

The Forty Days

by T. Austin-Sparks

Jesus' 40 days after His resurrection were a time of liberation, empowerment, and foundation-laying for the Church.

Scripture: Luke 12:49

Topics: "Resurrection", "Empowerment of the Church"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the significance of the forty days following Christ's resurrection, highlighting that this period was crucial for establishing the foundation of Christianity. He explains that during these days, Jesus appeared to His disciples, providing many proofs of His resurrection, which were essential for their faith and the future of the Church. Sparks draws parallels between the forty days and other significant 'forties' in the Bible, illustrating that this time was one of testing, release, and integration for the scattered disciples. He asserts that the resurrection not only liberated Christ but also released His followers from their limitations, enabling them to become empowered witnesses. Ultimately, these forty days were pivotal in transforming the disciples from a state of fear and division into a unified and bold community ready to spread the Gospel.

Transcript

"I came to cast fire upon the earth; and what will I, if it is already kindled? But I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how am I straitened till it be accomplished!" (Luke 12:49, 50). (The real sense of the first sentence is perhaps better given in the American Standard Revised Version: "I came to cast fire upon the earth; and WOULD THAT IT WERE already kindled!")

"To whom He also shewed Himself alive after His passion by many proofs, appearing unto them by the space of forty days, and speaking the things concerning the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3).

"And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as one dead. And He laid his right hand upon me, saying, Fear not; I am the First and the Last, and the Living One; and I became dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades" (Revelation 1:17-18).

We approach this particular aspect with the same question as that with which we have approached the others, and ask: Why the forty days? We shall sum up our answers to that question in three ways, although there are many more details than we can at present cover.

It is evident that those forty days were very much fuller than the records indicate. We have only ten recorded appearances of the Lord during the forty days, and five of them took place on the first day, leaving thirty-nine days for the remaining five (if ten were the full number of the appearances). But John, in speaking of the Lord's appearance after His resurrection, did say: "Many other signs... did Jesus in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book" (John 20:30), and I think the context would lead us to conclude that these "many other signs" were done after His resurrection. This receives support from Luke, when he speaks of the forty days as containing "many proofs". So, they were evidently very full days, and that being so, the period was one of very great importance. It is not our purpose to stay with the various appearances, but to seek to understand the significance of the whole.

Now this note in the Octave of Redemption has not been struck nearly so strongly and firmly as it ought to have been. We know how sometimes, in a piano, a hammer becomes slightly worn or damaged, and when you go up the scale, that particular note is weaker than others, and you sense it. In the same way, I think that this note of the forty days has lost a good deal of its strength, or has not been given the strength and positiveness and fulness of volume which it ought to have been given. I trust that we shall see that as we proceed. For this was the great turning-point, and everything for Christianity rested upon this aspect of redemption's plan.

We can mention only a few of the things that rested upon these forty days, but they are sufficient to indicate what a tremendous period this was. Let us, however, note firstly that this is one of the great 'forties' of the Bible. It is not an accident that there were forty days after His resurrection. There are eight major 'forties' in the Bible--I leave you to look them up--but I mention some.

There was the great forty years of the life of Moses in Egypt, a time of deep preparation and testing, especially the testing of his heart. If all the wealth and treasure and learning of one of the greatest empires in history is open to you, at your disposal, your attitude to it constitutes a very good test of where your heart is! And Moses came through just such a test as that. At the end of those forty years, it was seen that his heart was not in that: his heart was for God and God's interests. Forty is always the number of probation, of testing and proving and deciding, and it was fairly decisive, was it not, with Moses at the end of those forty years.

But then commenced another forty years for Moses, in the land of Midian; and if the first forty was a testing of his heart, the second forty was a time of testing of his faith. What a tremendous probation that was--disappointed undertakings, disappointed hopes and expectations, and the consciousness that he was in the main responsible for it by his own folly. It was a tremendous test of faith. But he emerged.

Then there were the forty days and forty nights spent by Moses in the Mount. And what a time of testing that was for Israel down below! Yes, it was meant for that, I think, to find them out; and we know how they emerged from that time. They were proved, beyond any question. This issue was decided very definitely, and out from that God had to make His great movement concerning the Levites. That is a subject full of instruction; but we must leave it there.

