

# The Holiness of Zion's Hill

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*Spiritual ascendancy is achieved by standing well with God, having power with God, and overcoming the enemy and our own souls through holiness.*

**Scripture:** Numbers 23:21, Job 42:5-6, Psalm 24:3-5, Daniel 7:27, Luke 17:21, John 3:3, Acts 1:8, Ephesians 3:20, Hebrews 12:28, Revelation 14:1-5

**Topics:** "Holiness", "Spiritual Ascendancy"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the concept of spiritual ascendancy, exploring the necessity for God's people to rise above spiritual challenges and the forces that seek to bring them down. He identifies three realms of ascendancy: over the enemy, over our own souls, and with God, highlighting that true power comes from holiness and a pure heart. Sparks illustrates that spiritual power is rooted in holiness, and that the introduction of unholy elements can lead to defeat and corruption. He encourages believers to persevere on their journey to Zion, reminding them that spiritual growth is progressive and requires overcoming obstacles. Ultimately, he reassures that while the path may be difficult, God's power sustains those who seek Him earnestly.

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## Transcript

Reading: Ps. 24:3-5; Rev. 14:1-5.

We have been occupied with what we have called "spiritual ascendancy" -- "Who shall ascend...?" What does it really mean? How does it concern us? The answer will come to us in some such form as this. First of all, the whole of the Word of God from beginning to end sets forth the necessity for spiritual, inner ascendancy on the part of God's people. That carries with it the fact that there is something to get over; for ascendancy has no meaning if there is nothing above which to ascend, if there is no challenge, nothing to overcome. We have no need, I think, to be told that there is quite a lot that demands absolute ascendancy in our hearts, in our spirits, and we learn afresh almost every hour that there is a great realm, a universe, in which our lives are set, which will press us down and under, and hold us there, unless we know how to get on top of it. That is patent to us all.

### Ascendancy Over the Enemy

Then we begin to define that, to break it up, and we find three things about it. Firstly, there is a great realm of spiritual forces outside ourselves which are set upon our casting down, seeking by any means to get us

down and under. That is a reality. There is no doubt about that.

### Ascendency Over Our Own Souls

The second thing is that that great realm of spiritual antagonism to us has its opportunity in something in us. As we find ourselves now in our present state of humanity, there is that in us which constitutes a foothold, a ground and a response to that great system of evil outside. Temptation has no meaning unless there is something in us that can respond. We know that this is not only an objective fight, it is also subjective. This whole matter is an inward one as well as an outward, and until you have dealt with the inward, you have no chance of dealing with the outward.

### Power with God

Then there is a third thing which arises in the Word of God. It is a question of ascendency with God, or, to put that in another way, power with God, standing with God; where God's power and support and resources are with us. That is a tremendous thing, for, apart from that, ascendency in the other two realms is hopeless. We cannot meet the great foe without and have any assurance of victory within unless we know absolutely that we stand well with God, that there is no shadow over God's face where we are concerned. On that basis we are princes with God, we can prevail with God in prayer. (I did not say to prevail UPON God in prayer. That is a different thing altogether. We have not to prevail upon God, but to prevail with God; that is, to come so completely into oneness with God that He has no need whatever to have reservations in our case -- He can completely let go. To prevail upon God would be to change God. We are not out to do that, but we are out to bring the unchangeable God -- if I may put it in this way -- into a place where, in His relationship with us, He can release His power. That is just a little technical difference by the way.) Prevailing with God in prayer is no small matter, but a tremendous thing. This is power with God and, because of that, power with men, and power over the enemy, and power over our own souls -- and what an enemy our souls are to spiritual progress! All that is what is meant by spiritual ascendency: coming into a place where we are really in possession of the situation.

Lest you should be discouraged at that point, let me say again that this is not something done suddenly, in a moment. Coming to Zion, as we said earlier, is a journey, but it is an upward journey. This whole matter ought to be progressive.

