the voices of the prophets which are read every sabbath, fulfilled them by condemning him" (Acts 13:27).

We were taking note, in our last chapter, of a contrast which is marked between the old dispensation and the new: of how much there is to be missed if there is a continuing in the fixed order of the old, and how much there is to be gained by moving into the essential nature of the new. This is found focused for us in the passage we have read.

Without repeating too much of our previous meditation, may I just say that it is perfectly clear in the New Testament, from the Book of the Acts onwards, that the people in the new dispensation, the dispensation of the Holy Ghost, were required to keep completely free from everything set, from everything of a conclusive position, excepting fundamental facts of the faith. So far as their mentality was concerned - yes, their religious, traditional mentality, the mentality which had been formed by their very birth into Israel, by all that they had received through training and teaching from their infancy upward - they were to be always open to the Lord even for the revolutionary. They were called upon to come into a place where that no longer held them, but where the Lord was perfectly free to do the revolutionary thing in them and make

them revise all their thinking - in the light, not of anything contradictory, but of God's fuller meaning in all that they knew of the Word of God; where they acknowledged that the Lord really had 'more light and truth to break forth from His Word' - indeed, so much more as to make all that they already knew seem as nothing.

You find, therefore, that this necessity precipitated crises in their spiritual course, and sometimes brought them to a standstill, where a tremendous conflict was set up; but the Holy Spirit was sufficiently in possession to win, and to be able to carry them further. That happened with Peter, on the housetop at Joppa. It happened with Saul of Tarsus. There is no doubt about it that, in acting as he did, Saul was acting upon the basis of the Old Testament Scriptures. He thought he had the full support of the Word of God for what he was doing. When he met Jesus of Nazareth out from heaven as he went to Damascus, although he capitulated there and then and acknowledged Jesus as his Lord, his great problem was, 'How am I going to reconcile my Old Testament with this?' He went away into Arabia, and probably for two years he was occupied there with the reconciliation of the Old Testament with the fact of Jesus as Christ and Lord. And he got well through, came back from his desert, and, caught in the resistless stream of the Spirit, became a mighty servant of God.

We want to go on a little further now. We are saying that here, in this new dispensation as represented in the Book of the Acts, the prophets are being re-interpreted, or their inner meaning is being brought to light, with all that that inner meaning implies. We know that the inauguration of the dispensation on the day of Pentecost was accompanied by a quoting of the prophets. It began with Joel - "This is that which hath been spoken through the prophet Joel" (Acts 2:16) - and went on with other Old Testament quotations pointing to that time. Now, either by direct citation or fulfilment (as clearly seen in the case of the Joel prophecy) or by an unmistakable implication, the prophets are here brought in in many connections.

#### CHRIST ALONE THE MEASURE OF WHAT IS OF GOD

You pass from chapter 2 of the Book of the Acts, and go on to chapter 5 - the very terrible, dark story of Ananias and Sapphira. Where did the prophets come in in that?

In the first chapter of the Book of Ezekiel, you have what was introduced spiritually on the day of Pentecost. There you have that wonderful, though difficult, vision of the living creatures, the wheels full of eyes, the Spirit in the wheels, the Spirit of life going, always going: the Spirit, life, eyes, and the irresistible movement from heaven in relation to the Man upon the throne. "Acts" begins there. The Lord Jesus was received up, out of this world; and in relation to that Man in the throne there is this going on here, touching the earth and yet detached from it; touching, but not fixed here; a heavenly thing. And that is moving with tremendous directness and deliberation. That is like the second chapter of "Acts". The Man in the throne; the wheels, the eternal counsels of God, the goings of God from eternity; the living creatures, the Church; the life within, the Spirit of life there, with His perfect vision - "full of eyes". Is that not what is here?

Yes; but that is the beginning of "Ezekiel". At the other end of his prophecy you have this - away, up from the earth - a vision, a picture, of a temple, a spiritual house, very fully depicted and defined, with every detail marked. The man who leads the prophet round goes measuring, measuring, giving the measure of every detail. This house is all of the Holy Ghost. It is all a measure of Christ, in every part. This thing is not on the earth; it is heavenly measurement. Before you can have the river issuing from the sanctuary, flowing on in increasing volume, deepening and widening, making everything on its banks to live, and swallowing up death in victory as it proceeds, you have to have the house utterly according to God; and

then the one overall statement about it is: "the whole limit thereof round about shall be most holy" (Ezekiel 43:12). It is all of God; it is all of Christ, His risen, exalted Son. It is out from Him, through a Church constituted on a heavenly pattern, that the life flows; and it is flowing here in "Acts".

