

The Incarnation

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon explores the profound significance of the Incarnation in the context of redemption, emphasizing faith and the believer's relationship with God.

Scripture: Genesis 1:31, Ezekiel 48:35, John 1:17, John 17:4-5, Romans 7:14, Romans 8:17, Galatians 2:20, Ephesians 4:21, Hebrews 2:10, 1 Peter 1:9

Topics: "Redemption", "The Incarnation"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes that the Incarnation is central to understanding the truth of Jesus Christ, asserting that true knowledge of God comes through a personal relationship with Him. He explains that the Incarnation serves three primary purposes: the reclamation of man from sin, the reconstitution of man to restore his intended state, and the perfecting and glorifying of man through faith. Sparks highlights that the essence of redemption is not merely in what Jesus did, but in who He is, as He embodies the very nature of redemption itself. The sermon underscores the importance of faith in Jesus as the means through which believers can experience these aspects of redemption in their lives.

Transcript

As we take up these meditations, let me utter a brief word of caution. We are not just embarking upon some 'line of truth'--a theme, a subject. The fact is that there is no 'truth' apart from the Lord Jesus Himself, and the truth is in Him, not about Him. For the right apprehension, therefore, of the truth, a personal relationship with Himself in life is essential. We cannot know the Truth except by union with the Lord Jesus in a living way. That in turn demands the work of the Holy Spirit upon us and in us, and that means that we must be in a spiritual condition to understand and apprehend the truth, "even as truth is in Jesus" (Eph. 4:21). Our life--all of our life--our hope, our salvation, our way, our assurance--our everything--is centred in the Lord Jesus Himself. It is not centred in some aspect or interpretation of the truth: it is centred in Himself. Everything, therefore, is resolved into a matter of knowing Him, of 'attaining unto the full knowledge of the Son of God' (Eph. 4:13); and the value of what the Lord may say to us in the ensuing pages will depend entirely upon our living relationship to Him, Who is the Truth: the Sum of truth, and the Power of the truth.

Introductory

We have called this series of studies 'The Octave of Redemption'. The word 'octave' (from the Latin octavus) means 'eighth', and in music it means the interval between the first and last of the eight primary

notes which complete the musical scale, since every eighth note repeats the first at a higher (or lower) level. We might equally well have taken as our title 'The Rainbow of Redemption', for we have a very similar thought there, with the seven primary colours, and then number eight returning to number one. In such 'octaves', we see one series, or phase, or movement, completed, and a new one commenced; the series of seven is never regarded as finished in itself--it must have the next to make the scale complete. We know, if we try it on an instrument, how necessary the 'eight' is--how incomplete seven is without eight.

This feature of 'seven plus one' is peculiarly a mark of Christianity. Christianity is based upon the day after the Sabbath day, upon the eighth day which became the first day of the week. Judaism remains the religion of the seventh day: we know how incomplete it is, how it has stopped short and never gone on, never moved into taking the eighth day as the first. Christianity rests upon that eighth day which has become the first--the end of a phase of Divine work and the beginning of a new. The word 'Sabbath', however, does not mean 'seventh'; it means 'rest'. Seven sees a completeness; eight means that God begins again upon something that has been completed. His new beginning is out from something finished--God proceeds from completion. That is Christianity: it rests upon something finished, and that something finished is God's rest, God's satisfaction. He begins everything from that point.

As you may know, the letters of the Hebrew alphabet are not only symbols for sounds, but also symbols for numerals; that is, each letter has a numerical value. And that is not only true of the Hebrew language. The name 'Jesus', in the Greek form, as used in the New Testament, has six letters, each letter having a numerical value; and when all those letters are put together with their numerical value they add up to 888. 'Jesus' = 888. I am not making a great deal of that, or trying to be fanciful, but I think it is impressive--I do not think that is an accident. He is the 'eighth day' Man, the One Who has gone beyond, having perfected the work of redemption.

Eight Aspects Of Redemption

Now, redemption may be said to have eight primary notes or aspects. There are, of course, many subsidiary features, but there are eight primary ones. These are:

1. The Incarnation
2. The Earthly Life
3. The Cross and Resurrection
4. The Forty Days after the Resurrection
5. The Ascension and the Glorifying
6. The Advent of the Holy Spirit
7. The Birth, Vocation and Completion of the Church
8. The Coming Again.

Into these everything else is gathered, and there is nothing outside of them; they complete the scale. You will notice that one and eight are the two comings. In principle, eight returns full circle to one: it is the coming of the Lord, representing two completions. The first coming, the Incarnation, was the completion of a phase: "The law was given by Moses; grace and truth came by Jesus Christ" (John 1:17); and it need

not be emphasized that the coming again will be likewise the completion of a phase. But each is also the beginning of an entirely new phase. "The hour cometh, and now is...", said the Lord Jesus (John 4:23), introducing that new phase, and we may indeed thank God that it will be true when He comes again.

