

The Faith

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon explores 'the faith' as a profound spiritual reality intertwined with conflict and the unique nature of sonship in Christ.

Topics: "Faith", "Spiritual Warfare"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the significance of 'the faith' as a spiritual reality that encompasses both conflict and experience. He explains that true faith is not merely a system of doctrine but a profound spiritual position that invites spiritual warfare, as believers embody a nature that challenges the status quo. The essence of 'the faith' is rooted in the unique sonship of Christ, which brings both privilege and conflict for believers. Sparks urges Christians to recognize that their identity in Christ as sons and daughters carries with it a responsibility to contend for this faith amidst opposition. Ultimately, he reassures that enduring this conflict is part of the journey toward glory and maturity in Christ.

Transcript

"Fight the good fight of the faith, lay hold on the life eternal, whereunto thou wast called, and didst confess the good confession in the sight of many witnesses" (1 Tim. 6:12).

"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim. 4:7).

"Beloved, while I was giving all diligence to write unto you of our common salvation, I was constrained to write unto you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3).

"I know where thou dwellest, even where Satan's throne is; and thou holdest fast my name, and didst not deny my faith, even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwelleth" (Rev. 2:13).

These are four passages out of a considerable number in the New Testament which contain the same phrase. I have jotted down some twenty-seven or twenty-eight of such passages, and there are probably more. The phrase that occurs in them all is this phrase - "the faith". "Fight the good fight of the faith": "I have kept the faith": "Contend earnestly for the faith."

Now, wherever that phrase occurs, you will not have to look far for the element of conflict. You will find that conflict is almost invariably associated with that phrase - "the faith". That is to say, the two things always

go together in the New Testament, and in true spiritual experience - the fight and the faith, or the faith and the fight. "Fight the good fight of the faith": "Contend earnestly for the faith": "I have fought... I have kept the faith." Thus, although it will not always be as precisely stated as that, I repeat, that you will not have to look far in the context for the element of conflict when "the faith" is in view.

Of course, that may not be very surprising. It is the sort of thing you would naturally expect to find when anything like a new faith which might be a rival faith to other faiths was being introduced.

The Faith Not a System of Teaching

But if you look carefully at the matter here in the New Testament, you will find that it is something more than that. The conflict is not occasioned just because another faith which is a rival to existing faiths has been introduced. It is rather in the very nature and essence of this thing that is called "the faith" that the element exists which sets up this terrific conflict. It is something more than just a new religion coming in to challenge and attempt to oust other religions. There is something about this faith which is far more than that, and to grasp and understand what that something more is should be of tremendous help to the Lord's people.

The fact is that the very presence in this world of those who do truly, in a real New Testament way, stand in the faith and have the faith in them - apart from all their framework and form of religion - even without their saying anything about it - constitutes a conflicting factor in the world, and they become centres of spiritual warfare. What I mean is, that you need not announce that you are a Christian, and you certainly need not state your Christian beliefs, in order to be the focal point of antagonism. If you are really in the good of what is meant by "the faith", you are a centre of antagonism. You cannot help it. To try to avoid it is to destroy that essential of the faith.

Thus, in the beginning, the faith was not a system of doctrine or teaching. It was not a number of tenets and truths, but it was a single, though all-inclusive, truth which carried with it a spiritual impact, altogether apart from the defining of that truth.

The New Testament has a wonderful way of summing up everything in very short sentences. We have several of these. For instance, everything at the beginning was gathered into two words - "the way". They were said to be people of "the way". It became a name for them. Or again - "the Name"; everything is gathered into that. Again and again it was the Name. They were commanded "not to teach in this name" (Acts 5:28). They went forth "for the sake of the name" (3 John 7). On many occasions we have it all summarised in that way. It is the Name; very terse, but tremendously significant, boundlessly full: but just two words - "the Name". Or again, on many occasions it is called "the testimony". "Even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you" (1 Cor. 1:6); or, as we are so familiar with it in the book of the Revelation - "the testimony of Jesus".

Let me repeat. That was not a systematised doctrine in the first place, a form of teaching, an interpretation of truth. It was something very much more than that, gathered all into very simple, very brief phrases - the Way, the Name, the Testimony, or the Faith. You would be interested and helped if you just went and turned up each of these passages in which this phrase "the faith" occurs and looked at the context.

Well, our point for the moment is this, that there at the beginning the faith was not a doctrine, not something which began and ended with an assent to a statement of truth, even about the Lord Jesus. It was not an embracing of Christianity, an embracing of Christian truth, an embracing of the Christian

position. Such phrases have come to mean no more than becoming associated with Christianity and Christians, and subscribing to what they believe.