#### HOLINESS THE LAW OF WHAT IS OF GOD

Now Ananias and his wife violate the very governing law of that house - holiness; and what happens? That is where Israel failed to hear the voices of the prophets. We said, in our previous meditation, that they carried on the external formalities of the temple, the daily services, the ritual and the liturgy, adopted the forms and the vestments, but the inner life did not correspond. It was the cry of the prophets that a system was being maintained and preserved out of relation to the inner life of the people. The prophets throughout are crying for holiness. The trouble lay there. And what does this matter of holiness really mean? When you really get to the heart of it, what is it? "Why hath Satan filled thy heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?" (Acts 5:3). That is the unholiness. The act of Ananias and Sapphira implies something deeper - that sinister mind behind; Satan finding an opportunity of getting into these holy precincts, this heavenly realm, corrupting and polluting, and establishing his lie. "He is a liar, and the father thereof", said the Lord (John 8:44). A lie right in the presence of the Holy Ghost! The life of the Spirit and the Spirit of life do not just go on ignoring conditions. They require that first of all everything shall be constituted on God's heavenly pattern; that is only saying, constituted on the pattern of Christ His Son; that it shall be really an expression and representation of the Lord Jesus by the Holy Spirit.

#### THE SPIRIT SPONTANEOUSLY REPRODUCES THE NATURE OF CHRIST

Now, I am not going back behind what I said earlier. I am not saying that we must take the Bible in its letter and phrases and make a mould, a scriptural mould, which we think is the New Testament order. That is not the point at all. Development did not come about in the beginning in that way. Every fresh reproduction of the Church, in any part of the Roman Empire or beyond, in the days of the Apostles, came about, not by taking thither a fixed mould and trying to pour people into that mould and to reproduce the shape of things that existed somewhere else. It began with life - life from heaven - "the Holy Ghost sent forth from heaven" (1 Peter 1:12). And wherever the believers went, two things were imperative: firstly, baptism, as a testimony to the fact that an old order was finished, and that everything now had to have as new a beginning as anybody must have who has died and been buried; and secondly, the gift of the Holy Ghost, the Spirit of life, coming to take up residence within those concerned.

When the Holy Spirit comes in and has His way, He relieves you of all the responsibility of New Testament order; you have no more burden and responsibility about that than a tree has in producing leaves and fruit. No tree ever spends hours and hours worrying and fretting, 'How can I bring forth some leaves? how can I develop my fruit?' It just lives - it yields to the life process; and the rest happens. That was the glorious spontaneity of New Testament churches - they just came about. And the Lord must have them like that - constituted from heaven by the Holy Ghost; not man bringing his form of church and church government, his mould, his conception of things, and saying, 'This is our conception of a Bible church.' No, it is the product of life. As that Spirit of life was allowed to work, things took a certain course and a certain form, and that was the form of Christ. The Holy Spirit took responsibility. "I will build my church", the Lord Jesus had said (Matthew 16:18), and He meant it; and He is found doing it here.

#### THE NATURE OF CHRIST IS UTTER HOLINESS

But remember: Christ, in the innermost expression of what He is, is very holy. "The holy thing which is begotten", said the angel to Mary, "shall be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35, A.R.V.). He "offered himself without blemish unto God" (Hebrews 9:14). He was "... in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15). Christ was and is without sin. He is infinitely holy. The great antagonist of Christ, that unholy one, is always seeking to destroy what is of Christ, by introducing a contradiction, a lie, giving the lie to the holiness of Christ; and that is what happened here.

I do feel that this is a very solemn matter for us all. I have not said this without a very great deal of exercise in my own heart. It is not an easy thing to say. Some of us are not ignorant of Satan's devices. Who has a right to talk about holiness? Who is sufficient in holiness to talk to other people about it? Holiness is what Christ is. Who of us could say we are like that?

