

The Fact and Nature of the Heavenly Way

by T. Austin-Sparks

T. Austin-Sparks explores the concept of the heavenly way as a pioneering journey for believers, emphasizing their relationship with heaven and the challenges they face on their pilgrimage of faith.

Scripture: Job 11:7, Psalm 24:1, Ecclesiastes 5:2, Daniel 4:26, Matthew 6:10, Hebrews 11:13-16, Hebrews 12:18-24, Hebrews 13:13, Revelation 21:2

Topics: "Heavenly Pilgrimage", "Spiritual Pioneering"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the concept of being 'Pioneers of the Heavenly Way,' illustrating that true believers are called to live as strangers and pilgrims on earth, seeking a better, heavenly country. He explains that the relationship between heaven and earth is foundational to understanding our spiritual journey, where our education and purpose are rooted in heavenly realities. The sermon highlights the inward transformation that occurs when one is called from heaven, leading to a sense of conflict with worldly values and a longing for the divine. Sparks encourages believers to embrace the cost and challenges of this pioneering path, reminding them that their ultimate destination is a city prepared by God. He concludes by urging the congregation to cultivate a spirit of pilgrimage, always seeking the deeper realities of their faith.

Transcript

"These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things make it manifest that they are seeking after a country of their own. And if indeed they had been mindful of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed of them, to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city" (Hebrews 11:13-16).

Some time before these messages were given, desiring to be quiet and away from many things, I went down into the country with my heart very much to the Lord for His word. In the early hours of the morning it seemed as though the heavens opened and everything became alive: it all opened up wonderfully, and centred in one phrase - 'Pioneers of the Heavenly Way'. That really does sum up the verses that we have just read, and, while we are going to think and perhaps say much about the heavenly way, it is this matter of pioneering the heavenly way that will be our main concern. It is necessary, to begin with, for us to consider to some extent the heavenly way itself, but I repeat that it is this whole tremendous business of

pioneering that way that I believe to be the main concern of the Lord, and hence of ourselves, at this time.

THE EARTH RELATED TO HEAVEN

The Bible begins with the heavens: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" - not 'the earth and the heavens'; the heavens come first. The Bible closes with the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven (Rev. 21:2); and, just as heaven stands at the beginning and at the end, so everything in between, in the Word of God, from the beginning to the end, is from heaven and to heaven. As it is in the natural realm, so it is in the spiritual. The heavens govern the earth and the earthly, and the earthly has to answer to the heavenly. It is the heavens, it is heaven, that is ultimate: everything has to be in the light of heaven, to answer to heaven, to come out from heaven. That is the sum of the Word of God, the whole content of the Scriptures.

This world, this earth, is not unrelated and alone. However important it may be in the Divine scheme of things - and certainly it is an object of great heavenly concern; perhaps the greatest things in the universe have taken place on this earth: God has come here in flesh, has lived here, has given Himself for this world; the great drama of eternal counsels has to do with this earth - nevertheless it is not apart, alone, it is related to heaven, and all its significance is by reason of that relationship. It takes its significance and importance from being related to something greater than itself - to heaven.

The Bible teaches that God is located in heaven. "God is in heaven" (Eccles. 5:2): that is the declaration. It teaches that there is a system, an order, in heaven, which is the true one and which is the ultimate one. In the end, it will be the reproduction of a heavenly order upon this earth which will be the consummation of all the counsels of God. Christ came down from heaven and returned to heaven. The Christian, as a child of God, is born from heaven and has his life centred in heaven, and the life of the child of God will be consummated in heaven. The Church, that masterpiece of God, is of heavenly origin, of heavenly calling, and of heavenly destiny. In all these things, and in many others, "the heavens do rule" (Dan. 4:26). This great factor of heaven governs everything.

CHILDREN OF GOD RELATED TO HEAVEN

As for ourselves, if we are children of God our whole education and history is related to heaven. That is one of the matters we must follow out presently in greater detail; but let it be said, and let it at once be recognised, that our whole history and education as children of God is related to heaven - and by that I do not mean simply that we are going to heaven. We are related to the kingdom of the heavens, by birth, by sustenance and by eternal vocation. All our education, I have said, is related to heaven. All that you and I have to learn is as to how it is done in heaven; as to what the Lord meant when He said, "Thy will be done, as in heaven, so on earth" (Matt. 6:10) - a great comprehensive fragment covering all the education of the child of God, for that prayer begins with "Our Father who art in heaven". For as things are in heaven, so they must be here; but a whole lifetime of education, deep and drastic training, is involved in conformity to heaven.