### Zion the Place of Spiritual Power

Zion, then, is the place of spiritual power. Zion, we have already indicated, means the stronghold. It was the peak of conquest in the Old Testament. It was the one thing which forever stood as a testimony to kingship, when kingship reached its highest point of realization in David. It became known as the city of David. That is no mere title: that is achievement, that is triumph, that is the last word in ascendency. So Zion speaks of being over, up, through: it is there above all other places spiritually. Thus Zion becomes the symbol of the life of the Lord's people in the place of His Lordship or of His power, and it is the very embodiment of the meaning of the kingdom of God. And remember, that while by new birth we are brought into the kingdom of God -- "Except one be born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3) -- the kingdom of God is also within you (Luke 17:21). Both things are true. You come into a position by birth, but that position comes into you. The Kingdom has to be in you. The Kingdom is not just the realm of God's reign. It is a form, a nature, a kind of reign which is above every other authority and power. "His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey him" (Dan. 7:27). It is a spiritual thing in the first place. People talk about the kingdom of God in such earthly ways. They speak of

"extending the Kingdom". The idea is that you are building something up over a wide superficial area, whereas the Kingdom means something very much more than that. The kingdom of God is a deep thing, a mighty thing; "a kingdom which cannot be shaken" (Heb. 12:28). Zion, meaning ascension through victory, becomes the simile of spiritual power.

### Holiness Basic to Spiritual Power

Upon what does spiritual power rest? Power with God, power from God in our lives and in this world, enabling us to overcome; upon what does it rest? Who shall ascend? "He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto falsehood, and hath not sworn deceitfully" (Ps. 24:4). "I have set my king upon my HOLY hill of Zion" (Ps. 2:6). This matter of spiritual power is a matter of holiness at its root and foundation. Many have thought that spiritual power is a matter of enduement. To receive a "baptism" of the Holy Spirit, that is said to be the way of power -- something that happens to you like that. Let me point out that that concerns power for witness. "Ye shall receive power, when the Holy Spirit is come upon you: and ye shall be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8). But power over the power of the enemy is by reason of the nature of the Holy Spirit -- the HOLY Spirit -- and the witness, the power, of the church in its effectiveness at the beginning was simply because the HOLY Spirit had come to be absolutely in the ascendent as Lord. That is why, when in the book of the Acts you so soon find something unholy rising up in the midst, there was such an instant action of judgment by the Spirit. You will recall the cases of Ananias and Sapphira and others.

That opens up a very long and full history, and you at once see that the great enemy's one means and method of destroying power over him was to corrupt, to introduce something unholy. That is the history of man. "Thou makest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet" (Ps. 8:6). But that purpose was definitely countered for the whole race by the subtle movement of the enemy to introduce something unclean, unholy. It was done. The enemy did not come with an army and assail objectively. He simply insinuated something unholy, and that did it, and that whole kingdom crashed. From the beginning it has been like that, all the way through. Israel's history is just such a history. The Lord's purpose for Israel, as we have seen, was that they should be above all the nations of the earth, the head and not the tail. Then Balaam was hired to curse them. But you cannot curse people who are holy. He came in his heart to curse, but his very lips were taken hold of by God, and he said the most glorious things of Israel. "He hath not beheld iniquity in Jacob" (Numbers 23:21). "Who can curse a people like these whom God hath blessed? I am helpless in this matter." He went away and came back a second time to seek to defeat these people, to bring them down from their excellency. I suggest you read again those three visits of Balaam and all the magnificent things he said about Israel. He describes them from God's standpoint. After three tries he has to give it up. In effect, he has to say, "It is no good; people like that cannot be paralysed by a curse, they cannot be defeated." But then he sells himself, and somehow his soul is bound in the irons of covetousness, and what he cannot do directly, Satan leads him to do indirectly. You have those words in Micah (6:5) about Balaam, and then in Revelation: "Thou hast there some that hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit fornication" (Rev. 2:14). Balaam went round to the back door and introduced something unclean -- idolatry -- and down Israel came. How awful is the tragedy of the crash of that glorious people! Not from a position which they had reached by their own merits, not from an exalted condition which was their own native condition, but a position in which God had placed them through faith in Him; our blessed position in Christ it was, virtually. It was not true literally to say of Israel that there was no iniquity or sin or wrong in them. It was how God looked at them while they were

there encompassing the tabernacle in a full obedience to the Lord. God looked at them, so to speak, in Christ positionally.

But then idolatry was introduced. It is the story which arises again and again, both generally and particularly, of how Satan gains the ascendancy, what the ground of Satan's power is. The ground is always something unholy.

