

# The Eternal Purpose of God

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*The sermon explores the eternal purpose of God, which is to fill all things with His Son, and to bring the church to its full potential as the body of Christ.*

**Scripture:** Ephesians 1:4-5, Ephesians 1:11, Ephesians 1:22

**Topics:** "The Church as the Body of Christ", "Eternal Purpose of God"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the eternal purpose of God as revealed in Ephesians, focusing on the church as the body of Christ, which is called to fulfill God's sovereign will. He discusses the significance of God's will, purpose, and the means by which the church is to realize its calling, highlighting the importance of understanding our identity in Christ. Sparks illustrates this with the story of Esther, drawing parallels between her role and the church's mission to embody Christ's fullness. He concludes by stressing the obligation of believers to live in a manner worthy of their calling, reflecting Christ's love and humility in all relationships.

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## Transcript

"He that descended is the same also that ascended far above all the heavens that he might fill all things" (Ephesians 4:10).

"And he put all things in subjection under his feet, and gave him to be head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all" (Ephesians 1:22,23).

"That he might fill all things... his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all".

We are going, as the Lord enables us, to consider those two statements along four lines: firstly, the purpose which they indicate; secondly, the means by which the purpose has its realisation and fulfilment; thirdly, the method by which the means will fulfil its vocation; and fourthly, the obligation that rests upon those concerned.

### The Purpose

We come to these complementary words that we have read, and beginning with the purpose that is indicated. You have this letter to the Ephesians before you -- so called "to the Ephesians", but you can just cross that right out, because it was not in the original letter at all. It was a circular letter. Ephesus may have been the first place, though we don't know.

When we take up this letter, this mighty document, we find that we are, as we read through it, moving in the realm of sovereign purpose. That is an unmistakable characteristic of the letter and its language. There are three phrases, or words, which constantly recur in this letter, and they indicate that when we come here we are in the presence of something very positive and very definite as to purpose.

The first phrase is "His will", and you must look upon that not just as something willing, but as an object. It is a very definite thing. This will of God is something very concrete. You can look at the letter and move with me in it in these connections: "Having foreordained us unto adoption as sons through Jesus Christ unto himself, according to the good pleasure of his will" (Ephesians 1:5); "Having made known unto us the mystery of his will" (Ephesians 1:9); "In whom also we were made a heritage, having been foreordained according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his will" (Ephesians 1:11). All those come so quickly at the beginning of this letter, laying the foundation for all that is to follow, and each phrase carries its own significance. Surely they do impress us with this fact: that we are here presented with something tremendous -- "the good pleasure of his will"; "the counsel of his will", and so on.

Then we turn to Ephesians 5:17: "Wherefore be ye not foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is". May I say again that we, of course, daily and continually ask that we might know the Lord's will, but in so doing we are thinking in relation to many details of our lives. We want to know the Lord's will as to whether we should go here or not go here, do this or not do this, and so on. We say that we want to know the will of the Lord and we go to the Lord about it and ask Him to show us His will. That is specific and particular in its application. It is quite right, but it is not what the apostle is talking about here. We must understand that this letter comprehends the church. Individual lives come into that, but it is the church that is in view and does that will -- write it with a capital "W" if you like. That is behind everything here.

Then there is that word "purpose". As you know that is characteristic of this letter. We have just read the first occurrence of it: "In whom also we were made a heritage, having been foreordained according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his will" (Ephesians 1:11); "According to the eternal purpose (the margin says 'the purpose of the ages') which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Ephesians 3:11).

And if we want a third emphasis we come to this word "foreordained". "Having foreordained us unto adoption as sons through Jesus Christ unto himself, according to the good pleasure of his will" (Ephesians 1:5); "In whom also we were made a heritage, having been foreordained according to the purpose of him..." (Ephesians 1:11).

His will -- big will: His purpose of the ages: foreordained accordingly.

