

# The Glory of Life Triumphant Over Death

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*The sermon emphasizes the transformative power of Divine life, which triumphs over death and is essential for spiritual growth and effective ministry.*

**Scripture:** Isaiah 8:16

**Topics:** "Life in Christ", "Sovereignty Of God"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the theme of life triumphing over death, drawing from Isaiah 8:16-9:2. He explains that the essence of Zion is divine life, which is a nature, method, and law that governs spiritual growth and the Church's testimony. Sparks illustrates how the ministries of Elijah and Elisha exemplify this principle, showcasing how life can conquer death in various situations. He warns against the dangers of relying on personal interests, as seen in Gehazi's failure, and encourages believers to trust in God's sovereignty, especially in seemingly hopeless circumstances. Ultimately, the sermon calls for a deep reliance on the life of Christ within us to manifest God's glory in our lives.

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## Transcript

Reading: Isaiah 8:16-9:2.

"Behold, I and the children whom the Lord hath given me are for signs and for wonders in Israel from the Lord of hosts, who dwelleth in mount Zion."

Let us be reminded that we are here concerned with fullness; it is that which governs all that we have to say. When, of course, that matter was in view in the days of the prophets, it was a question of recovery of the fullness of Divine thought and intention. We in our time correspond to that, but in the book of the Acts it was not recovery that was involved - there were all the principles of fullness clothed with much that spoke of actual fullness. You have things there very much as the Lord desired and desires to have them, but all too soon the radiant morn passed away and a new period came when the need was for recovery; and as you move on in the New Testament you know how true that is. Arriving at the first chapters of the book of the Revelation, you find them occupied with the recovery of something that is lost. In all but one or two cases, the Lord has to speak of things that have gone, a state that has been left behind. It is recovery that is in view. We are in the time when the question of recovery is before us, and therefore we are in the time when the prophetic principle and function are operating - that is, when a vessel of prophecy is proclaiming that which was from the beginning as God's thought concerning His people.

## The Testimony in Zion Summed up in Life

Now we saw in our previous meditation something of what Zion stands for - sovereignty, fullness, light, glory. If we look for one thing which includes all these elements and features of Zion we find it gathered up in the one word 'life.' By that, of course, we mean Divine life. So the testimony in Zion is basically that of life, a particular life, a life utterly and altogether different from any other life. We are going to follow on what we said in our previous meditation, with life as our interpreter.

### Divine Life a Nature

Firstly, this life is a nature. Now throughout these messages we have been speaking about the gospel of the glory of the blessed God, of the satisfied God, and we have been saying that glory is the nature of God shining forth, manifested, expressed. That Divine nature is given to us in the eternal life which we receive in new birth. It is a nature, something planted within which has Godlikeness inherent in it. Of course, I am not meaning that we have planted in us Deity. Is it necessary for me to say that? But I am saying what Peter said - "...whereby he hath granted unto us his precious and exceeding great promises; that through these ye may become partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4). It is in the life of which we are speaking that the nature resides. It is always subjective-objective, that is, we have this life in God's Son; we only have it in ourselves in so far as we have Christ in us. We do not become Divine, and no Divinity degrees can make us so! We are not great 'Divines,' and never shall be. It is an essential part of what we were saying earlier that we do not become that. This vessel will always be something which attributes everything to God, therefore in such a vessel He will have people who in themselves are very imperfect. You will never be able to talk of them as great in themselves. They will be very human people, and the very mark of their humanity will be their utter dependence upon the Lord for any bit of goodness at all. They will know that if there is anything in them at all that is of any worth, it is because the Lord is there, because Christ has come in. But saying that, and keeping that in mind with all that we say, we repeat that we have given to us the uncreated life of God, Divine life in Jesus Christ, and that life is the nature of God. That life does not sin and will always be our correction, whatever our own life does and whatever our own nature does. That is why the Lord's people who make mistakes and go wrong have a very much worse time in themselves than anybody else. They have a standard set up in them and they do not get away with things, because there is within them that which is a sinless life. If ever we raise the question of sinless perfection, we shall never be able to say it of ourselves; it can only be said of that other life that is given to us. But of that life it can be said.

God starts with that mighty potentiality of holiness, that mighty dynamic of His own likeness. He plants it in us at the beginning of our spiritual experience and Christian life, and it has in it all the mighty possibilities of God Himself. As it has its way, as we yield to it, complying with its demands, recognising its laws as we recognise the laws of our natural life, only so shall we come to fullness of spiritual health; but, given that, the result will be a Church which has the glory of God. "Unto him be the glory in the church... unto all generations for ever and ever" (Eph. 3:21). "He... showed me the holy city Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God" (Rev. 21:10-11); the glory which is the nature of God in the very life of God which is given to us. Is that too elementary for you? It is the first thing that we must recognise, however.

