

The Earthly Life of the Lord Jesus

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon explores the profound significance of the earthly life of Jesus, emphasizing His unique nature and commitment to the will of the Father.

Scripture: Isaiah 53:8, Matthew 16:22-23, Matthew 17:24-27, Mark 1:11, Luke 24:25, John 14:12-20, Acts 8:33, Romans 2:29

Topics: "The Humanity of Christ", "Commitment to God's Will"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks explores the significance of the earthly life of Jesus, emphasizing that His time on earth was not merely to demonstrate His goodness or teachings, but to reveal a different order of humanity. He highlights that Jesus lived a life utterly committed to the will of the Father, showcasing a unique separation from the self-principle that governs ordinary human existence. Sparks argues that Jesus' life serves as a model for what humanity could be when aligned with God's intentions, demonstrating both the reality of His humanity and the necessity of faith. The sermon underscores that Jesus' miracles were not meant to change hearts but to testify to His divine identity, and that true transformation comes from Christ living within us. Ultimately, the message calls believers to embrace a life that reflects the 'otherness' of Christ, moving beyond mere human expectations.

Transcript

When we ask the question: Why the earthly life of the Lord Jesus?--it is clear that that question implies and contains within itself other questions. For instance: Why was it necessary for Him to be here for something over thirty-three years? Again: Why was it necessary for by far the greater part of that time to be spent in private, and, so far as we are concerned, in secret? We shall try to answer these, and other, subsidiary questions, to some extent at least, as we go on.

Much has been made of the earthly life of Christ--usually for the purpose of showing that there was such a Person as Jesus of Nazareth, and what a good Person He was, and how much greater He was as a teacher than other teachers; or at most to show that He was more than just a man. There may be other purposes for writing books on the life of Jesus, but these usually comprehend the object. Of course, seeing that Jesus has become a great historical world figure, it is interesting to know where He was born, where and how He was brought up, where He went about in the country, what He taught, the miracles that He performed, and so on. All this has provided material for a great deal of discussion and controversy. The miracles have provided much food for the psychologists, and His teaching for the theologians and the

doctrinaires. But when you have said all that you can say and written all that you can write on those matters, you may not have advanced much beyond the human story. The human story, as such, appeals very much to the emotion, to the imagination, but it does not change character. However fascinating, impressive and moving it may be, if you just leave it there you have stopped short of the real meaning of the earthly life of the Lord Jesus.

The earthly life of our Lord was not intended for those purposes. The record of His life was not intended merely to provide us with data and information and interesting matter about a certain man--however great and wonderful--who lived so long ago, in such-and-such a part of the world, and said and did such-and-such. He did not come for that. He was not here for thirty years and a little more for that purpose at all. His life was intended to show--not merely that He was in many respects different from other men, but that He was of a different order of mankind from all the rest, the best included. Until you have clearly recognized that, you have not found the key to the earthly life of the Lord Jesus. He met some of the best types of men of His day, but between Him and them there was a great gulf fixed--there was no passing from the one side to the other.

A Different Order Of Mankind

Jesus was a mystery. He was not just mysterious --He was a mystery. He was not just misunderstood. So many have said about Him, 'He was an altogether misunderstood Man.' No, He was not just misunderstood --He was un-understood, and that is very different. Jesus did not conform to any of the principles and methods upon which this world is run. He did not do what He was expected to do, either by the world or by His friends. Often He put that expectation back: He did not instantly fulfil it because He was asked to, or because it was expected of Him. He put a gap between the expectation and whatever He did. And into that gap you must place this uniqueness that there was about Him, as an order of Man--His 'otherness' from other men. If you try to fit Him in, try to make Him a part of the established human order, try to show how He did this and did that, in a kindly way, just because He was so kind, you have altogether missed the point.

Why, for instance, when that embarrassing situation arose at the marriage in Cana of Galilee, and it was presented to Him as His opportunity, did He put it back with something that sounded very much like a rebuff? So far as the expectation of people was concerned, nothing might ever have happened--but for something else that belonged to another realm altogether. And we find the same kind of thing repeated in other connections. He did not do what people expected Him to do--He very often did what they never expected Him to do. He did the unexpected--took people, not only completely by surprise, but right out of their depth. They just could not follow Him in some of the things that He did. He did not go where people expected Him to go, and when, and so conform to their order and programme. And He certainly did not say what He was expected to say--far from it. On the contrary, He said many things that He was not expected to say--difficult things, shocking things, offending things.