So, if this all refers to the church -- and we are that -- then we certainly are moving in the realm of tremendous sovereign purpose, something laid down, fixed, irrevocable, unalterable, and laid down by God before the foundation of the world.

One thing from which we and all the Lord's people -- and we might say further all men -- need to be delivered is this sense, this growing sense, this intensifying sense in the universe of futility, meaninglessness. There is a growing fatalism in men's hearts because they cannot explain. They cannot get the meaning -- and fatalism is a most soul-destroying thing. It just says, "Well, if it is to be, it will be. If it is not to be, it will not be, and that is all there is to it. You had just better give it up; take your hands off. It is going to be and you cannot alter it. It will happen", and so on. That is the very heart of weakness, of looseness of life, of uncertainty, indefiniteness, of insecurity, of utter aimlessness. It takes every sense of

purpose and meaning out of existence. And that is a growing thing. Why is it that over this world today there is a wave of suicides as has never been known in its civilised history before? We don't dwell upon that, and you may not be acquainted with it. Some of you from the continent know about it, however, especially in northern Europe, where it is just like a terrible wave. It is growing, and it is because of this very thing, this feeling of fate and fate being against one. A hopeless impotence in the presence of forces with which men cannot cope and which they cannot explain. This fatalism, is the most disintegrating thing in anyone's life, or in any society. There is no cohesiveness about this, no holding together -- and that goes right to the heart of this letter... "In whom each several building, fitly framed together" (Ephesians 2:21). The answer is in Him. We will leave that for the moment.

In this letter for Christians, for the church, we are right in the presence of something which is so much the opposite of all that, such a contradiction to all that: His will, concrete, divine, positive, settled, established from all eternity, which cannot be defeated, or deflected, or in any way frustrated in its full and final realisation. It is fixed and His purpose stands, and according to it you and I, and all who are in this body of Christ, are foreordained. That is fairly solid ground! And is it not true that the greatest need is to be on solid ground in days such as these?

So, over against all this state of things, which we have only touched upon so lightly, is God's fixed and established purpose -- something that God has fixed and established and in relation to which it says here: "He chose us in him before the foundation of the world" (Ephesians 1:4).

The purpose, then, begins with God's Son. The thing, which God has settled in His unalterable, unchangeable, irrevocable will is that His Son, shall ultimately fill all things. This is the Bible, this is the Word of God, and, of course, we are confronted with whether we believe the Scriptures when we read things like that. You wonder, perhaps, why such a thing is said, because you all do believe the Scriptures. I venture to say, in the awful upheavals and shakings of the end times the faith of the most devout believer will be shaken as to the Scriptures, as to the Word of God. Forgive me if that sounds a wrong thing to say. However, whether you can endorse it by your own experience, or not, there is a tremendous shaking going on amongst Christians today as to whether the Bible can really be relied upon.

Here, then, is the statement -- sheer, definite, positive, because it comes right from God Himself -- that He has in His eternal counsel settled it, with full knowledge of all that would rise against it, with full knowledge of all history of this world and of the work of evil and seeming contradictions, that "In the end My Son shall fill all things".

But He has alongside of that, just as definitely, positively, categorically and finally decided and determined that a certain body, a certain elect body of people are to be a medium, vessel, channel, instrument for the fulfilment of that determined purpose concerning His Son. That elect body is known to us by various names, but in general "the church". Here in Ephesians it is "the church, which is his body" -- an elect body.

#### The Means of its Realisation and Fulfilment

That leads us, then, to the second thing -- the means: the church, the elect body of Christ. God has foreseen this body and chosen this body before the world was in Christ: it is set down here in the Scriptures as a fact, a definite fact. And you know that God's facts are very awkward things and very stubborn things. If you come up against God's facts that is an end of all argument. And here is the fact. God has done this. It is stated to be so in the Scriptures of truth. There is the fact.