### Divine Life a Method

The second thing is not, perhaps, quite so common in our knowledge and recognition - that this life is a method. We have often said that God's method is the biological and not the mechanical. Man's method is usually mechanical, even in the work of God. He makes a machine, he makes a 'Philistine cart' - some apparatus for the work of God, something outward, a framework. That is man's way of doing the work of God. With God it is always the method of life. When He is going to do something, His method is to implant life from Himself there. That is His basis, His method. Is He going to develop something? - it will be by life, and only by life and the increase of life.

Simply, it means this, that the real spiritual growth of the Church, and development and expansion of what is of God, will depend entirely upon the measure of Divine life present. That is God's method; for all purposes, that is His method. The one great thing that the enemy is out to do is to hinder that life from getting in. If he cannot do it in open campaign, by direct activity, he will do it by either deception or counterfeit - perhaps they are both the same thing. I mean this - there is a very great deal produced in the work of God which is not life. It is nothing of the sort. It is enthusiasm, it is zest, it is interest, it is strong emotion and feeling and the overflow of natural spirits worked up, drawn out, fed and ministered to, and it goes by its own momentum, and it has to be kept going from the outside - you have to give it more and more and more. God's method is inward - His own life; and when He gets a way for His own life, there is no need for any of these externals at all, the thing just goes on.

You have it like that in the beginning, in the book of the Acts. When things are as the Lord would have them, life solves all the problems, meets all the needs, gives all the directions; life, of course, not as abstract but in the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of life is a mighty intelligence for direction and counsel and guidance. If you are alive in the Spirit, and you are praying on an issue, you know by the witness of life whether the thing is according to the Lord's mind; and on the other hand you know quite well that the Lord is not interested in it because the thing just does not live in you. That is spiritual intelligence, that is having your senses exercised to discern good and evil (Heb. 5:14). That is a matter of function resulting from life. You go the whole way round in the work of God and you find that is the secret of everything. Things to be done at all or not to be done at all, things to be done now or not to be done now - any question whatsoever - it all resolves itself into a matter of life in the Spirit in believers and in the Church. Well, again, that is elementary.

You know quite well, and the devil knows quite well, that the greatest secret of success is life. 'So let's have a semblance of life.' says the enemy, 'in order to triumph by death.' And he triumphs very often with his great weapon of death by getting for a time a semblance of life and then letting it go, so that people are not ready to try again. 'It is all a myth, it is all false', they say; and he has doubly killed, and the last state of that thing is worse than the first. God has the true secret. Now the testimony of Zion is there, the true life of God, not only as a nature and a power, but as a method. If we are concerned with the work of the Lord, the point upon which we shall fix all our attention will be this, that life is having full, clear way in us and in all concerned. That of course will necessitate on many things, the application of the Cross to get them out of the way, but that is something on which I am not going to dwell for a moment. I am simply saying that this Divine life is God's method; it has always been.

#### Divine Life a Law

Then it is a law. Paul calls it "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:2). Now, what is the nature of this life, this law? The law of life is that it is spirituality which is the first and final standard of God. That is the law; not by any other standard does God judge a thing. He judges entirely by spirituality. That is

a very searching thing. You can have all the framework of the truth and yet with a total absence of spirituality; having it all, it may be a beautiful and clever and masterful presentation of things, but still hollow. I have heard a perfectly masterly presentation of the letter to the Ephesians which, if you were spiritual, left you cold and dead. Why? We can carnally present Divine things by the sheer cleverness of our own brain and strength of our own soul appeal. We can come right into the picture with Divine things and be the force - the force of brain and the force of will and the force of emotion - and it may for the time being seem to be a marvellous exposition of the Scripture; but after all, what has it done? It can be like that - carnal. Was it not John Bunyan who said that the greatest peril that he knew was that of Divine things carnally handled? Spirituality is God's standard. It may not appear to be so clever, but it will go much farther. Our measure before God is just the measure of our spirituality, our spiritual life. What we count for is determined by our spiritual life, nothing else.