Is not that the story of Job from one angle? Job, on the ground of righteousness which is by deeds, acts, externalities -- the law, if you like -- is found blameless. On that ground, then, Satan is released to assail, and under the assault you find things rising up in Job that he would never have suspected. No one would have believed those things were in Job, and Satan is finding a good deal of power, of ground, to shake him to his very foundations, until Job gets through to another position. This is not the position of what he is according to the righteousness which is of the law -- works, deeds, externalities. It is a position of righteousness virtually by faith, where, so far as he himself is concerned, he no longer talks as he did at the beginning about the kind things he did, and of how everybody acknowledged what a good, generous man he was. "Now", he says, "I have learned something;" "Mine eye seeth thee: wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5,6). When he got through there and capitulated to the Lord, Satan's power was taken right away. Do you notice there is a certain stage in the course of that conflict where Satan disappears from the scene? Satan is very much in evidence at the beginning; but where is he at the end? What has happened to him? You cannot find him. A work has gone on within Job which has taken the ground from Satan and compelled him to retire, and in the end the man is in the place of absolute ascendancy -- over friends, circumstances, himself and the devil. A new ground has been found; not the ground of his own righteousness, but the ground of Another's righteousness. You find right through, as the matter develops, that Job is crying for someone else -- for a daysman, a mediator, an advocate; and the only one who answers his need is the Lord Jesus. You see it again and again. His cry is for this mediator to stand between; and speaking typically, Job passes from his own ground to the ground of Christ. And that is ascendancy; the enemy is out of court.

You come to later days, to Israel and the prophets. Take the third chapter of Zechariah. "And he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to be his adversary". Satan is in the place of power to resist. Joshua represents Israel, and in that vision of the filthy garments we have Israel's unclean condition before God, resulting in Israel's utter impotence in the presence of the enemy; weakness, powerlessness, because of uncleanness. Not only are the filthy garments taken away, but a new white robe is put upon Joshua, and a fair mitre upon his head. The word is, "The Lord rebuke thee, O Satan... is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?". The rebuke to Satan is administered when the condition is changed. That is to say, in other words, Satan's power is only, but always, established where there is unholiness. Ascendancy over Satan is not something objective: it is a matter of condition.

So you find that the whole thing turns, in Israel's history, upon the priests. How is the priest? That is how the people are. Look at the situation in the days of Eli. The priests, what of them? Look at Eli's sons. The priesthood is corrupt: there is gross uncleanness. How is Israel? Utterly in defeat, captured. It is a deplorable picture of a people brought down from their excellency to lowest levels of defeat, helplessness and misery. The priesthood was the key to the situation: as with Joshua, so with Eli.

What is priesthood? What is the meaning of it? Priesthood has to do with the removal of sin, of corruption. That is the secret of life. The priest stands for the life of God's people. But there is no life where there is

corruption, and there is no power with God where there is unholiness.

We could go right on to the New Testament, to the churches in Asia. It is the same trouble over again. "I have this against thee: thou hast there that and that and that". What is the effect? They are helpless, impotent, defeated. The one word which relates to them most is "Overcome". So we get the force of the words, "To him that overcometh" -- "You are under; you have to get over, but you cannot take this position officially and mechanically: things have to be dealt with."

I think I have said enough to show what the real foundation of spiritual power is, power with God, power over the enemy. It ought to be helpful to us.

### The Defilement of Self-interest

We do go through it in our spiritual experience! How persistent the enemy is to get us somehow involved in something questionable! There is an extraordinary phrase used in relation to Israel's life -- a phrase not easy to understand, and I do not profess to understand all it means; but there it is. It is this phrase: "the iniquity of the holy things" (Ex. 28:38). What does it mean? I can see something of what it means, and a great deal more than I am going to say now. I am only going to suggest to you that in the fuller meaning it means this -- that there are holy things, and it is in the realm of the holy things that the enemy is always trying to get something that involves compromise.