The Bible of the Christians in New Testament times was the Old Testament. When we read in the New Testament, as we so often do, about the Scriptures - "that the Scriptures might be fulfilled", "as it is written in the Scriptures", and so on - it was the Old Testament that was referred to. The Old Testament was the only Scripture, the only Bible, of the first Christians, the Christians of the first decades. They had not got our New Testament. For them the Old Testament was the Bible, and it was continuously drawn upon, referred to, taken up and used in order to exemplify the spiritual experience of Christians. This letter to the

Hebrews, from which we quoted at the outset, is just that. From beginning to end it is packed with the Old Testament; the Old Testament is being unceasingly used to illustrate and set forth the meaning of the spiritual life of the New Testament Christian.

A PILGRIMAGE RELATED TO HEAVEN

And what we find in the Old Testament is a pilgrimage, all the way through: a pilgrimage in relation to heaven. Let us step right back to the beginning. You see, the Divine intention in creation was that such a harmony should obtain between heaven and earth that God could be here in this world in pleasure, in happiness, in rest, just as much as He could be in His heaven. He made it for His pleasure, He made it for Himself, He made it that He might come and go in perfect satisfaction and rest and joy. The first picture is of God being pleased to come to the world which He had created. He made it, it was His work, and we are told that when He had made it He entered into His rest. His rest was found in being here in His creation.

Ah, but since the tragedy of the fall, heaven and earth have lost their harmony; they are now at variance. This world is in conflict with heaven. Everything here on this earth has been changed. So far as the world is concerned, God has no pleasure in being in it or coming to it. His presence here is in testimony, not in fullness - in testimony that this is His rightful place, in testimony to the fact that "the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof" (Ps. 24:1), in testimony that He made it for His own pleasure. But God is here only in testimony, in token. He must have that testimony, but He is not now here in fullness. In a very real sense and in a very large degree, God is outside of this world, and there is conflict between heaven and the world; and even while there is testimony here, that very testimony is here and not here. It is outside. The very vessel of the testimony of God's presence is something that does not belong here. Here it has no dwelling; here it has no city. It is 'in', but not 'of'. It is a stranger in this world. So it has been since the fall.

Now the whole history of Divinely apprehended instruments for that testimony, whether they be individual or whether they be corporate, is the history of spiritual pioneering in relation to heaven. Have you grasped that? Let me repeat it. The whole history of vessels Divinely chosen and apprehended for the testimony of God, whether they be individual or corporate, is the history of pioneers breaking a way, cleaving a way through, doing something which was new so far as this world was concerned, breaking fresh ground, making fresh discoveries in relation to heaven; pioneers of a heavenly realm. How much history is gathered into a statement like that!

FOR PILGRIMS THE CENTRE OF GRAVITY IS IN HEAVEN

Let us look at one or two of the features of this pioneering vocation. First of all, those who are called from heaven, apprehended by heaven, to serve the heavenly purpose, find that their centre of gravity has been inwardly and spiritually changed and transferred from this world to heaven. Inside there is a deep-seated sense that we do not belong here, that this world is not our resting-place, that this is not our home and this is not our centre of gravity; we are not drawn to it inwardly. Within the spirit of the pioneer there is this sense of conflict with what is here, of being at variance with it and unable to accept it. I repeat: inwardly and spiritually, the centre of gravity has been transferred from this world to heaven. It is an inborn consciousness, and it is the first thing in this heavenly calling, the first effect, the first result of our calling from on high. We are going to come back to that again later on.

And we can test by this. Of course, it is true of the simplest child of God. The first consciousness of one born, truly born, from above, is that the centre of gravity has changed. Somehow or other, inwardly, we have moved from one world to another. Somehow or other, that to which we have hitherto been related by

nature no longer holds us: it is no longer our world. Put it how we will, that is the consciousness, and unless it is so there is something very doubtful about any profession of faith in the Lord Jesus. And this inborn sense of a new centre of gravity has to grow and grow and grow and make it more and more impossible for us to accept this world in any way. Again I say, it is a test of our spiritual progress, of our pilgrimage and our advance in it. But that is elementary after all.