But then, God has not only fixed it from eternity. He has given the revelation of it in time. The Holy Spirit has come from God, from heaven, for the specific purpose of making known this very thing, first giving the revelation of it and then, by wonderfully sovereign means, raising up and choosing vessels, preserving vessels, anointing vessels, and enabling vessels, through untold opposition and adversity and suffering, to fulfil this ministry of bringing to the people of God the knowledge of this very thing. The revelation has come.

We have not measured, and probably in time we shall never be able to measure, all the tremendous triumph that lay in this one instance of Paul at last being able to give this revelation in fulness. That man ought to have been dead a dozen, a hundred times! If the devil could have done it he would have been. That man ought to have been absolutely neutralised again and again, not only by the evil powers, but also by men. His battles were tremendous battles. Everywhere his steps were dogged, his path was followed. This man was marked down for destruction, and for the entire and final discrediting of himself and his ministry. But we have it on record in this fulness, as we saw in the last chapter. It looks like a little pamphlet, doesn't it, this letter to the Ephesians? What does it amount to on paper? Yet it is the greatest document that has ever entered into this creation! It is the embodiment of the exceeding greatness of God's power in a man's life for a ministry, and for the revelation of this eternal purpose of God for the church.

And so God has sovereignly done this thing to give it to the church, to make it known that there is an elect body in existence in the eternal counsels of God, and that that elect body is the object of this dispensation -- particularly to be called out of the nations.

All the difficulties and problems, of course, arise there, theologically, for God does not say who belongs to this elect. He has never yet said to you and me directly and personally: "Look here! I chose you. You belong to the elect." He does not do that. This problem exists everywhere amongst people -- "I wonder if I am one of the foreordained, predestinated. I have reason to question whether I belong to that." You know all the difficulty because God has not just said to individuals directly, in this way, that they are of the elect, but God works on this line.

We may touch this more intimately presently, but you are familiar with this sort of thing: that when the Lord brings to many people the light and the revelation and the truth that is here, when it comes their way, or when they come its way by the sovereignty of God, you watch and you see, either literally or metaphorically, their mouths opening and their eyes open wide -- "This is what I have been wanting. I did not know what it was, but I have had a great longing for something, and this is it. This just answers to something in me which has prepared me for this. Something has been going on. Even in my unconverted state I knew that there was something more in life than I had. I was dissatisfied and I knew it. I went here and I went there, and I went somewhere else to find it, but could not find it. But this is it!" Isn't that true? Well, that is our experience, our own experience and the experience of many. God just works, you see. And when the revelation, the light comes, there has been a preparation, perhaps an unconscious preparation very largely -- that is, an unenlightened preparation, in darkness, in distance, far away from God, and yet, something drawing, some hunger, longing -- and then the content, and it is just as though the hand goes into the glove: they fit! "This is it!" That is how the sovereignty works in relation to the elect. And if you have not seen it in every case you have met yet, don't give it up. I mean, you may think of people who are not yet like that. They are showing no signs of that. Ah, but the end is not yet. The time may come when through deep experiences, through suffering history, their hearts will be prepared and touched and you will find they respond. That is all we need say about this matter of election, or ordination.

God works accordingly.

I want to put this word in here. It is to remind you and point out to you that in this letter that we have before us the Gospel and the eternal purpose are united. That is a very important thing to remember. Some people, I am afraid, have a mentality: "Well, the Gospel, the simple Gospel, is one thing. All this is another." Indeed, we have known very strong reactions, people saying: "All right, you can have all your deep teaching, if you like. You can have all that sort of thing, if it appeals. We are satisfied with the simple Gospel." The Lord have mercy upon such people! Here you have the profoundest document, as I have said, that has ever been given from God to man, and it has, not as two different and separate things but as joined right in, the Gospel and the eternal purpose.