Love, true love, is the most holy thing, and it is in the realm of love that the enemy is always trying to get something compromising, something wrong. We have said ambition is not a wrong thing. It is a divinely implanted thing. God made man to have dominion. Perhaps ambition is the wrong word; aspiration is a more spiritual word -- the desire, the sensing of destiny, that you were made to rise, made to attain. You were not made a worm grovelling on the earth: you were made with legs; which means that you were made to get somewhere. Interpreted spiritually and morally, God made us to rise, to reach, to attain. That mighty instinct is found in the apostle -- "Not that I have already obtained, or am already made perfect: but I press on..." (Phil. 3:12). Here it is at work, that kind of thing. Aspiration is a holy thing. Is it not just there that all the iniquity is found? -- the self-element, the possessive, the acquisitive, the assertive, the domineering, the effort to gain dominion. Then dominion becomes domination, and it has gone wrong: the very spirit of it has gone. Meekness has become pride, the glory of God has become instead our glory. It is the iniquity of holy things: and remember, that the nearer you get to the most holy, the nearer you get to the deepest perils. The deep things of Satan lie next to the deep things of God. "The iniquity of the holy things." The Lord gives something which is His gift, and it is holy; and then the enemy seeks to spoil it by bringing in something that is not holy. The Lord has ever had to do a work there of cutting in between. He gave Isaac to Abraham, a holy gift. It was God's gift, something utterly of God, very pure. In principle God's most utter gift. Then God had to say: Offer him! What is happening? Abraham is in peril now, in infinite peril of the iniquity of a holy thing. What is it? To hold that personally to himself and not let it go. A self-hold may come in to spoil the holy thing. It was when the self that was there was resisted without hesitation, when in faith Abraham responded to God and let the boy go, that the boy was given back a thousand-fold forever and ever on holy ground. There must be no self-ground. What a perilous moment that was for Abraham, lest his personal love should come in and interfere with his holding everything for God! And that is a thing with which you and I are continuously confronted and assailed. Holy things; but an impingement of personal interest, and the holy things are robbed of their power. We could mention thing after thing that is holy and yet that holy thing, which is meant to be of such account, such spiritual value, can be robbed of it all because something comes in that is unholy.

## The Defilement of an Earth Touch

Let me say again that the unholy thing need not be something that all the world would call evil. When we talk about unholiness, our thoughts fly to certain things which we call unclean and corrupt and evil, certain positive things. Oh, but it goes very much deeper than that. You see, it may only be what we have before called the earth touch. We live in a world and on an earth that is cursed. Everything in this creation lies under a curse, the proof of which is becoming more and more patent; for the higher man rises the quicker he destroys himself with his work. He cannot rule out the power of death and evil from his world however high he rises. The further he goes, the more that power of evil and death works. It is such a vain, false thing to talk about a "new world", a "new order", until you have changed man's very nature. We live in a world, in a creation, like that, and the prince of this world has got things in his hands; there is no doubt about it. If you live in his world, he has you in his hands. Step across from the kingdom of God's Son to the kingdom of the enemy and you know you touch death. In many, many ways we know we touch death when we do that. The further we go with the Lord, the more we find we dare not touch that other realm. What we could touch as Christians at one time we may not touch now. We are learning. We could talk at one time in a way in which we may not now. We have learned in a very grim way that others may, but we may not. As you go on in a certain realm, you are becoming more and more limited in another realm.

That is the difficulty of going right on with the Lord, being of "the hundred and forty-four thousand" company. There is a certain amount of isolation. You have gone with the Lord -- "They... follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth" -- and no one else follows you; you are very much alone; it is spiritual loneliness. We are in this world and if we touch it in a voluntary way we become defiled. I am not saying we have to leave our business. As Paul says, if we are not going to have anything to do with this world in practical ways, we had better go right out of it (1 Cor. 5:10). That is not the point. The question is that of our voluntary moral and spiritual links, our choices. It is not our business obligations that need involve us, but our heart association -- the sort of things we want, like, choose. Those things bring a death touch, and we come under arrest. We find we have lost our position, our spiritual power, our ascendancy, whatever that may mean -- our joy, peace, rest. We have touched the dead realm somewhere in spirit. It is a terrible thing in spirit to touch death -- and that is iniquity. You have touched iniquity.

Hence the Lord has to do this work of the Cross in us. It is no use saying, Bring us not over this Jordan! Jordan has to do its work continually, to cut right in.

Let me say here, for the sake of the Lord's servants particularly, that this is the realm in which our main education takes place. You and I, as the Lord's servants who have responsibility in the things of God, are up against this question of spiritual power all the time. We find the enemy so entrenched, we find him holding the ground. We meet so much that does not yield, and our whole question is one of power, power with God and power over the enemy. Now, it is not always a case of flagrant wickedness, a Corinthian situation of gross moral sin, of wrong in the domestic and social life of the saints, of doubtful business dealings, and so on, with which we have to deal.