One other small technical point by the way. The Hebrew word for 'seven' just means 'satisfaction' or 'completion'. We scarcely need comment upon that. God saw all things: they were "very good" (Gen. 1:31); and God rested in His satisfaction, in the completion of His work. But the Hebrew word for 'eight' is again a very interesting word. It takes its rise from the root 'shammah', which occurs in one of the names of the Lord, 'Jehovah-Shammah' (Ezek. 48:35), meaning 'the Lord super-abundant', the all-sufficient One. So eight follows seven. Seven signifies completeness, and yet the Lord never stops there--He is super-abundant.

Now we shall approach each of these different aspects--these eight 'notes' in the 'scale' of redemption --with a question: the question 'Why?', and we apply it first to the Incarnation: Why the Incarnation? Why was it necessary that the Son of God should take human form and human nature?

Why The Incarnation?

Of course, to answer that fully we should be under the obligation to consider the whole of the Divine thought and conception in the creation of man at all. Man's conception in the mind of God, man's vocation and man's destiny--this all represents a very great thing in the thought of God. But we have to allow that to come in at this point in order to lead us further. We might say--and rightly--that the Bible is all about God. That is true. We might go on to say that the Bible is all about God's interest in His Son, and that is quite true. But when you have taken full account of both these facts, you find that you cannot divorce either of these matters from man. The Bible is all about God--yes, but it is about God and His relationship to man, and man's relationship to Him. It is all about God's Son--and yet it is all about the concern of God's Son for man. When you have said everything, you arrive at man. We should not be interested in a remote God outside of the realm of human life. The truth is that everything has to focus down upon man, and we find that the Bible is the book of God's interest in man. Somehow God's interests are inexplicably bound up with man--his vocation and his destiny. All this and what it implies will be gathered into what we are going to say about the Incarnation.

Why the Incarnation? The answer is threefold. Firstly, for the redemption, or reclamation, of man. Secondly, for the reconstruction or re-constitution of man. And thirdly, for the perfecting and glorifying of man.

(1) For The Reclamation Of Man

Firstly, for the redemption or reclamation of man. The common idea about redemption is associated with the slave market--going into the slave market and buying out or buying back, redeeming, that which has been sold into it. There are, indeed, certain fragments of Scripture which lend themselves to that idea. "Sold under sin" (Rom. 7:14) is a scriptural phrase, but we need some clarification of it. You say redemption means the 'buying out' of man from the slave market. He has been sold into some kind of slavery and bondage. True; but who sold him? Until you look into that question, and answer it, you have not really got to the meaning of redemption. Who sold him? He sold himself! That puts a new complexion upon things. We speak of a man 'selling himself to the Devil'. But how did he do it? Well, he did not sell himself objectively, like selling some chattel, some thing, some object, into another's possession. He sold himself subjectively--he sold himself in his soul. He actually sold his soul to the Devil.

But exactly what happened? Let us put it in this way. There was a day when someone knocked, and he opened the door: and that someone began to speak, and to speak treachery, under cover of beautiful language, and clothed in very appealing terms: and instead of slamming the door in the face of that visitor, he opened it a little wider and listened. Remember--that is always the first step to bondage, that is always the first movement towards a situation calling for redemption-- listening to the Devil, and not immediately reacting with a question: Is this true of God, or is this false as to God? Is God a Person like that, or is He other than that? If every Christian would react like that to satanic suggestions and insinuations, what a different situation would obtain in many Christian lives! There are many in awful bondage because they have listened, they have opened the door; they have never confronted themselves with this question: Do you really believe that God is a God like that? Let me urge you to take that question to your present problem--situations and conditions, accusations and condemnations that the enemy is always trying to throw at you, in order to bring you into bondage--and say: Is God really like that?

The Root Sin: Unbelief

When man opened the door of his soul and listened to the enemy, he opened himself to unbelief. And remember--unbelief is the root sin. Let us be quite clear about that. There may be motives behind, but the root sin is unbelief. It is the one thing that God will not have, the one thing that sets God back, holds Him off, makes Him non-committal. Whilst there is any unbelief, God stands back; so long as it persists, the gap grows. God will never commit Himself where there is unbelief. Does that sound elementary? It is a thing that pursues us right to the end. This question of faith in God is the basis of all our education. Let it be said straight away that the measure in which God has ever committed Himself or will ever commit Himself is the measure of our faith in Him. When man opened the door to unbelief, Satan put his foot inside, right into man's soul, and has never taken it out. He has maintained that foothold in man's soul ever since. So that now the soul of man, as he is by nature, is linked with the evil powers, and the strength of that link is unbelief. Until that unbelief can be completely broken, shattered, the union between natural man and Satan continues.