And then there were Israel's own forty years in the wilderness. What a time of testing, probation and decision it was!

There are other forties, but we leap right over from there to the New Testament, to our Lord's testing for forty days in the wilderness--a time of unexampled testing; and, finally, to these forty days after the Resurrection. You see the character, the nature and meaning of forty, as a time of testing and proving, of

establishing, deciding and settling. All that was gathered into the forty days that we are now to consider.

But look at some of the factors included in this period, as affecting Christianity, the Church, the future. All the work of the apostles hung upon this, as we shall see. It is so very clear. Of what good were they before the beginning of those forty days? What could they have done in the state they were in while He was in the tomb? He might have risen and gone to Heaven without their seeing Him, and then, in some way, it might have come to them that He was in Heaven--ah, but there would have been something of very great importance lacking if it had been like that! The door would have been open for all kinds of things to come in. But the Lord did not leave it like that. Their future work rested upon these forty days. The Lord was laying the foundation for everything with them during that period.

And the very existence of the Church rested upon the same ground; it demanded these forty days. That we shall see again presently, more fully. The ability of Christians to suffer, to endure and to conquer required these forty days. The many proofs--the ground soundly and solidly established--for the fact that He was alive, were essential for the steadfastness and overcoming of believers in all the sufferings of the days which lay ahead.

Again, the assurance of an eternal future for believers rested upon this. That death is not the end; that there is a life which has conquered death; and this life is for them, and that an eternal future is secured--it rested all upon these forty days.

Again, the very nature of the believer's resurrection body is established by these forty days. The Apostle Paul makes that quite clear. In 1 Corinthians 15, it is positively stated that this mortal and corruptible shall be put off and immortality and incorruption shall be put on (vv. 53-54). The believer's body is to be "conformed to the body of His glory" (Phil. 3:21). But what is that body like? Have we anything to go upon? Is there any solid ground for believing that after resurrection we have a body? Well, the Lord was taking great pains to make it perfectly clear that He was no phantom, no disembodied spirit. "Handle Me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye behold Me having" (Luke 24:39). Our knowledge of a resurrection body, its features and nature, was established during those forty days.

And what of the hope concerning those who are asleep? That hope is established by this period. Still other factors could be mentioned, but the mention of these alone is sufficient to indicate that this was no unimportant phase of the great octave of redemption. It is truly redemption that is focused upon in this period. Everything had to be well founded and grounded, with "many proofs". As we said earlier, Luke was a meticulous historian: he tells us that he had taken pains to ascertain and make sure of the facts that he was recording; and he says that the Lord Jesus "showed Himself alive" to the disciples "by many proofs". As we have already seen, John said that the Lord did "many other signs... in the presence of His disciples". The object? To set the evidence, to leave things--or rather, one thing--beyond any doubt. What is it? The fact that Jesus lives--Jesus lives again after death! In other words: The Lord is risen!

So much for the more general side of this matter. We come now to look at the three more specific things which, to some degree at any rate, sum up the answer to the question: Why the forty days? What we have already seen provides, of course, a good answer, but that is not the whole answer.

The Release Of The Lord

Firstly, what did the Lord Jesus Himself conceive to be the particular value to Himself of His resurrection? The answer is in those words which we have read from Luke 12:49,50: 'I came to scatter fire on the

earth... O that it were already kindled! ...I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how I am pent up until it be accomplished!' There is no doubt that He is speaking about the baptism of His Cross and passion; and He is looking through the baptism and thinking of the other side as His release. So the very first thing about these forty days is that it meant the release of the Lord. 'How am I straitened, how am I pent up, how am I confined! I have come to scatter fire--to broadcast the fire over the whole earth: but here I am, tied to these few miles of a little country, tied to time, tied up to all the conditions of life here.' Oh, how limited He was! limited in His own movement, limited in His disciples, limited in every way. He was longing to be free, to be out, to be released. He looked upon the resurrection as His release, and upon the Cross as the way of it.