Where these are found, they are, of course, holding up everything, and must be dealt with. But as we go on we find that spiritual progress, coming to a place of real increase, of spiritual ascendancy, is not just a matter of dealing with what everybody would call evils and iniquities, but it may only be an earth touch that is involved -- in this sense, that a thing is too earthly, the horizon is an earthly horizon. We have come down to earth, and it is a matter now of the success of our work in the eyes of men, of all sorts of things which are earthly considerations.

We are involved in something which, after all, while it means to be for the Lord and is very zealous for Him, nevertheless is itself so earthly. There is a worldly principle in this. It is only as we come to that completely heavenly position, where every earthly and natural consideration is set aside, and nothing matters to us here so long as the Lord is being glorified, that ours is a true position. What does it matter whether everybody leaves us and goes somewhere else, so long as they have gone after the Lord?

It does not matter to me whether all of you get up and go, and never come back here, so long as you have found more of Christ somewhere else. If you do, I will be after you, to enjoy it with you! If you have found something more of Christ, that is all that matters. Is that true of organized Christianity today? What about the charge of sheep stealing? On what does that rest? OUR fold, not the Lord's fold: OUR people, OUR workers, taken away. It is OURS! If all who had responsibility would but take the attitude, "If only they can find more of the Lord somewhere else, let them go as soon as they can: we are prepared for our whole organization to come to an end, if only that is true.

If we cannot be the channels of meeting their need, well, the Lord save us from trying to carry on something that is not delivering the goods." An utterly detached position, with no personal interest or consideration at all, is the only place of spiritual power. That is ascendancy, that is heavenliness. It is very real, and again I say to you, that is the realm of our education as the Lord's servants. If we are going on into fullness, we shall be learning all along the line what has to go, what we cannot touch, what the Lord cannot allow.

He will allow and bless up to that point, but beyond that point something more has to be done, the question at issue being, not something of positive sinfulness, in the sense in which men speak of sinfulness, but just some earth touch, something we have never before realized to be of the old creation. So the matter of spiritual ascendancy becomes very practical.

#### Encouragement to Perseverance

I cannot close without going back, lest anyone should come under oppression over this. There are two sides to this matter. We have seen Israel spread abroad in the valley and Balaam looking down from the height, and what the Lord made Balaam to say, as expressive of His own attitude toward them because they were centred in His Son: and that is true. Our position in Christ through redeeming grace is so complete and perfect that there never, never can be added anything to it; it is perfect.

Even to Corinthians, who are always looked at by us as the poorest specimens of Christians in the New Testament, with all that was there that was so unhappy, so unholy, the apostle will begin by saying, "sanctified in Christ Jesus, called saints". Not "called to be saints": the words "to be" are not in the original text and should be left out, as they entirely upset the whole idea. "Called saints". When you are called saints, you are regarded as saints. "Sanctified in Christ Jesus".

So far as our position in Christ is concerned, we shall never be any more sanctified than we were at the beginning, than we are today. But no one is going to settle down on that and say that nothing matters. We have now to walk according to our calling. The battle is on, the enemy is out to put us out of our position in Christ, to make it unreal. That is just where the mighty power of the Holy Spirit comes in to educate and discipline us. We pass into experiences which, but for the mighty reactions of the Holy Spirit in us, the mercy and grace of God, would undo us as the Lord's servants, rob us of all our power, because they are compromising positions.

But, while our hearts are really toward the Lord, the Spirit goes on and does the work, and brings us inwardly to the place where already in Christ we are deemed to be. We are in Zion, we are there positionally, and yet we are on the way to Zion. Do not be discouraged if the way seems difficult. It is a rising way, and that means you have to overcome something with every step. You have only to take one step at a time; do not try to take two or three. If you look right up there to the summit from the beginning, you may be discouraged.

If your feet are on the way to Zion, take the next step. And don't forget, young people, that in this way the first wind is usually our zeal, and power to go only comes when the first wind comes to an end. God's power really comes when our first wind gives out. I mean this, that when we come to the place where we have to say, "I cannot go on any further; unless something happens, I shall never go on" -- that is all right. What some of us have proved in the further stages of this way to Zion is that the power of God to keep us going is altogether independent of our enthusiasm.

The marvel is that we have gone on at all. We have not done it because we were so enthusiastic. All that has long since waned and dried up. Now it is something very much more than enthusiasm that keeps us going; it is nothing less than the power of His resurrection. That is the power working in us of which the apostle speaks, when he says, "Unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us" (Eph.3:20).

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