Now, Jesus was not just being different, being awkward, being singular. There are people who behave like that, but on entirely different grounds. They are merely trying to be singular, exceptional, unusual, to do the unexpected, to be awkward. I knew a Christian man, some years ago, who had gained a great name in this world, and who, by reason of the tremendous amount that had been made of him, had developed an ultra-self-consciousness. On one occasion I was having a talk with him in the garden, and after a little time I suggested that we should come into the house. I took him by the arm to walk up with him, and he instantly drew himself up stiff, stuck his heels in and absolutely refused to budge! 'Well!' I thought, 'What is

this?' I had to wait a minute or two--evidently until he had satisfied himself that it was right to move--and then he relaxed and we walked up together--but not arm-in-arm! I had learnt my lesson. I came to know that he had adopted a manner on this: that he was never going to allow himself to be influenced, or affected, or led, or in any way moved, by another human being. He had come to such an 'ultra' place that he would not even walk arm-in-arm with a brother Christian unless the Lord told him to! Ultimately, of course, it developed into quite a serious complex. But you see what I mean. It is possible to act like that on an altogether false basis.

Jesus was not like that. He may have seemed to behave like that at times, but it was not on that basis. We need to be very clear about this--this strange, this unknown way with Him, which often perplexed and mystified, sometimes disappointed, and sometimes even annoyed and angered. But these are facts; these are very clearly recognizable features of the earthly life of the Lord Jesus. They were not of the order of which I have spoken--an ultra-self-consciousness, a deliberate standing apart, trying to be different from others, wearing a strait jacket, unbending, unyielding. There was nothing of that about Him. We have got to explain it, for there is no mistaking it. There He is--an unknown Man.

The Negative Side: 'Circumcised In Heart'

Here then, was a Man--with a capital 'M'--living a human life on a basis different from that of every other man. There was a negative and a positive aspect of that fact. The negative aspect was this: He was, if I may bring in the expression here, 'circumcised in heart'. That is, He was utterly separated from the self-principle in every way, in His mind, heart and will. He would not use His mind, or think His thoughts, or arrive at His judgments, on the basis of any self-principle whatsoever. Nor had self any place in His feelings or His will. Here is a Man Who has a soul--a mind, a heart and a will-- constituting Him a true human being, but in whose soul the self-principle has been put completely aside.

You cannot make Him do anything along the line of ordinary human reasoning, however right or good it may seem to be. 'They have no wine--therefore...' An argument comes in, a reasoning. 'Therefore' ...this and that and some other thing, constituting a very good case for His intervening and doing something. It could be argued from almost every standpoint as being a thing that He should do: from the standpoint of human kindness, from the standpoint of the vindication of His mission, the establishment of His Divine Person. Yes, you can argue it from any and every standpoint, but He is not moving on a mind that is influenced by any kind of argument. The only consideration with Him is: Does My Father will it? and does My Father will it now? and does My Father will it in this way? Those are the things that influence His mind and His heart and His will--His soul. Until He is sure about that, nothing on this earth or in this world, no argument or appeal or case, will get Him to move. For He is doing something, and we are going to see presently what it is that He is doing.

I have said He was utterly 'circumcised in heart'. That is a biblical phrase (see Rom. 2:29). We need to understand the meaning of it. It means that in the heart there has taken place an absolute severance between two things. If you like, you can substitute 'soul' for 'heart'; it is the inner man. Something had been done in Him inwardly, and He kept steadfastly to that ground to the end. It was upon that ground, in one form or another, that the fiercest battles in His life were fought. Sometimes the assault came through an innermost friend and disciple: "Be it far from Thee, Lord: this shall never be unto Thee." "Get thee behind Me, Satan: thou mindest... the things of men" (Matt. 16:22-23). 'Your outlook is that of men--merely on the level of men. I do not belong to that realm of men in which you move. Other men may listen to your argument, be influenced, persuaded; but as for Myself--no!' And so it is, right to the end: He steadfastly

held to that ground--the ground of what we will content ourselves by calling the ground of inward heart circumcision.

That, as I have said, was the focal point of Satan's persistent endeavour: reason, argument, as to why He should, or should not, do certain things. It is a matter of argument, sometimes the argument of absolute necessity. 'Your body demands bread or you will die. Necessity requires that you turn these stones into bread.' So say men, but not the Divine Son of God, not the Son of Man. Jesus repudiated that argument absolutely.