And what is spirituality? Well, God is Spirit; it is just what the Lord is, that is all; the measure in which the Lord is met in us, the measure in which it can be seen that the Lord is getting the upper hand with us, subduing us, getting on top of us, taking our place. Oh, that is testing; we all fail there; we often fail terribly. I am not saying that we should never fail; that would be to discourage you far too much. But I am saying this - that if we are growing spiritually, the same old failures ought not to be just as dominant now as they were; we should not now be fading at the same point, in the same way, as we did; the Lord is becoming more; that is spirituality. Do not think of spirituality as some abstract high-flown thing somewhere up in the air, in words and kind of talk and ideas and sanctimoniousness and intensity - things that are, after all, just mental. That is not spirituality. There is a false spirituality that is an utter deception. We know of people whose 'spirituality' has made them superior to the Scriptures - the Scriptures are no longer the basis of the government of their life. It does not matter what the Bible says - 'the Lord has told me to do this,' they say; and yet there is a Scripture which directly contradicts what they are doing! You may say that is extreme, but it is only the issue of a false spirituality which begins somewhere.

Remember that true spirituality is a matter firstly of character. Is the Lord met? Is the registration in the main that of the Lord? Well, the law of life is spirituality; it is spiritual life because it is God's life.

### The Practical Outworking

Now we are going to turn at this point to bring this into a very practical realm. I am going back to a section of the Old Testament, not to study it, but to remind ourselves of it. At the end of the first book and the beginning of the second book of Kings you have the ministries of Elijah and Elisha, and when you look into those ministries you find that the distinctive characteristic of both was life. I am not going into all the incidents, but just to dwell with the issue. The distinctive characteristic being life, it indicated what was the issue for the Lord's people to whom they were called to be prophets - and for those beyond the Lord's people; because, you remember, their ministries went beyond Israel. That is the point that the Lord Jesus made at Nazareth. "There were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah... and unto none of them was Elijah sent, but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon... And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian" (Luke 4:25-27). The testimony was to go out to, and through, Israel; keep that in mind. And it was the testimony of life; and that was the issue which was in view for the Lord's people as seen in the fact that these men were prophets of Israel.

Therefore, again, that ministry necessitated situations which were humanly quite impossible. The characteristic feature of their ministry was life. That indicated the issue that the Lord had with His people -

their life, their spiritual life, their testimony to the nations; and being a question of life in the ministry, to recover that testimony it became necessary that they should be brought continually into situations of human impossibility which could not be met on any other than Divine ground.

Now in these two men, of course, you have typically Christ and the Church - Christ in Elijah, eventually coming to Jordan and from Jordan going up in glory, and in his ascension his mantle falling upon his successor; and the Church in Elisha taking up the ministry of the ascended and glorified Lord in the power of His Spirit, fulfilling His own word - "and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto the Father" (John 14:12). What does Elisha represent? We have said that he represents the Church, but we must be more precise than that. He represents the ministry of the Church on this basis - that he speaks of the Holy Spirit present in the Church bringing out all the values, all the potentialities, of the resurrection and ascension and glorifying of Christ. You see, they have both been to Jordan, they have both passed through Jordan, the one with the other - speaking in New Testament language, the one in the other - and on the other side of Jordan the glorious rapture of the master has taken place; and then the successor, taking up the mantle - taking up the Spirit, receiving the Spirit - moves to put to the proof all the mighty virtues and powers of that risen life. "Where is the Lord God of Elijah?"

Now that question is going to be answered in numerous ways, every one of which is set in a situation of death. If you can grasp that, you have the key to the whole matter. Then some other people come into view, called the sons of the prophets. Well, of course, from the story as it is written, you do not become very enamoured of these sons of the prophets. However, they mean something. What do they stand for? Well, just this - those who will serve among the Lord's people in relation to that energy of the Spirit which is present with Elisha; those who will serve among the Lord's people in the testimony of Jesus. It is the testimony of His risen life. That is very simple.

Now note what happens. These sons of the prophets must have experience in order to serve, and their experiences will be identical with this particular ministry that is going on - the ministry of life conquering death. Now consider the matters recorded - the waters of Jericho, the poison in the pot, the axe-head that fell into the river and was made to swim. All are suggestions of death working in various directions, in various ways, in various connections (each of which has its own significance) and of life coming in to triumph over death in all its operations. These sons of the prophets are having experiences in this, and they are learning by being terribly tested about it. Every time it is like that. "Master, what shall we do?" is their immediate cry, as it is ours in similar dilemmas. But the point is that it was through severe, deep testing that these men came to prove the power of resurrection life in order that they might be sons of the prophet.

You see how that corresponds to our passage - "Behold, I and the children whom the Lord hath given me are for signs and for wonders." They signify something which is altogether outside of the human realm - something wonderful, which cannot be accounted for on any ground other than that it is of God. They are for signs and wonders, and the sons of the prophets alongside of Elisha are taking their character from him, learning in his school in an experimental way.