THE HEAVENLY REALM UNKNOWN TO US BY NATURE

Again, that other realm, the consciousness of which has come into our hearts, the gravitation toward which has commenced in our spirits, is an entirely unknown world to us by nature. To nature it is another realm altogether - different, unfamiliar, unexplored. It does not matter how many have gone on before us, it does not matter how many there are who have started on this way and gone a long way in it: for every individual it is an altogether new world and it can only be known by experience. We may derive values from the experience of others, and thank God for all those values, but with all their experiences they cannot get us one step further on that way. For us it is new, utterly new, and strange. We have to learn everything about it from the beginning.

That makes pioneering - what pioneering always is - a lonely way. No one can hand down to us a heritage. We have to obtain our own in that world, strange and unknown as it is; demanding basically a new constitution according to that world, with capacities that are not possessed by nature. No man by searching can find out God (Job 11:7); we have not the capacity. It must be born in us from heaven. We have got to make the discovery for ourselves of everything. We have to discover God for ourselves, in every detail of His willing relationship to the human heart.

Light may come through testimony, light may come through the Scriptures, help may come through counsel, inspiration may come to us from those who have ploughed through and gone ahead, but in the last analysis we have got to possess our own spiritual plot in the heavenly country, subdue it, cultivate it and exploit it. You know that is true; that you are going that way in the spiritual life. You are having to find out for yourself. Oh, how we long for somebody to be able to pick us up and put us through on the good of their experience! The Lord never allows that. If really and truly we are on the heavenly road - if we have not just started and sat down or given up: if we are moving on the heavenly road, we are all pioneers. There will be values in it which others will come into because we have pioneered, but there is a sense in which every one, no matter how far behind, has got to make discoveries for himself, and it is best so. Ultimately, there is nothing second-hand in the spiritual life.

PIONEERING FRAUGHT WITH COST AND CONFLICT

So we come to the third feature of this pioneering. All pioneering is fraught with great cost and suffering, and, this being a spiritual course or way, the cost of this pioneering is mainly inward.

Perplexity; yes, perplexity. I have been reading a translation of a message by our brother Watchman Nee. In it he says, in effect, 'There was a time when I had such a high idea of the Christian life that I thought for a Christian to be perplexed was all wrong; a Christian to be cast down - that is all wrong; a Christian to despair - that must be all wrong; what kind of Christian is that? And when I read Paul saying he was perplexed and in distress and in despair it constituted a real problem for me, in the light of what I had taught myself a Christian ought to be; but I had to see there was nothing wrong with it, after all.' Yes: a Christian, and such a Christian as the Apostle Paul, perplexed, and cast down, and in despair. That is the way of pioneers.

Perplexed. What does perplexity imply? It implies a need for capacity or comprehension in some realm in which at present there is none. There is a realm that is beyond you. It does not mean that you will always be perplexed in the same measure over the same thing. You will grow out of your perplexity on this matter, and you will understand; but there will be to the end perplexity, in some measure, simply because heaven is bigger than this world, vaster than this natural life, and we have to grow and grow. Perplexity is the lot of pioneers.

Weakness. Brother Nee asks, 'A Christian in weakness and confessing to being weak? What kind of a Christian is that?' Paul speaks much about weakness, and about his own weakness - meaning, of course, that there is another kind of strength which is not our own, which has to be discovered; something that we do not know naturally. It is the way of pioneers: to come to a wisdom which is beyond us and which for the time being means perplexity; to a strength which is beyond us and which for the time being means weakness in ourselves. We are learning, that is all. It is the way of the pioneer, but it is costly. The cost is inward, like that, in so many ways.

But while it is inward, it is also outward. This letter to the Hebrews is just full of these two aspects of the pilgrimage. "These all... confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth" (Heb. 11:13). It was a spiritual journey, a transition from the earthly to the heavenly, that the Apostle was writing about. There was an inward aspect. But there was the outward aspect for them, and it is the same for us. The whole trend of nature, if left to itself, is downward. Leave things to themselves, and down they go, in all nature. Is that not true? A beautiful garden will become a wild desolation, a riot and a chaos, in no time, if you take the upward-ordering hand from it. And that is true of us in a spiritual way - gravitation earthward, always wanting to settle down, always wanting to end the conflict and the fight, always wanting to get out of the atmosphere of stress in the spiritual life. The whole history of the Church is one long story of this tendency to settle down on this earth and to become conformed to this world, to find acceptance and popularity here and to eliminate the element of conflict and of pilgrimage. That is the trend and the tendency of everything. Therefore outwardly, as well as inwardly, the pioneering is a costly thing.