Look at the word "Gospel" in this. Paul links it in himself. This ministry that was given to him, this full, rich, profound ministry he calls "his Gospel". He was chosen for this Gospel. Oh, if only our gospel were richer and fuller we would have much better results. Don't divide these things! Remember, this is the Gospel. What is it? It is the good news. "He chose us in him before the foundation of the world." There is an imperative need of linking the purpose with salvation in our preaching, and not leaving salvation as something in itself, something smaller than it really is, but linking purpose with salvation always. And I don't think we shall get very far with the kind of Christians that will be until we have attended to that weakness and remedied it, and brought in relation to salvation the full purpose of God in salvation.

#### The Method By Which the Means Will Fulfil its Vocation

We come next, then, thirdly, to the method. The purpose... the means, the church, the elect... then the method.

Let us remind ourselves again that the apostle is particularly occupied with the church in this letter. It runs throughout, and then it emerges in one sublime definition, which he calls: "This mystery" (Ephesians 5:32). You must look upon familiar words to us in the light of the whole of the letter, the whole revelation.

Reading: "Wives, be in subjection unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, being himself the saviour of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives also be to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself up for it; that he might sanctify it, having cleansed it by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. Even so ought husbands also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his own wife loveth himself: for no man ever hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as Christ also the church; because we are members of his body. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is great: but I speak in regard of Christ and of the church." (Ephesians 5:22-32).

Now, we do not know all that was in the mental background of the apostle. We know that he had a very full and deep and thorough knowledge of the Old Testament, which was his only Bible, and that it was ever with him, either in his full consciousness or in his subconsciousness. We do not know, but the Holy Spirit knew, whether behind what was being written here was an Old Testament story. Whether it was or not, when you come to think about it, it does seem that it is so. The Old Testament story, gathered into one little book... the Book of Esther.

Whether what I am going to say is the right interpretation to put upon that book or not, I am not very concerned about at the moment, because I believe that it does serve as a very good illustration of what we are now considering -- that is, the method by which this means, the church, the body, is to fulfil its eternal vocation of bringing the fulness of Christ into expression.

I suppose you remember the story of Esther. It is not necessary for me to take you through it thoroughly. It opens with a picture of happenings in the great Medo-Persian kingdom and palace. Ahasuerus, in all his glory, power and authority, having a banquet lasting a long time for all the rulers, the princes and the governors of his great domain, from India to Ethiopia. That is no small thing! Gathering all these representatives and having this wonderful time, feasting, revelling and displaying his glory. And then, when that is over, gathering his immediately intimate company of counsellors for seven days of another feast. All this pageantry has been going on, and as it is in its full swing, Ahasuerus gives command to his eunuchs to go and bring in the queen, the Queen Vashti. It is said that she was beautiful, and he wanted to display her beauty to those who were assembled. He made a feast for the purpose.

Vashti refused to go in, to obey the king's command. She stayed away. The king was fiercely angry and appealed to his counsellors: "What does the law say in a case like this?" You know their answer: "Well, you know, it is not only to the king that she has done mischief. All our wives will begin to behave like that if you let her off." Well of course, that is persuasive. The result: the king stripped Vashti of her royal rights and cut her off and set her aside. She was no longer his queen.

There was a vacancy, a vacuum, an emptiness, for how long we do not know, but it must be filled if the king was to have all that he should have as king. And there the story opened concerning Esther, and you are familiar with that. She was there, a captive, an exile, an alien to that kingdom. She was in the king's harem, but exactly how it came to pass, what is the detail, we don't know, but somehow or other the sovereignty of that throne was at work, and Esther was seen, was known, was focussed upon, was chosen, and was marked off for this high position. She filled this vacancy and she was given everything to furnish her, adorn her and make her suitable for that position. She was clothed with royal apparel and enriched with royal gems, and riches. She was called, released, redeemed from her exile, from her captivity and brought in as one of that race, that royal kingdom. We are not told of any marriage ceremony, but undoubtedly there was something by which she had to commit herself to a covenant of loyalty, of devotion, of faithfulness, to be what Vashti had refused to be -- alive only for the king, not for herself.