Now, the Lord had, at the commencement of His ministry, made a great announcement. You remember that His first recorded ministry was in Nazareth, when He took up Isaiah 61 and spoke of the sevenfold aspect of His ministry: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me... He hath sent Me to proclaim release to the captives... to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:16-19). Now there is little doubt that in His mind He was thinking of the year of Jubilee: because those words of Isaiah are an echo of the words used in Leviticus 25:10 concerning the Jubilee year, the fiftieth year, the year of release, when everything that had gone into bondage--man, woman, child, houses, land, or anything else--had to be released. And so, right at the commencement of His ministry, He said: 'I am come in relation to God's jubilee, God's fiftieth year, the year of the Lord's release.'

From the exodus of Israel to the beginning of the ministry of the Lord Jesus there were thirty jubilees--an interesting piece of Bible study for you, if you like! Here is the thirtieth jubilee beginning. Now, when the Lord Jesus made the declaration in the words of the Scripture--"release to the captives... recovering of sight to the blind... liberty [to] them that are bruised"--He knew what He meant. He made the announcement that He had come to bring in the greatest of all the Jubilees. The realization, the actual fulfilment of that, was still a little way ahead--perhaps three-and-a-half years ahead--but it took effect during, and as the outcome of, the forty days.

It took effect, first of all, as to Himself. By the resurrection He came into His own release, His complete emancipation. He was set free. See Him now: no geographical confinement can hold Him;--He is outside of all that. No time limits can hold Him; none of those old features of limitation and straitness now obtains. Time does not matter, distance does not matter: He is out. On the day of His resurrection He walked with two to Emmaus, broke bread with them, and... disappeared! They raced for their very lives back to Jerusalem to tell--but He was there before them! It was like that all the time. It is an instructive exercise to tabulate all the marks of His release during those forty days.

See now what He is doing with these disciples, the larger company who are to be the nucleus of His Church. He appeared to above five hundred brethren at one time, says Paul (1 Cor. 15:6). What is He doing? He is establishing the evidence for the fact that now He knows no limitations, He knows no bounds or bonds--He is free! That is a tremendous inheritance for the Church, for us. How glad we are of that today!--to realize that geography does not matter, whether it be fifty, or five hundred, or five thousand miles; that time does not matter--none of these things matter: He is free! It is a tremendous thing for the Church to have it established by "many proofs". Our King James Authorized Version used to put in another word there--"many infallible proofs". Even if it is not in the original text, the epithet is fully applicable.

The Release Of His Own

That was His side. But He had not only come to proclaim His own release and to secure it through the Cross. There was the other side, the release of His own: the release of the men and the release of the Church. Look at the men before: they were terribly tied up in themselves, were they not? They were manifestly limited in every way: in their capacities for spiritual things, in their understanding, in their spiritual intelligence. Paul's word to the Corinthians might very well have applied to them: "ye are straitened in your own affections" (2 Cor. 6:12). But look at their release in these days! There is no doubt that it has happened--and it is happening all the time: you can see it growing! They have been released. You have only to think of the difference between Peter in the judgment hall and Peter on the day of Pentecost. One man limited, bound, straitened, defeated; the other man out, right out--a man emancipated.

They are all like that. It was the year of jubilee for them! The Lord Jesus had proclaimed it; by His resurrection He had brought it in; and by the sending forth of the Holy Spirit on the jubilee day, the fiftieth day ('Pentecost' means 'fiftieth'), He had finally sealed it. The fiftieth year is jubilee, and Pentecost is the fiftieth day. Yes, it is jubilee, it is release; everything bears the stamp of that. And so Pentecost was the crown of those fifty days, and the making good especially of the values of the forty. It was their day of release!