Now we too are right there. We have the Spirit present. The ministry of the Spirit is the ministry of life conquering death in all manner of ways and directions, and our education is in that connection. If we are to come into this service, this real service amongst the Lord's people, we must know through experience in this way and in that way the power of His resurrection. The only thing that will really serve is life which conquers death. Now let me repeat; in a testimony which is not a testimony of words and phrases and

doctrines and systems of truth and interpretations, but a testimony in very truth, in very power, in utter reality, we have to be brought constantly - not once nor twice - in different ways, different connections, different places, into situations where only God can meet the need - the God of resurrection Who alone can raise the dead. That is the testimony, and it is not something that you can hear talked about and then take up; don't you try it! If you want to be in the good of the ministry of the Spirit of life, you have to face this - you are going to be plunged into situations where no one can help, nothing can meet the need, but God Himself. That will happen more than once, and you, like the great Apostle will have to say "that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raiseth the dead" (2 Cor. 1:9). When iron swims, you have a testimony that there is life triumphant over death! One is tempted to take up the various incidents in Elisha's life, but it would take far too long. All the way along it is life triumphing over death in this way and that.

### Succession a Question of Life

The point I want to make is that succession is a question of life, life which has proved itself again and again as more than sufficient for all the power of death. Elisha's testimony went on after he was gone, that is, the power of life was there even when he himself as God's servant and instrument had passed off the scene. You recall the incident of the dead man coming to life when he touched Elisha's bones. The testimony of that is this - Elisha may be dead, but this life is not dead. The vessel of it for the time being may be laid aside but the life itself goes on. If it touches what is dead, it will restore it to life. It is the whole principle of succession. God's principle is life - that is my point. You cannot have succession of personal ministries or of instrumentalities, of means or anything else; you cannot have a guarantee that the thing will go on fulfilling the original purpose by appointing successors. It must be a testimony of life, and it would be better that things were allowed to cease when the original life is no longer there. We should not try to keep going something which no longer has that life of God in it. The earth today is cumbered with the lifeless corpses of works, organisations, which had a beginning in life, but which have lost it and are now being kept going at tremendous expense and yet fulfilling no vital purpose. Succession is a matter of life. Let us remember that. Oh, if we are concentrated upon anything at all, let it be upon that. We do not want to get something going with a name; we do not want to keep things, places, ministries, teaching, going. No, no, not at all! If the thing is to continue when we are gone, it can only be if the life of God is in it to carry it on, and still prove that it is of God and not of ourselves. We can go, but if the thing is of God it will go on; it does not depend upon any thing or people, but upon the Lord Himself. The Divine principle of succession is life, and that the life of the Holy Spirit.

### Life by the Cross

Well, one more word - the contrast between Elisha's servant, Gehazi, and the sons of the prophets. Gehazi is a very despicable figure. You call to mind the outstanding incidents of his association with so great a man as Elisha. Gehazi represents that professional association with the testimony. You remember when the widow's son died and she went after the prophet, and the prophet said to Gehazi, "Take my staff in thy hand... and lay my staff upon the face of the child" (2 Kings 4:29). The woman saw through Gehazi, as women usually do see through people like that, and she was not putting any confidence in him. She clung to the prophet, but Gehazi went off with the rod, and arrived, I expect, very self-important, very professional - the servant of the great prophet! In he walks and makes his way to the room where the boy is lying, puts the rod upon the lad, and stands back expecting to see something happen, but nothing does happen. No doubt Gehazi exhausts every method of making this thing work. Perhaps the rod is not in the right position; try it another way! - but nothing happens. At last he has to admit defeat and go back a

confessed failure.

The sons of the prophets, on the other hand, are brought into touch with equally difficult situations where acts of God are called for, but they see the things happen. What is the difference? What is the explanation? I think we find it here. You remember that when the Lord came down from the mount of Transfiguration, He found some of His disciples at the foot, and a poor father had brought to them his son that the son might be healed; and the father said to the Lord, "I brought him to thy disciples, and they could not cure him" (Matt. 17:16). Afterwards the disciples privately said to the Lord. "Why could not we cast it out?" Well, you remember the end of Gehazi. He had seen the miracle upon Naaman, who, when he found himself cleansed from his leprosy, wanted to make a present to the prophet, and the prophet refused it. But Gehazi was governed by personal interests and so he went after Naaman and concocted a story and obtained the present. When he came back, his master said, "Went not my heart with thee, when the man turned from his chariot to meet thee? ...The leprosy of Naaman shall cleave unto thee" (2 Kings 5:26,27). Gehazi became a leper. Now it is a very solemn thing to carry this over to the New Testament; but do you see Simon Peter in that Judgment Hall denying his Lord thrice with oaths and curses? What is this? He is closely associated with this very Lord of life, this Prince of life, but in Peter as in the others, all the way through the time of that association you can trace personal interests; they had personal interests in the Kingdom, they wanted position in the Kingdom, they quarrelled amongst themselves as to who should be greatest in the Kingdom. Yes, there were personal elements. The end of that is spiritual leprosy and death. Anything that is personal, professional, in the way of our association with the Lord, is going to end in our undoing; it will not carry the testimony through.