There are a great many more details. We are not moving on to the great and glorious end of all this in sovereignty for the release and redemption of a race, but it does not require a very great deal of insight to see spiritual meaning in all this. It seems to me to have a double application.

God chose man at the beginning for this very thing. Adam was created for this very thing, and brought into that glorious association with God at the beginning... and then he did this very thing -- not to be for God but for himself, not to be for the glory of God but to retain the glory, as did Vashti, for himself. The result? Repudiated! And the story is written in history, not in the Book of Esther, that the period which followed was for Vashti a reign of vanity. Her life purpose was gone; all the meaning of life was gone. Only imagine what Vashti was thinking and feeling after this as things developed and Esther came into her place! Perhaps remorse, and many other emotions. But the fact is that it began a reign of vanity for her, meaningless -- all the meaning gone out of life. Is not that the human race? In Adam -- called, given, potentially, dominion. And then taking it into his own hands and refusing to hold it for God's glory. Then he himself was set aside and there came this long-drawn-out period of meaninglessness in the human race.

That is one application. But what about Israel? Israel -- chosen, called to the kingdom, and called in the Old Testament the wife of Jehovah. Called to that high position -- and then what? Taking it all to themselves, and not holding it for God.

The great challenge of the coming of God in the flesh into this world had this great issue bound up with it. Will Israel hold everything for God, or will they hold everything for themselves? Well, we know what happened. "No, away with Him. We will not have this man." They were holding everything for their own glory. And then came these long two thousand years of vanity for Israel -- the Vashti cut off and set aside.

It is a sad story, is it not? But when the race in Adam failed, God had His elect somewhere quietly hidden. From eternity He had His bride, there in His eternal knowledge, foreknowledge and counsels. She was there! When Israel failed God in this matter He brought in the church. She was there to take Israel's place, and all the vanity of the latter was reversed in the saints.

Now what does this all mean as an interpretation, if only by way of illustration, of this letter to the Ephesians, so-called? "Chosen in Him" -- that is Esther, the instrument and vessel. When the other fails, the element of sovereignty is at work, bringing in this vessel foreknown, foreseen and foreordained, knowing it, choosing it, and then, blessed be God! calling to Himself His Esther, redeeming from alienation, redeeming from exile and captivity.

That is the story of the church, isn't it? Released from the terrible embargo of the rejected world, of the rejected race. The rejected Gentile, Esther, called. What a word that is in the New Testament -- called! Redeemed!

And here there rushes right in at this point, through the gap which we present, this word "grace". Thirteen times the apostle uses this word in this letter! That we should be "to the praise of the glory of his grace" (Ephesians 1:6). Well, is not that Esther? Who was she? What was she? Where was she? And now look -- in the second place in the kingdom! Adorned with all his glory -- "the glory of His grace".

There is something which to our hearts is still more precious. What had she where she was? Nothing! But out of the royal store there was brought for her everything that she required, but which she did not have, not one fragment of which she had. There was brought to her everything to make her suitable for that most august presence of the most high -- she was clothed suitably, and provided with everything to make her not an offence to the king, but a pleasure. What a story of grace that is! What a lot comes in at that point!

What is this church in nature? Or, to come to ourselves, what are we in nature? Well, if we know anything about ourselves at all we are prepared to say "Anything and everything but suitable for His presence!" No hope, no chance, no possibility whatever of our standing in His presence as we are in ourselves by nature. No, we are exiles, in captivity, alienated and far off. But He brings us in and clothes us "with the garments of salvation... the robe of righteousness" (Isaiah 61:10) and lavishes upon us riches. Have you traced that word through this letter? I would like to give you the passages which occur again and again. "According to the riches of his grace" (Ephesians 1:7). "Unto me", says the apostle, "...was this grace given, to preach unto the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ" (Ephesians 3:8). Esther is brought in, adorned with all for His presence and for His service "that he might present the church to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing" (Ephesians 5:27). That is the end of the story!