If you and I were really in the good of these forty days, we, too, should be liberated and released men and women. Think of Thomas. Was ever a man more tied up than Thomas? He was tied up with himself, and tied up with his own temperament. He had that kind of temperament, you know, that does not believe anything unless it has absolute proof. It can never take anybody else's word for it--it must have everything proved and demonstrated. What an unhappy fellow he was! "Except I shall see... I will not believe" (John 20:25). That shut him up to a little prison of his own soul. No Gospel, no good news, not even the very best news that you can bring, is any good to one like that, because they won't have it, they just can't believe it. 'Yes, but that is, after all, only what you say'--that is their reaction. 'You say that, you believe that: I have no proof that it is so.' Poor Thomas is representative of a whole temperamental class.

But look at the man a few days later. The Lord soon settled all that for Thomas--settled it so thoroughly that when, eight days later, he was invited by the Lord, with the words: "Reach hither thy hand..." , to consider and test the evidence for himself, it is never recorded that he did so. He could only say: "My Lord and my God." He is overwhelmed--but he is a man released. The same thing was true of them all: each one of them needed release--and that release came during the forty days. Then they were men out! There they were, standing up together on the day of Pentecost--men who were free! The resurrection of the Lord Jesus ought to have that effect in you and in me. It ought to release us from ourselves and our own little world--and thank God it does, if we come vitally into it. If you do not know that in experience, that is nevertheless your inheritance. These forty days are not just a chapter in history; the value of them is your inheritance: it is for you--for us all. This is not a point of Christian doctrine; this is an up-to-date power for every life, offered to our faith to take hold of, for our release from ourselves. It was the year of their release, but it is also the year of our release, the Church's release. The jubilee is not over yet.

The Integration Of The Scattered Flock

We come now to the third thing. The Lord Jesus had said to them, as He was going to the Cross, as He was with them on the mount of Olives in the last hours before the Passion: "All ye shall be offended in Me this night: for it is written, I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered abroad" (Matt. 26:31). What a scattering took place! They one and all forsook Him; they were broken up into

fragments, 'all over the place', as we might say, like a shattered vessel. They were outwardly in pieces, as a band, and inwardly in pieces, as men. His word "scattered" was very truly realized. Now look at the forty days. What is He doing? He is bringing together again all the pieces, He is collecting all the fragments. Here, and there, and there, He is finding those pieces. Two have gone off in this direction, one is here, others are there; there is no sign of any oneness about them. But now, during the forty days, He is finding them all, collecting them up, bringing them all together. At the end He has got them all together, and in a 'togetherness' that had never been before, in a oneness that they had never yet known. This is the value of the forty days.

But remember, things could not have been otherwise. There were all the elements of disintegration in them before, and so it had to be--it could not be otherwise. Now that wants thinking about, because in those eleven men you have the Church in representation. They are a picture of the Church in division, all broken up into fragments, with no mutual confidence--doubting one another, suspecting one another, not believing one another--a broken-up Church, a divided Church, a scattered Church. That is how they were, simply because of the conditions which were in themselves before the Cross; the ground was there for it. But just think: they had had an association with Him for three-and-a-half years, they had companied with Him during that time, they came under His influence and His spell, they heard all His teaching, they saw His works--they were His disciples; and yet, and yet, there was all that latent which made possible these divisions and suspicions and questions.

If our relationship to the Lord Jesus is something merely objective and outward: if it is a matter of knowing His teaching--of course believing that His teaching is right--and of having some measure of devotion to Him: all that kind of doctrinal, theological, historical relationship to the Lord Jesus, but falling short of something deep and drastic wrought inside; falling short of that tremendous action of the Cross to break the natural man and open up the way for something other from Heaven: then such conditions can and will obtain. In saying this I am saying more than my words perhaps convey. But very often that is the ground of all the scattering and the division and the quarrelling and the suspicion and the questions, and everything else. The Cross has not done its work to break the natural man--even in his relationship to Christ, in his apprehension of the things of Christ; to break all his natural life and so to speak split him wide open for something from Heaven. There is a long, long story bound up with a statement like that, and a terrible story. And so that is why I say that their disappointment and scattering was not just because Christ was crucified: it was because the seeds of that scattering were in them--the ground was already there.