Yes, Satan's focal point of every attack was just there--to try to get Him to do, to act, to move, to decide, according to human standards, to be influenced by the ordinary dictates of human life as we know it; and He refused. That being the focal point of all satanic attacks and efforts, that was the realm of His absolute victory over Satan and the world. "The prince of this world cometh: and he hath nothing in Me" (John 14:30). What was he looking for?--the self-principle. If only he could get that moving, if only he could stir that into action, through mind, heart or will, the same thing would happen with the last Adam as happened with the first, and the Kingdom would go again into the hands of the Devil. But he has met a different kind of Man, Who is not coming out to him on that ground at all. Jesus did not just say, 'The Devil is coming to Me...' , 'Satan is coming to Me...' ; He said: "The prince of this world cometh"--implying the whole principle of this world, as Satan's Kingdom; the self-principle of the prince of this world. But--"he hath nothing in Me."

The Positive Side: Committed To The Will Of The Father

That, then, is the negative side of His life. The positive aspect was that He was so utterly committed to the will of His Father. He was not only refusing, resisting, repressing, suppressing, putting away. The motive of it all was His absolute committal to the will of the Father. The will of the Father was the dominant thing, the most positive reality in His life, from beginning to end. And the will of the Father came down to every detail in the most meticulous way. This was established in His whole life on the earth.

It was established first in the thirty years of what we call His private life. Those thirty years were also divided into two. You notice that division in the Gospel by Luke, chapter 2. First, from His dedication in the Temple until He reached the age of twelve years: this is what is said over this section: "And the child grew, and waxed strong, becoming full of wisdom: and the grace of God was upon Him" (v. 40). Then from the age of twelve onwards: "And Jesus advanced in wisdom and stature, and in grace with God and men" (v. 52). We will not now stop to analyze that. It is subject to an analysis which is very profitable, if you care to make it. You see the realms in which this progress was made--physical, mental and spiritual; and over all the verdict is: the grace of God. The grace of God, the Divine approval, Divine satisfaction, was over His life. He was growing up before the Lord as one well-pleasing. Why? Right at the very heart: "Wist ye not that I must be about My Father's business?"--or, if you like the alternative translation, "that I must be in My Father's house?" (v. 49). Whatever that meant, it certainly meant a Father-consciousness above the ordinary, natural relationship. Note that it is set right in the midst of something that caused a good deal of heart-burning and perplexity to his parents after the flesh.

Yes, there was an utter committal to the will of His Father, and it was established for thirty years in the ordinary, common way of life. I think that is a tremendous thing. Why were there thirty years in silence and in secret so far as we are concerned? We have so little light upon it. Why? Just for that same reason. If you want the explanation, go back to the Old Testament. You remember that the Levites commenced their

service at the age of thirty years. Luke tells us about Jesus beginning His ministry: "Jesus... when He began... was about thirty years of age..." (Luke 3:23). The Lord Jesus was in type a Levite, although He came of the tribe of Judah. (Compare Heb. 7:13-14). But the official entry of a Levite into his ministry at the age of thirty was never willy-nilly. There was a history lying behind this. The Levite history, the Levite life, the Levite behaviour lay behind it. And, although we have nothing that makes this quite clear to us, perhaps because there was never any occasion for it, I venture to say that, if any young man of the tribe of Levi in that old dispensation had been living a profligate life, he would never have become an officiating Levite upon reaching the age of thirty years. No, the seal had to be set upon those thirty years, that the man had walked before God. And the same principle was brought to bear in the life of Jesus: God tested Him, proved Him, in the ordinary ways of life.

That ought to be taken by us very seriously, as a principle of God's approval. You may be longing to get out into ministry: God may be longing for you to be fit to be brought out into ministry! In all the ordinary ways of life you are going through it, you are being tested; the eye of God is upon you. Remember that when Jesus, at thirty years of age, came to the Jordan, Heaven was opened and a voice said: "In Thee I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). I think that covered the thirty years: it spoke of the grace of God in thirty years of ordinary life, and made it possible for Him to take up His ministry. Perhaps we are not so right in saying 'ordinary life', seeing how the Devil tried to get Him right at the beginning (Matt. 2:13-18).