The sons of the prophets are in another position. They are themselves in living union with this one whom they call Father. There is nothing that you can trace of personal interest with them. Whatever you may have to say about them and their faults and weaknesses and failures, you have to recognise that these men are really in spirit, in heart, one with their master, and they are recognising that everything for them depends upon that master. Is there poison in the pot? Well, he alone can meet the situation. Is this crowd of people hungry and needing to be fed and there is nothing for them? He alone can do it; he will feed them. Has that axe-head gone to the bottom? It is he who can recover it - not Gehazi! The power is in him and in him only. They are in spirit on the other side of Jordan, in the place where the self elements have been dealt with. I know the type is imperfect, but I think there is no doubt that this is what it is.

If the Cross has not done its work, we are 'something' in the work of God, and that is the way of death, not the way of life. When we come into the picture it is the way of death, as for Gehazi, and that must go out in the end in shame and failure. When the Cross has been planted well into that self-life, it is no longer I but Christ; that is the way of life. We may come into very difficult situations which may look like death, but no, this "is not unto death but for the glory of God" (John 11:4).

#### Death an Opportunity for the Manifestation of the Glory of God

This is one big argument for the fact that the testimony of Jesus to be in us, to be borne by us, necessitates in the first place the setting aside of ourselves by the Cross, and such a union with Christ on the ground of His risen life that He can allow us to come into situations which are death and seem to be the end of everything, but those very situations are the ones that are definitely foreordained for the glorifying of God. Remember there is that sovereignty behind these experiences, they are not accidents, they are not just haps. "Who sinned, this man, or his parents, that he should be born blind? ...Neither did this man sin, nor his parents; but that the works of God should be made manifest in him" (John 9:2-3) -

that God may be glorified. Strange sovereignty in a man born blind!

Lazarus is sick and dies, and there is sovereignty behind it. The Lord Jesus is standing back to give place to that sovereignty. "Said I not unto thee, that, if thou believedst, thou shouldst see the glory of God?" (John 11:40). That is the thing that governs this.

How do we view our situations - as tragedies? as judgments of God? Let us ask again whether the Lord has not got something wrapped up in them which, when it breaks out, will be tremendously for His glory. That is Elijah, that is Elisha. It is life triumphant over death as a sovereign thing in the hands of God to bring out His glory. I do want that all the words and ideas and material used shall not just be the stuff of a message, but that we shall really get to the heart of what the Lord is saying. The Lord is after a vessel with this testimony - that here is that which is of God, very God, all of God, not of man at all, and which will therefore bring all the glory to God. But to have part in such a 'Zion' vessel for His glory we have to come by strange, unusual ways, and many times we shall come to situations which look like the triumph of death, and the answer in ourselves will be death. "We despaired... of life: yea, we... had the answer of death within ourselves" (2 Cor. 1:8). But then there is sovereignty in it - "that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raiseth the dead." Let us look at ourselves for a moment; have one glance at yourself. What is the hope? Is there any hope? The sentence is that it is death. All right; but go the next step. It is not the end with God; it is only "that we should not trust in ourselves." Are you trying to find something in yourself in which to hope? Is that a part of the trouble? What is the meaning of all this introspection, this accursed introspection, which is death, death, death? Oh, let me say to you from my heart - be as objective as you possibly can in your faith. Leave the subjective side to the Lord; that is not your business at all; that is God's side. Our business is to hold on to Him, to look off unto, His is to do the rest. We simply recognise it has to be done, and commit ourselves to the Lord to have it done; then we hold on to Him, but we do not hope in ourselves. Let us stop looking for any ground of hope or trust in ourselves - "that we should not trust in ourselves." Why has the Lord brought you to despair? - in order to stop you looking for any ground of hope in yourself; that you should not trust in yourself, but in God Who raiseth the dead.

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