What is the method by which the church will fulfil this high vocation? The marriage relationship with the Lord, with all that that means. That is Ephesians five, verses 22 to the end! The marriage relationship... "I

speaking in regard of Christ and of the church" (Ephesians 5:32). Oh, it is more wonderful the more you think about it! Married to the Lord, joined to the Lord by one Spirit. In the natural and the flesh "the twain shall become one flesh" (Ephesians 5:31). But in the spiritual these twain become one spirit joined to the Lord. Married, one flesh, one body, one life. There is no figure in all creation that sets forth oneness, identity in the thought of God more than the marriage relationship when it is according to God's mind. That is how God intends it to be and more or less it is like that in humanity, some more than others, when one does not, cannot live without the other. Sometimes we open our morning paper and look down the list of the departed, where we see two notices -- the woman has gone and within a few days the man has gone, too. That is the ideal. I mean, there is something there, in that. When it is according to heaven -- "I speak in regard of Christ and of the church." I ask you -- can you live without Christ? Listen: He cannot live without you. It is stated here: "The church, which is his body, the fulness of him". Literally that is "the fulfilment of Him". He must have this relationship for His own fulfilment. The marriage relationship -- that is the method.

What a lot we ought to say about it! But our time for the moment has gone and we come to the last thing -- the obligation.

### The Obligation Resting Upon Those Concerned

Well, if this is the truth, if this is God's revelation, if it is that and not some beautiful story, some spiritually or religiously romantic story -- if this is spiritual truth, and not just doctrine or teaching, (God help me and God help you if that is all!), there is an application, surely resting upon Esther, surely resting upon this church. "I... beseech you to walk worthily of the calling wherewith ye were called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love" (Ephesians 4:1,2).

The obligation? If this is more than a beautiful picture, if it is something that really comes to us as God's word today, in this time, it puts us under a big obligation as to our demeanour and our conduct. "Walk worthily... with all lowliness and meekness". That is the demeanour, the sort of people we ought to be, called to such heights, such a calling. Oh, no, there is no room here for conceit, for spiritual pride, no room for us to take the glory to ourselves and hold it to ourselves. That is the way of Vashti. No, "with all lowliness and meekness". God's church and God's people ought to be like that.

And conduct. Here every relationship in this life is lifted by this concept of marriage relationship with the Lord. Husbands, wives; wives, husbands. That must come up on to a higher level, mustn't it, if it is a reflection of Christ and the church. Children, parents; parents, children -- servants, masters; masters, servants. Every relationship is touched by this great concept of what the church is: its high, noble, honourable position, its wonderful dignity as before God. And that dignity ought to come down into our behaviour, our conduct, our relationships. We are talking, not in the court of Ahasuerus, but in a greater, the court of heaven, and we have a word -- it is in the New Testament -- "courtesy". "Be courteous," says Peter (1 Peter 3:8 -- A.V.). That surely is a very low level -- good manners! Proper behaviour! Etiquette! Yes, that comes into this. In the court of heaven there should be good manners amongst those who make up this bride. I fear that we often fail in common courtesy to one another. It is true -- we have failed. Very often there are better manners amongst the people of the world than there are amongst Christians! That is a terrible thing to say, but it is true. Our conduct in every relationship of life must be touched by this high conception, which is not only a dream, a teaching, but is stated as a fact. "I speak in regard of Christ and of the church" -- even as husbands, wives, servants, masters, children, parents, even as Christ, also the church.

It is challenging; it is practical. What are you going to do about this? Are we going to say now "Well, I determine that from this moment, by the grace of God, I will live up to that level of my holy, sublime calling. By the grace of God I will adjust to this. I will do something about it. I will watch my behaviour. I will be careful of my speech. I will keep a guard upon how I react to others." There is an obligation... "I... beseech you to walk worthily of the calling wherewith ye were called."

The Lord help us!

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