#### THE SPIRIT ARRESTED BY CONSCIOUS UNHOLINESS

Unholiness is that which is not consistent with Christ. It is the opposite of what Christ is; it is a contradiction of Christ. The mighty purpose of God, the mighty course of the Spirit of God - all that has come in with this dispensation - can be suddenly brought under arrest, and a tragedy occur, if you or I knowingly dabble with unholiness. "His wife also being privy to it" (Acts 5:2) means that this was conscious. I am not speaking of the unholiness which is ours in general - though we are not going to condone or make light of it. What I am speaking about now is deliberate sin in the very presence of the Holy Spirit. Ananias and Sapphira deliberately planned to give to the Lord only a part of the proceeds of their sale, but to represent it as being the whole. If they had been really in the good of the regime of the Holy Spirit, they would have known the Spirit saying to them: 'That is not right - it is a contradiction of Christ.' And may we not confidently conclude that the Holy Spirit did warn them? Were there not two voices which, though perhaps not audible, yet spoke in them, the one warning from evil, the other suggesting this deceit - the voice of the Spirit and the voice of Satan? They were disposed to listen to the tempter's voice, and Satan 'filled their hearts'. That is the kind of unholiness we are speaking about.

We are in the dispensation of the Spirit. If we are really in the good of this dispensation, that is, if the Holy Spirit is in us, He will tell us - He does tell us. If we will, we can know the mind of the Spirit on all issues of right and wrong. But until we yield to the Spirit, everything is in suspense. The whole life of the Spirit is brought under arrest. The Lord was very positive in laying down the principles for the dispensation. He left us in no doubt as to what His attitude is toward this sort of thing. If He does not act in the same way every time, and if we do not fall down dead, it does not mean that something just as tragic does not take place in us. The Spirit is arrested, and spiritual death comes in, and there is no going on from that time. There is a sense in which, spiritually, we also are 'carried out'.

Yes, this is a solemn matter. Forgive me if I seem to be oppressive, but this matter of holiness is so very pertinent, and so very much bound up with all that we are seeking to see - all the wonderful meaning of the Spirit's being here and of His being able to go right on; life and fullness, growing depth, increasing vitality, ever fuller knowledge, the swallowing up of death in victory. That is to be the spiritual existence of the Church, but that can all be arrested by some unholiness, known to be such and not dealt with before God, repudiated and refused. Whatever that may mean to you in its particular application, remember that it is a very dangerous thing to have an unsettled controversy with the Holy Ghost - dangerous not only for you, but perhaps for many others who will be affected.

#### THE PERIL OF PERSISTING IN UNHOLINESS

Oh, the tragedy of a controversy with the Lord not cleared up! Surely, seeing the setting of a matter like this, we must face the specific things from the standpoint of the great background. You have not an adequate motive for dealing with particular points of outstanding unholiness unless you see this whole matter in its great setting. If it is merely something personal, relating only to us, we may or we may not feel it is worth clearing up. But look! The whole course of God's eternal counsels, coming down our way and gathering us in: the mighty purpose of God to be realised in and through us: the far-reaching range of those purposes of God which would find us as their vehicle and channel: all that God would do of making Himself known to us for the sake of others: all brought under arrest because of that! Yes, a personal ministry, a great ministry which might be very far-reaching, may all be set aside - the Lord, in keeping with His own nature, would have to set it aside - if there were a persistence in something about which He had spoken but which was not dealt with. It is a tremendous background.

The psalmist said: "I know, O Lord, that thy judgments are righteous, and that in faithfulness thou hast afflicted me" (Psalm 119:75). What did he mean? Evidently he had gone through some severe handling by the Lord, and as he looked at what his wrong involved for the Lord's people - how many were affected and how it touched the Lord's honour - he said: 'Only the faithfulness of God lies behind His dealing with me: He has to be faithful to Himself and faithful to me, and not let me off; and He has to be faithful to His own nature, His own righteousness, because so much is bound up with it.' May the Lord show us just what that means, and give us grace. Oh, we need protecting, we need safeguarding in this matter of a holy walk with God; we need to clear up every controversy with Him because there is so much bound up with it.

We see that those that dwelt in Jerusalem, and their rulers and those whom they represented, would not clear up the controversy which God had with them, and they were set aside, and another nation bringing forth the fruits of the Kingdom was brought in. What a loss! And do you think that the Lord will deal with us differently? It may not be our salvation that will go, but surely our vocation is of some consequence! The Lord give us grace!

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