But, whatever the thirty years represented, there is no question that the three-and-a-half years public ministry ratified, through intense fires, the fact that He was committed without any reservation to the will of His Father. Those three-and-a-half years were a period of the intensest fires, to make Him deviate a little bit, in personal, self-consideration, from doing His Father's will. By every bribe of 'the kingdoms of this world and the glory thereof', and by every threat of the ignominy of the Cross, Satan sought to bring about this deviation from the will of God. Jesus fought it through to the end.

The Reality Of His Humanity

Why the earthly life? First of all, to establish the reality of His humanity. You see, in the old dispensation there had been many Divine appearances in human form. No one dare be dogmatic on this matter, but it may well have been that the very Son of God Himself was in some of those so-called 'theophanies'. God came in human form, so that those visited first spoke of them as men, or a man, and then woke up to the realization: 'I have seen God--God was here!' But this earthly life of thirty-three years was no theophany: this was real humanity. This was not a transient guise, a passing form, just a visitation. This was a Man, true humanity, on this earth for over thirty-three years. This was not an angelic visitor. It was a Man. And I think this is one reason or explanation, amongst others, why at His entry into the world He was born as a babe and started from the beginning. He did not arrive as a visitant in full maturity; He began right at the beginning, coming in--although with a difference--yet by the same door as other men, and living here, through infancy, childhood and youth, into Manhood, accepting a life on the basis of absolute dependence on God as other men.

If you think, you will see that there is so much that bears this out. Why must He in infancy be hurried away by Joseph and Mary, out of the country, because His life is sought after? Why does not Heaven come in and assert itself for His absolute protection in miraculous ways, in order to preserve Him and to meet those forces that were against Him? Whereas He had to be taken and run away with, be got out of the way, like any other child! The fact is that He is living our life, He is subject to our experiences. There may be miraculous elements working behind, but on the face of things He is hungry, He is thirsty, He is tired,

He is pursued and sought after--He is 'going through it', in the same way as you and I. He is living a human life. He has voluntarily accepted the basis of absolute dependence upon His Father. And the Father is not performing a series of miracles--although in truth the whole thing is a miracle.

A Life Of Faith

For this reason, like other men, He has got to overcome by the principle of faith. He has no other life, in principle, than you and I have: it is the life of faith. Faith had to be exercised for Him before He could exercise it for Himself. I have no doubt that Joseph and Mary had considerable exercise about that matter. They had to look it squarely in the face, and either say, 'Well, we can trust God to look after Him: we will not do anything, we will just trust God'; or else say, 'We will go, and trust God'. In either case, it was faith--faith for Him. And then the time came for Him to exercise faith for Himself, and everything for Him had to be on the basis of faith, as much as it has for you and for me.

Are you thinking: 'What about His deity? What about His miraculous powers of knowledge and action? Surely He knew in a supernatural way; He exercised powers quite supernatural. That is not humanity!' Let us get this very definitely cleared up in our minds. It does not contradict anything that I have said. Note: Jesus never used His miraculous powers of Deity for Himself. There is only one instance which it might be thought could be set over against that statement: the occasion when He had no money to pay His taxes, and sent Peter down to the sea-shore, and there was a fish with a coin in its mouth (Matt. 17:24-27). You might say, 'It would be very nice to have that power to pay our rates!' Ah, but be careful--it is not quite as clear as that. It does not really contradict what I have said. He never used supernatural, Godhead powers for Himself, and they never took Him off the ground of dependence upon God and the basis of faith. Note that even in that one instance there was no creative action. It was superior intelligence. There was a fish, and that fish had a coin, and somehow He knew it was there.

Unbelief Untouched By Miracles

But let us pursue that. Take the miracles. The miracles related, on the one side, to His Deity: but, even so, they did not have a character-changing effect upon the people who saw them or participated in them. They were but for a testimony to Who He was. Do you get the significance of that? With all His miracles, in the end the principle of unbelief has not been rooted out of a single individual! That is the tragedy of it all. That is a tremendous argument. Though they saw all that He did, the deep-rooted unbelief was untouched. The amazing thing--even with the disciples themselves--was that they were still capable of deep-seated unbelief. "O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe...!" (Luke 24:25). "He upbraided them with their unbelief..." (Mark 16:14). With all that they saw, it did not touch character, it did not touch their nature.