The Faith a Spiritual Reality in Terms of Experience

Oh no, it was not that, it was something deeper than that. It was a spiritual reality in terms of an experience. The Faith was an experience: the Name was an experience: the Testimony was an experience: the Way was an experience. Beloved, I want to stress that just for a moment, because, while we are not going to make everything of our experience, everything of Christ has to be an experience. Everything that is true of the Lord Jesus as He stands in relation to us has to have its counterpart in us an experience. His birth has to be an experience, not merely an historical fact. His baptism has to be an experience, on the death side, the burial, the resurrection. It is something that has to be done in us. We have to know in our own history; not in the history of the Lord Jesus, not in the book which is the history of Christ, but in our own history. All has to be as something through which we have passed in a living experience. We have to know that He died; that death has to have a registration in our history as something through which we have gone with Him. So also His resurrection; it is to be an experience.

Think you that the coming again of the Lord Jesus is going to be just an historic event in an objective form? While all is true of the Lord Jesus in an historical way, that is not enough for the Church, that is not enough for us. No, His coming again, while it will be actually objective, historical, will be an experience, wrought in the very life, heart and nature of those who are joined with Him. He is not only coming to be manifested in glory, but He is coming to be glorified in the saints (2 Thess. 1:10). Not only objective, but subjective, is the coming of the Lord.

And all other things that are true about Him have to take that character. What a vast difference it would have made from the beginning if the truth of the Church, the Body of Christ, had been kept there. If only all the Lord's people had realised from the beginning, and realised today, that the Church is an experience and not a doctrine. The Body of Christ is an experience, something that goes through you and through which you go. I mean this: in the beginning they had no doctrine of the Body of Christ at all, no teaching about the Church but they had the Church. And how did they have it? I sometimes think they had it in a much more living way than it has been had since the doctrine came. They were in this world as a company of those who stood in isolation from the world; they were Christians, and all the rest of the world were not Christians. There were only two kinds of people on the earth, namely, Christians and non-Christians, and because the Christians were in a minority, and were just a people by themselves, they desperately needed one another. It was a matter of life and death to them whether they had fellowship with other Christians. They could not live without one another. That was the Church. It was an experience.

If all Christians today were unable to live without one another, what a different situation there would be! If only all such realised they belong to the Lord and all the others do not, and that this is the one great difference to be taken account of - You are in Christ or you are not in Christ, and, if you are in Christ, you cannot live without your fellow-members in Christ, you must have one another. If that were true, we would have the Church, the Body, in reality. That is what I mean by saying it is an experience; something wrought at the very heart of us that is really the Church. Would to God we could just step right back there where, because we were so necessary to one another, we could never harbour a spirit of criticism toward one another, because we would be doing ourselves as great an injury as we would be doing to the one criticised. That is an experience.

Now, the faith is that: it is a spiritual reality. The testimony is that; not a doctrine, a teaching, in the first place, but a living experience. It is something which carries with it a power, a spiritual power, and that power registers itself against opposing powers, without any terms, without any phraseology.

The Faith a Spiritual Position

Then it resolves itself into two things. Firstly, it resolves itself into a spiritual position. The faith is more than a doctrine; it is a spiritual position. Those who are in the faith, and of the faith, are a people who occupy a position which is recognised by all the spiritual intelligences which are in another position, and, because they occupy that position, they are marked out, and without inviting it they know what spiritual conflict is. Their very position brings that upon them.

By way of illustration in the type, the antagonism of the nations toward Israel of old was simply because of Israel's spiritual position. They represented a heavenly position as apart from this world, as in union with God and His Christ, and ultimate supremacy was bound up, not with them just in a people, but with them as a people in the spiritual position which they held. When they lost their spiritual position, the destiny was suspended, the realisation of the purpose was made impossible. But, while they preserved the spiritual position, that, in itself, brought everything against them. You might have said, Well, these people, somehow or other, are the most provocative people in the world; somehow or other they stir up trouble wherever they go! That may be said to their disadvantage, to their discredit, but the fact is that they could not help themselves. It was not that they were inviting hostility, but their very position precipitated it, and brought it upon them.

And we must recognise that there is something even more in the antitype than in the type; I mean in the case of the Church. The Church is a far more spiritual thing than was Israel on the earth. The Church is a far more heavenly thing in reality than was that which was only heavenly in type, and we shall be very provocative people if we are in the faith. I mean that we shall be the cause of trouble; there will be spontaneous antagonism. We shall not have to be awkward people who cannot get on with anybody. We shall be here as a challenge, and we shall not be able to avoid or evade spiritual conflict. It becomes spontaneous.

It is like that in the type. You remember the smitten rock, the waters gushing out, and the Psalm "Spring up, O well" (Num. 21:17) - a foreshadowing of the Holy Spirit coming in fulness into the life of the Lord's people. What is the next thing? "Then came Amalek, and fought with Israel" (Ex. 17:8). There is nothing between. "Spring up, O well": that is one phase. The next phase is, "Then came Amalek, and fought..." Pentecost, then persecution! The Spirit, then the wilderness and the Devil! It is always like that. A spiritual position precipitates spiritual conflict, and the faith was always in that very atmosphere and realm. Every time you have the faith, you have the fight. It is a position.