Redemption or reclamation begins with faith: that is what we should call the simple Gospel. Faith is the very beginning of redemption. But faith is also the basis of continual redemption, continual recovery or reclamation. Redemption, while in Christ it is completed and perfect, is something that is going on: we are 'receiving the end of our faith, the salvation of our souls' (1 Pet. 1:9). This matter is going on continually; it is progressive. While final in the work of Christ, it begins in us with the first exercise of faith--believing God--and proceeds upon that basis right to the end. How true it is that, when we fail to believe God, cease to believe God, have questions about God, we immediately come into some kind of bondage; Satan gets some hold, or has some gain. Immediately any doubt of the Lord comes in, we find ourselves at once locked up, and the only way out is a recovery of faith in God again.

Now, because of his unbelief, Adam brought about and established for the whole race a soul-link with the evil powers, and that is the nature of man's bondage. He is sold to another. That lays the foundation for the real, true meaning of redemption. Why the Incarnation? 'A final Adam to the fight and to the rescue came': another Man came to redeem man. But oh, we shall see as we go on that that was no mere objective activity--it was not just the things that He did. He was in His very being the Redeemer. Let me put that in another way: He was redemption. He not only did something, but He was that. This will become clearer later. But here we see the necessity for a Man of whom none of this is true coming to the rescue: a Man Who, because of His non-implication personally in the entail of Adam's sin, has a clear and unique advantage. The Incarnation was to provide redemption for man in a Man, and not only for man by a Man. I

hope you see the significance of that. It is a tremendous thing to see not only what Jesus did, but what He was to meet the situation.

(2) For The Re-Constitution Of Man

By Adam's act, as we have seen, man became disordered in his very constitution, deranged, broken, another kind of being from what God had made him and intended him to be. He was robbed, and therefore deficient; deceived, and therefore defrauded. He lost what he had--his innocence. He lost what God meant him to have, and had already provided for him, on the basis of faith in Himself. He became a culpable being. Reading back with our Bible in our hand and the full revelation of Scripture, we are now able to see what man was intended to have. It all becomes clear now. He was intended for two things.

Firstly, he was intended to have the Spirit of God indwelling him. He was intended to be a temple of God. The whole Scripture now makes it perfectly clear that it was God's original intention that He should dwell in man, that the Spirit of God should be resident within. Secondly, it was intended that he should have within him what is now called in the New Testament "eternal life"--the life of the ages, Divine life, uncreated life. But he missed the intention of God in both respects. The Incarnation was for the express purpose of begetting a 'new-creation' man in which those two things could become actualities: man now indwelt by the Spirit of God; man possessing eternal life. That is the answer to the question: Why the Incarnation? And let me repeat that the Lord Jesus not only effected that as some accomplishment, or transaction, or work done: He was Himself the first of that order, to beget another race after that kind.

(3) For The Perfecting And Glorifying Of Man

And finally, the perfecting and the glorifying of man. Of course, these two things are clearly seen in Jesus, the Son of Man. Some of the more serious things of the Word of God are said in this connection. "Though He was a Son, yet learned [He] obedience by the things which He suffered" (Heb. 5:8). He was made "perfect through sufferings" (Heb. 2:10). We will not stop with the theology or the doctrine of that. We can focus it down to the one word which we have used and underlined already. How was He perfected, or completed?

I think, in faith. He had, as Man, accepted voluntarily a basis of faith--to live His life on the principle of faith in God, His Father. And it was concerning that that every trial and testing and ordeal had its meaning--if by any means the enemy could entrap the last Adam, as he had the first. He had succeeded with the first race on one point only, and that point was unbelief. So successful a manoeuvre could lead him to believe that there was no better. 'That is the thing that does it--that is the point upon which to focus', we can almost hear him say. It opens up the life of the Lord Jesus very much more fully and clearly to recognize that the focal point of all His trials, testings, satanic assaults, every imaginable thing that was working contrary to Him--and we have not got the whole story, by any means--had as its one object the insinuation of some question about His Father. The enemy knew that the devastation of a new creation could be brought about on that one thing. And he knows it today, with you and with me. Then, the Son of Man was made perfect through sufferings. In what way? what were His sufferings? I do not mean His physical sufferings. His physical sufferings were but the ways and means by which the enemy was trying to get at His soul. The real suffering that the Son of God, the Son of Man, knew, was this constant, nagging pressure and assault from every angle, the unceasing efforts of the enemy to get in between Himself and His Father. That was the essence of His supreme agony when He cried: 'Thou hast forsaken Me!' I do not believe, and I am sure you do not believe, that His cry in the garden--"If it be possible, let this cup pass

from Me"--was the cry of a Man Who was not prepared to die even the kind of death that He was facing. That kind of thing has, of course, given rise to an utterly false doctrine and theology. Jesus knew what He had to face in being made sin: He knew that the ultimate, dire issue lay in that moment when the Father's face would be turned away, and He would be left, like the scape-goat out in the wilderness, alone, alone, alone--God-forsaken in that one awful moment. That was the point of His suffering, and that was the sum of His suffering.