You are up against the trend of things religiously. See again this letter to the Hebrews. The trend was backward and downward to the earth, to make of Christianity an earthly religious system, with all its externalities, its forms, its rites, its ritual, its vestments; something here to be seen and to answer to the senses. It was a great pull on these Christians; it made a great appeal to their souls, to their natures, and the letter is written to say, 'Let us leave these things and go on'. We are pilgrims, we are strangers, it is the heavenly that matters - you recall that great paragraph about our coming to the heavenly Jerusalem (chapter 12:18-24).

But it is a costly and a suffering thing to come up against the religious system that has 'settled down' here. It is, I sometimes feel, far more costly than coming up against the naked world itself. The religious system can be more ruthless and cruel and bitter; it can be actuated by all those mean things, contemptible things, prejudices and suspicions, that you will not even find in decent people in the world. It is costly to go on to the heavenlies, it is painful; but it is the way of the pioneer, and it has to be settled that that is how it is. The phrase in this letter is, "Let us therefore go forth unto him without the camp" (Heb. 13:13) - and I leave you to decide what is the camp referred to there; it is not the world. "Unto him without the camp" means ostracism, suspicion.

"These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them and greeted them from afar" - is that not the vision of the pioneer - always seeing and greeting from afar; hailing the day, though it

might be beyond this life's little day; greeting the day of realisation? - "and having confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things make it manifest that they are seeking after a country of their own. And if indeed they had been mindful of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed of them" - God is not ashamed of the people who are on the pilgrimage with Himself to His end; He calls them His own and He is "called their God" - and "he hath prepared for them a city" (Hebrews 11:13-16).

That is a marvellous summary, when you come to think about it. "These all" - what a comprehensive "all"! And covering them all, it says of them that they had seen something - and having seen they could never rest, to their last day and their last breath on this earth. They were still pilgrims, they could never rest, this was in them the call of the unseen. It is something that must come into us from heaven in order to get us to heaven. Have you got it?

Well, as we shall see, that is the key to everything, it explains everything. It is the guarantee - oh, blessed be God for this, would that more of the Lord's people knew it in greater power! - it is the guarantee that all that is in us of longing and of craving and of quest, born of the Spirit of God, is going to be realised.

Are you hungry? Are you longing? Are you dissatisfied? That is itself a prophecy of more to come. Are you contented? Have you settled down? Is your vision short and narrow? Can you just go on here? Can you accept things as they are? Very well, you will be left to it, you will not get very far. God calls Himself the God of those who are pilgrims. He is the God of pilgrims, and, divesting ourselves of all the mentality of a literal pilgrimage - if you like, of a literal heaven, for I do not know where heaven is, but I know that there is a heavenly order of things and that I am being dealt with in relation thereto every day of my life - let us leave out the literal side, and see the spiritual, which is so real; and let us ask the Lord to put this spirit of pilgrimage in us mightily.

You will find as you go on that, whereas at one point in your spiritual life everything was so wonderful and so full that you felt you had reached the end of everything, there will come a time when that will be as nothing, and you look back upon it as mere infancy. Things that you were able to read then and feed upon: you say, 'How was I able to find anything in this at all?' Do not mistake me: there is nothing wrong with that, that is all right for people at that point - but you have gone on, you must have something more. We ought to be growing out of things all the time, going beyond. We ought to be people of the beyond. That is probably the meaning of the word 'Hebrew'. This letter is called the letter to the Hebrews, and it speaks about pilgrims and strangers, and if the word 'Hebrew' means a person from beyond, well, we are people from beyond, our home and our gravitation is beyond. We are pilgrims here, pilgrims of the beyond.

May the Lord make this helpful, and on the one hand move us out of any lethargy or false contentedness, or undue longing to reach an end here, and, on the other, keep our eyes and our hearts with those who have pioneered before, seeing and greeting, and, if needs be, dying, in faith.

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