The Faith a Nature

But of course it is also another thing. It is a nature. A kind of being has come into God's universe which is not welcome, the universe being as it is. To spoil that kind, to change that nature, will be the one object of those antagonistic forces; to bring down from the position by corrupting, polluting, tainting, changing the nature if possible. That was the enemy's objective in and with the very Son of God Himself in the wilderness; to get Him to forsake His exalted position by coming down on to another level of life and nature.

The faith, then, represents a kind of people who must be got rid of, if possible, anyhow: and therein lies the conflict. So the faith is not just a subject preached or taught; it is a power let loose. That is the faith - a power let loose. Paul says, "I have fought the good fight... I have kept the faith"; and he exhorts Timothy to "fight the good fight of the faith". The article occurring three times in that statement is impressive - "Fight the good fight of the faith, lay hold on the eternal life".

The Principle of Sonship the Heart of the Faith

This is something specific, unique, peculiar in God's universe, which marks out those associated with it as being different in position and nature, and we must get closer to this, with regard to what the faith was and is. I think the best point at which we can approach it and get help is to note just where the fight came to light. I do not mean where the fight began; it began long, long centuries before this. It began in the Garden; it began perhaps even before the Garden. But, while it was there all the time right through the ages, it came to light in its nature and meaning at a certain point. The Lord Jesus dragged it out into the light by coming Himself, by Himself being present.

In Luke 4 we have the point at which the fight came most clearly to light, and it is couched in this interrogation repeated by the enemy - "If thou be the Son of God..." The occasion was a battle in the wilderness between Christ and Satan, the battle of all the ages now joined in its fullest and deepest and most malignant sense, and that battle is concentrated in this word - "If thou be the Son of God..."

What then, is "the faith"? It is gathered into that phrase "the Son of God". Now, Jesus Christ as the Son of God - that is, the deity of Christ - may be a tenet of the Christian faith, a part of Christian doctrine; but oh, it is something more than that! It is something around which this battle has raged in unabated fury. It is the occasion of all the conflict. Jesus, the Son of God: that is "the faith". That is something far more than a statement. I have said it is an experience. Sonship is something immense in God's thought, and it is upon this whole question of sonship that the battle rages, both in His case and in ours. If you want to know what the occasion of all the trouble is, it is gathered into one word - sonship; all that that means with God, both for the Lord Jesus and for the many sons whom He is bringing to glory. That word "sonship" carries with it everything that stirs and rouses hell to its depths, and explains all the trouble, all the suffering, all the conflict. It came to light on that point. There had been an announcement made from heaven - "This is my beloved Son" (Luke 3:22). Then, into the wilderness, and to the challenge - "If thou be the Son..." And so intense was the spiritual conflict in the wilderness that angels had to be sent from heaven to minister unto Him.

Well, we may know just a little bit about that. Have you never known spiritual conflict which has made it necessary for the Lord to minister life to you in such a way that, but for it, you could not go on. That oftentimes is the effect of spiritual conflict. His, of course, was an experience far beyond ours, but we share that, and the focal point of it all is just the same in our case as in His - although He was the consummate centre of it all - sonship. "If thou be the Son..."

In that challenge and that language, there is a recognition of the uniqueness of this Sonship. What I mean is this: One of the strategic, cunning, subtle methods of Satan, to deal with this whole matter to its nullification, is to propagate the doctrine of the universal sonship of mankind. You can hear it on the wireless almost any morning you like. We are all God's sons, if we will look deep enough into our own natures. All we have to do is to turn inward and go deep and we shall find God! Then, by the holy exercises of prayer and the sacraments, we will bring God up out of the depth of our own natures, and

bringing Him up, we shall have fellowship with Him! That is the stuff that is preached worldwide today. It is a clever move of the Devil's to get rid of this unique element in sonship, that it is something peculiar, particular, unique. There is no Divine continuity in man. That has been severed, and only by a miracle can union with God be recovered. But Satan, you see, by his false doctrine, and doctrine of demons, has sought to subvert the truth. Is it not of that that Paul says to Timothy, "...in later times some shall fall away from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of demons" (1 Tim. 4:1)? Of course, on the face of it, that sounds terrible: they must surely be very terrible doctrines. No, they are very lovely doctrines! One of them is this doctrine that you have God in you by nature and, if only you will turn into your own heart, you will find God and you can bring Him up by holy exercises, and, if you will but habituate yourself to this practice, you yourself will become Divine. A lovely doctrine, swallowed by the multitude, but a doctrine of demons! It is the Satanic move to get rid of this unique nature of sonship, because that is something apart in God's universe. Satan cannot touch that; it is something outside of his realm, it is unique. "If thou be the Son...". "The Son" and "the faith" represent something exclusive. In refuting one error I am not going to fall into another. Even by being born anew we are not made sons of God in the sense that Christ was the "only begotten" of the Father. We do not partake of deity, but we are made children of God in a sense that is not true of men generally by nature.