But now what has happened? They have been broken and shattered, and now a new ground is being put in, the ground of another life and another kind of knowledge of the Lord. That is the great thing about the forty days. They have never known Him like this before. Indeed, they are finding it sometimes difficult to believe that this is He at all. "When they saw Him... some doubted" (Matt. 28:17). 'Is it He?' When He first met them coming from the tomb, He had to say: "Fear not..." (v. 10). No, they were not sure yet. This is another kind of knowledge of Him; it is knowing Him on another ground. Paul said: "Even though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now we know Him so no more" (2 Cor. 5:16). In that way, no more! This is a different kind of knowledge of Him, as the essential basis of a true oneness: a knowledge which has come, on the one side, through a terrible shattering of all natural knowledge, and, on the other side, through a new coming of the Lord, personally, to those who have been shattered. It is always like that. Until we have been broken, we are not in a position for the Lord to come and show us the greatest things, the deepest things, the truest things. These are abiding principles.

And so He gathered them--or shall we say regathered them--and then, upon the basis of a new kind of life, upon a new kind of knowledge of Himself, He established among them an altogether new oneness. They are off the ground of their own life now; they are on the ground of His life. Their life was a divided life; His life is a uniting life. It is all very well for us to say that we are 'all one in Christ' because we all share one life. Of course, that is true, but it might be quite a superficial statement. We really only come into the practical value of that one life if the Cross has done something in us. The practical expression of the oneness of that life demands this deep work of the Cross. That we are all one in Christ, because we share His one life, the eternal life that He has given, may be positionally true; but the expression of it may still be waiting.

Is that not true today? We can say that all true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, who have received the gift of eternal life, are one--one by reason of the one life that they all share with Him and in Him. Yes, but look at the expression of it amongst Christians! Where is the manifestation of the oneness of that life? That is tragically lacking. With the disciples, the manifestation of it came about when the Cross had done its deep, breaking work in their natural life, and had turned them over on to another ground, where all their apprehension and knowledge of Him was a spiritual one. It was on the ground of something tremendous that was happening in them. These forty days were not only days of things happening to them: you could see something correspondingly happening in them all the time. Before, when He made the slightest allusion to or gave the least hint of His departure, they were thrown into consternation and terror. Now, they are moving rapidly toward the place where, far from feeling consternation that He is going from them, they are quite happy about it--even full of joy. All that fear has gone; it is all right now. As He appears, during these forty days, something is happening inside them.

The New Scattering

There is another factor here that to me is of very great significance and comfort. You remember that it was not so very long after this that the persecution arose over Stephen, and they were all scattered once again (Acts 8:1,4; 11:19). They were all scattered--and now it is perfectly safe for them to be scattered. The old scattering was a devastating thing: all loss, all weakness--all wrong. But they can be scattered anywhere, all over the world, now, and it is as safe as eternity. Once the thing is done inside, it is all right, it is all to the good. An Ethiopian no longer needs a Philip to lean upon: he can go his own way, rejoicing, without Philip or anybody else, when the thing is done inside. When that has happened, we can have every confidence that people will go on. Thank God that it is like that! There may be persecution, scattering, imprisonments, but they are going on.

These, then, and many others, are the values that sprang out of those forty days. But let us remember that this is here in the Word for us, it is handed down to us. It is not just history, Church history, of what happened long ago. This book of the Acts--which, as we have said, might very well be called 'The Book of the Lord's Release'--is given to the Church as the very basis of the Church's life. It is for ourselves, and we have a tremendous heritage in these forty days. If only we were really established upon those values, what a difference it would make!

Let me emphasize once more that factor of the re-gathering and the consolidating in a new fellowship. That is what is needed. Is not the present deplorable situation amongst Christians, with all the fragments and divisions, all the questions and suspicions, and so on, a clear proof that believers are not really standing in the meaning of what has been done by the Cross, in destroying the natural ground and the natural life, and in making room for the spiritual and heavenly? That is where it all focuses. The deeper the

Cross goes in us, in dealing with our natural life in all its forms, and the more we are open to the heavenly life, so the more we shall be drawn together and established. That is a statement of fact, but it is also a very real test of our own position.

I trust that I have said enough to show that these forty days were very, very important, and that they stand for all ages as a most significant epoch for the life of the Church.

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