But through it all, through all the sufferings, He was made perfect--perfect in faith. What meaning that gives to such words as these, so familiar to us, and used so lightly: "The life which I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God, Who loved me, and gave Himself up for me" (Gal. 2:20, A.V.). What a faith to live by! If only that faith could be transmitted to us--if only that faith could be in us in the power of the Holy Spirit! Then we should get through all right. "I live by the faith of the Son of God"--tested, tried, assailed to the last degree, and triumphant. I am glad that the end of the story was not on the note of God-forsakenness, but on the note of triumph: "Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit." It is all over--it is victory! That is faith perfected through suffering, and made complete by obedience--for obedience is always faith's proof. There is no such thing as faith without obedience.

Why The Transfiguration?

At this point we might put in an extra question: Why the transfiguration? The transfiguration represented the end of His own course, the end of His own road. He had travelled the road of testing and trying, the road of utterness of consecration to His Father. So far as He personally was concerned, He had no further to go. He had been obedient--that was the end of the road for Him. Hence glory could come in then. For Him there is glory--the transfiguration: a Man Who has gone all the way with God in faith's obedience has been glorified. But as for the rest, that is for us--that is our part in it. He came out of that glory, and, 'instead of that joy set before Him, He endured the Cross' (Heb. 12:2). He took our place, in order to bring us to His place--to glory --"many sons to glory" (Heb. 2:10), and He was thereby made "perfect through sufferings." A Man glorified, through faith, for man--nothing apart from us.

His glorification, as we shall see later, is a part of the redemption. It is a part of the re-constitution, it is the issue of all; and therefore, since the redemption and the re-constitution are for us in Christ, the glorifying is for us in Him also. 'Glorified together with Him' (Rom. 8:17). He was able to say at the last: 'Father, I have glorified Thee upon the earth'; and therefore He could also say: "Father, glorify Thou Me... with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was" (John 17:4-5). The point is that here on this earth the Lord Jesus lived a life of faith, and was as utterly dependent upon God for everything as you or I are. His was as utterly a life of faith as ever you and I are called upon to live. And on that basis, as Man, He went through in such complete satisfaction to God that He could be glorified. But remember, the Incarnation was not for Himself: it was for us, and all that was bound up with the Incarnation is for us. It is our redemption, our re-constitution and our glorification through perfecting in Him.

What Christ Is For Us

Now, all this lays the foundation for believing--it is a pity we have not got the exact translation--'believing on to, or into, the Lord Jesus'. Just to say: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ", is weak; it leaves much to be desired. This is positional: it indicates a change of position, a movement: 'Believe on to the Lord Jesus Christ.' It really means this: that there is in true faith something that makes Him, so to speak, into ourselves, and ourselves into Him. Do not misunderstand me: I am not talking about Deity--I am talking

about the Son of Man. There is something of deep spiritual significance in that word at the Lord's Table: "My body, Which is for you". Leaving out the extreme and wrong ideas associated with transubstantiation, and all that, behind it there is something left for the dispensation to recognize, until He comes again. Behind it there is this principle: that faith's appropriation of the Lord Jesus makes good in us what He is. We are redeemed through faith in Him. We are re-constituted through faith in Him. We are perfected through faith in Him. We are glorified through faith in Him. But it is not just objective--it is a matter of our taking the position that all that is true of Him is true of Him for us.

How impossible it is to explain! But you and I have got to learn what it really means to take our stand, in faith, on the ground of what Jesus Christ is--because then something happens. Our troubles arise out of standing upon the ground of what we are, or upon appearances or arguments--something objective--instead of taking our position upon the ground that the Son of God became incarnate, not only to work out, but Himself to be, my redemption. And by faith on Him there is redemption. He came to be my re-constitution: and, by faith on Him, through the action of the Holy Spirit, something happens, and I am re-constituted. He came to be my perfection: and through faith on Him the Holy Spirit takes up the work of my perfecting. He came to be my glorification: and faith gives the Holy Spirit His requisite, essential, indispensable ground for bringing us also to the glory of Christ, to be glorified together with Him.

Until we believe, and believe on to the Lord Jesus, the Holy Spirit stands back. You may perhaps deceive yourself, but you cannot deceive the Holy Spirit. You cannot have one foot on one ground and one foot on another. If you have got one foot on what you are, and the other foot--you think--on what Christ is, you are a divided person. The Holy Spirit does not commit Himself: He stands back and waits. He says, Put both feet on Christ, and then I will begin to do something.

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