In this challenge - "If thou be the Son..." - there is not only recognition of the uniqueness of sonship, but there is the realisation that in that sonship there is a challenge. There is not much challenge to Satan in this other doctrine of the continuity of the Divine in man! But in this sonship of Christ, and of those who are begotten of God, in whom, as Paul says to the Galatians, the Spirit of His Son is ("God sent forth the Spirit of his Son into our hearts" Gal. 4:6), there is a tremendous challenge to Satan, and that is why Satan assailed in this way, and does assail. He would seek in some way to neutralize the spiritual reality of sonship, because it is such a challenge and threatening menace to him and his kingdom.

Paul makes it perfectly clear in Romans 8 that, when the time comes that the sons of God are manifested, then the curse will forever be nullified; that is, all the work of Satan will be destroyed with the manifestation of the sons of God.

The Nature of the Challenge - Destiny Bound up with Sonship

Well, there is a challenge in sonship, because in that sonship there is all that is included in the destiny of Satan and the destiny of Christ. Satan's destiny is a dark and terrible one: Christ's destiny and the destiny of His own is a glorious one. But these two destinies are not just automatic, they are spiritual. Sonship is something which means a full attainment to a certain relationship and a certain nature.

It is very interesting to note the different usages in the New Testament between the word "child" and "son"; child being one born, son being the child a grown up, coming to maturity. The son, meaning a full-grown one, is sometimes used in this very connection of which we have spoken; meaning that those given to doing evil have come to full growth in it; and you will see that is exactly what happened with the Jews and with Israel in the days of the Lord Jesus. I do not want to become too detailed, but I just indicate it. When the Lord Jesus was speaking to the rulers and the heads of the Jewish nation who were so opposed to Him, He did not speak to them as being children of the Devil, but called them sons. He used the word about them which meant that they were something more than just offspring. They had come to a far measure of maturity in their devilish relationship and work, and when that sonship came to fulness, then Israel is dealt with, judged and cut off.

In the same way, when born from above, we become children of God, and are sons potentially, and when sonship in relation to God has come to full maturity, then the issue is glory, full deliverance. The whole situation is changed with sonship.

Now Satan and his kingdom are coming to that place where the final judgment rests upon the final development of his iniquity. It is sonship in principle. The Old Testament description that answers to it is 'the cup of iniquity being full.' That is only another simile. It is coming to fulness. Sonship, on the side of evil and iniquity, means iniquity full-grown, over-flowing, mature - destruction.

On the other hand, sonship in relation to the Lord, being brought to maturity, means the hour of the Church's maturity, Christ coming to fulness in the saints - "till we all attain unto the unity of the faith... unto a full-grown man" (Eph. 4:13); Christ coming to maturity in His saints. And then what? Well, just the opposite of the destiny of Satan. That is destruction, and this is glory.

The two destinies are bound up, let me repeat, not with some mechanical thing, but with a spiritual nature and development called sonship, and Satan recognises the destiny of sonship, and that is why he challenges it. "If thou be the Son..."

So, the heart and the essence of the faith is the significance of sonship. When again you hear or think of "the faith", always remember in the first place that "the faith" is what Jesus Christ is in the uniqueness of sonship; and, so far as we are concerned, "the faith" is what we are in Him in the uniqueness of sonship. I am not touching upon His deity. Do not misunderstand me in that. That is a sonship of His in which we have no part, in so far as that sonship means deity, but the relationship with God in terms of sonship is shared by us with Him. He is the Heir. "God... hath at the end of these days spoken unto us in his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things" (Heb. 1:2). And then, we are "heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8:17). The principle of sonship is the heart and essence of the faith.

We will leave it there for the time being. But I can say once more that it is in this that the born-anew ones are unique in God's universe, this is what separates them from all others, and with which so great a destiny is bound up. It is upon this that all the conflict rests, and around it all the battle rages. It is because of this we suffer. Do you want less conflict? You can have it at the expense and the meaning of your sonship. If you will not go right on to full growth, you can have a very much easier time, but if you are going right on, you may have the worst time. You are going to know more than any others what spiritual conflict is. You cannot get out of it. Demas evidently found things too hard. "Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world" (2 Tim. 4:10). Well, Demas goes back, but those who go on do so by having to accept what Demas found himself unable to accept - an intensifying conflict.

It is not a very comfortable message, but there are the facts. But let us remind ourselves that, if we suffer with Him, we shall reign together with Him (2 Tim. 2:12).

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