It was, therefore, given but for a testimony--a testimony as to Who He was. That is one side. For, you see, there are two sides to this matter. There is the side of His Deity, as John sums up everything: "These [things] are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in His name" (John 20:31). It was for a testimony to Who He was essentially. But withal, it did not have such an effect upon their natures that because of these things they got rid of unbelief. Yes--for a moment they may have believed on Him; but that is something less than having unbelief deeply and radically dealt with. The miracles did not do that, and Jesus did not expect that they would. He made it perfectly clear that He was not building upon His miracles any hope in that direction. He was still dependent upon the Father for the real effect.

And here let me say, in parenthesis--it is something to think about--that it is not the things that He does for us, but the life of the Son of Man, in all its mighty potency, its power, its principle, in us, that makes the difference. He might heal your body of a chronic disease, of something that is most certainly going to prove fatal in the ordinary way, but that does not necessarily mean that the deep-seated unbelief of your heart will be dealt with. After a few years you might argue or explain that away psychologically, or in some other way, and lose the real impact of it. No, those things done for us, in any realm, even though they might seem miracles, do not touch our real nature. Make no mistake: signs and wonders are not the ultimate argument--they are not. The ultimate argument is the change of our very being, deep-seated and deep-rooted, and anything that does not do that has failed of the ultimate purpose of His coming. It is not what He would do for us, miraculously, by outward things: it is what He Himself is in us, as another kind of Person. That is what matters. It is "Christ in you, the hope of glory"; not Christ working miracles for you.

The Superior Powers Of Man As God Intended Him

But then, there is something yet more to be said. He did have superior powers for doing and for knowing. While I am not for a moment suggesting that that had nothing to do with His Deity, His Divine Nature, it might very well be that that superior--what we might call supernatural--power and intelligence were, if I may put it this way, the 'normal' of the kind of being that Jesus is, as Man. If, without any question of participation in Deity, a man or men can be brought into such a relationship with God as that Which He had, they, too, might have that superior intelligence, and might know a great deal more than the ordinary person knows of what is taking place in the world around. It would not be just through psychic means, but by the very intuition of a spirit link with God. I venture to suggest that--putting aside all that is psychical--such power is not absolutely unknown to Christian men and women. Peter raised the dead; the Apostles healed the sick, performed miracles. Were they God? No, but by the Spirit of Jesus Christ they were brought into such a relationship with Him as to have His powers delegated to them. "Greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto the Father" (John 14:12).

There is a deep significance in a word that He uttered, as recorded for us in John 5:26-27. It is perhaps far too deep for our understanding, and I do not venture into those depths. "The Father... gave... to the Son... authority to execute judgment, because He is the Son of Man." Not because He is the Son of God--"because He is the Son of Man". It opens a very big field of enquiry, and we will not enter it; but my point is this: that, Deity apart--I am not arguing for a moment against the Deity of Christ in knowledge or power, supernatural ability-- may it not be that a humanity so related to and so indwelt by God, according to His original mind, should have these powers which we now call 'super-natural'? It only means 'of another order of intelligence', of knowledge, of ability to do. It means that man is lifted on to another level of ability and understanding, above the ordinary level of man as we know him. Is this not true of the gifts of the Holy Spirit given to the Church?

Why, then, the earthly life? To set forth the kind of humanity that God wants, to demonstrate through a human life what man would be if God had him after His own heart. I believe that is the answer. And if it was but thirty-three-and-a-half years, what does that say? Coming over the centuries I hear the prophet's voice saying: "He was cut off out of the land of the living" (Isa. 53:8); "His life is taken from the earth" (Acts 8:33). His life was cut off in mid-manhood. Men did not let Him finish it. Men took action that this should not go on. Men brought it to--yes, from one standpoint--an untimely end. Ah, Satan will not have this kind of man here longer than he can help.

But this kind of man can only be completed on the other side. We anticipate our 'octave' when we just hint that He has not left His manhood, He has not left His humanity; He abides there, on the other side, as Man. But He has done here all that was needed. He has demonstrated what man would be if God had Him according to His mind. And He has taken action that the rest of the prophecy shall be fulfilled: "He shall see His seed, He shall prolong His days" (Isa. 53:10). He was cut off, but He shall prolong His days: the days of His humanity are prolonged in His Church. That is what we are called to. By painfully slow processes, owing to the infirmity of our flesh, He is working to make us men and women after His own kind. And the heart of it all is: the complete severance from the principle of the self-life.

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