

The Incentive to Maturity

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of spiritual growth and maturity, highlighting the purpose of God through maturity and the need for believers to go on to full growth.

Scripture: Romans 8:19, Romans 8:29, 1 Corinthians 3:1-3, 2 Corinthians 3:18, Galatians 3:26, Galatians 4:6, Galatians 4:19, Ephesians 1:5, Ephesians 4:13, Hebrews 2:10

Topics: "Divine Purpose", "Spiritual Maturity"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the urgency of spiritual maturity in his sermon 'The Incentive to Maturity', highlighting that the New Testament is primarily focused on urging believers towards full growth in Christ. He explains that maturity is essential not just for personal development but for fulfilling God's divine purpose, which includes governance over the world to come. Sparks points out that the letters of Paul address various aspects of spiritual growth, stressing that immaturity hinders believers from realizing their calling and inheritance as children of God. He underscores the importance of understanding our identity in Christ and the necessity of pressing on towards maturity to fulfill God's eternal purpose. Ultimately, the sermon calls for a deep commitment to spiritual growth as a response to God's grace and purpose.

Transcript

Reading: Romans 8:19,29; 1 Cor. 3:1-3; 2 Cor. 3:18; Gal. 3:26; 4:6,19.

We have already pointed out how much there is of strength and urgency in the New Testament concerning full spiritual growth. Indeed, more than ninety percent of the New Testament is addressed to believers for that very purpose. Every letter of Paul's is a strong urge in that direction, and was written specifically for the increase of Christ in the believers, that they might come to full growth, to the stature of the fullness of Christ.

We observed that this is not only true in a general way, but that every letter of the apostle deals with the matter of spiritual growth from a different standpoint, or has a particular aspect of that matter to deal with, which, of course, has its occasion in the situation existing in the different places to which the letters were sent.

Then we began to consider the letters of Paul in their bearing upon this matter, and we got to the end of the second letter to the Corinthians. If the Lord wills, we will presently review that ground as we approach the letter to the Galatians, but we want to say another word first concerning the urgency of this matter.

Why Maturity is so Vital

It does not require argument and evidence to be produced to convince you that this is a matter of very great importance from the Lord's standpoint. It is quite impossible to read the New Testament and fail to see that it is to this end the Lord is by His Word and Spirit urging believers all the time, making it perfectly manifest that the Lord's thought is not just the salvation of men from sin and from judgment. The greater emphasis with the Lord is what they are saved unto, rather than what they are saved from. It is divine purpose which is always governing, and the calling by His grace is according to His purpose: "according to the eternal purpose". We must remember that salvation, from start to finish, at every point, is related to divine purpose, is toward an end, is with something in view, and in order to reach that which is in view in divine purpose a going on with God unto full spiritual measure is necessary.

There again it needs to be said, that to have full grown people is not an end in itself. The end in view is that they may be prepared and fitted for the purpose unto which He has called. No mere spiritual infant, who is such beyond the point of time where infancy ought to have ceased, can come into the divine purpose, and that is the reason why there is this tremendous emphasis placed upon the tragedy of immaturity when it ought to be otherwise, and upon the necessity for maturity. It is with something of a groan that the apostle writes these words to the Corinthians: "And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, as unto babes". Now it is all right to speak to babes when they are rightly such, but when it is time they were more than babes it is a terrible thing to have to go on speaking to them thus.

So that we must see what the purpose of God through maturity is, before we can feel the real weight and recognise the real importance of full spiritual growth. What is the purpose of God? What is that eternal purpose to which we are called by His grace in Christ Jesus? There are several words in the New Testament which are very full words, and very significant words. There is the word "adoption", a very misunderstood word by us, because it means something entirely different in our Western language from what it means in the New Testament. There is another word "sons"; and, again, another word "inheritance". If you look at those words you will find that they are always related to a particular thing. They are related to a position in the ages to come, and that position is definitely stated to be dominion over the inhabited earth. That governs everything in the thought of God. You will remember that in the second chapter of the letter to the Hebrews that is clearly and definitely stated: "...not unto angels did he subject the inhabited earth to come, whereof we speak. But one in a certain place hath testified, saying, What is man that thou art mindful of him -- putttest him in charge?". The inhabited earth to come will be subjected to man, and it is that particular man which is God's object in this specific dispensation. It is the corporate man in Christ; the church which is His Body, conformed to the image of God's Son, of whom He is the firstborn, as the firstborn among many brethren. Thus the letter to the Hebrews goes on to say that in bringing many sons to glory the Author of their salvation was made perfect through sufferings.

Galatians and the Day of the Adoption

That brings us right to this letter to the Galatians. You will notice in the course of this letter that the apostle Paul lights upon Abraham, and takes up everything in relation to Abraham, and in so doing he throws back our horizon tremendously. To begin with, he gets rid of a whole dispensation, the Jewish dispensation, which came between Abraham and Christ. He leaps right over it, pushes it on one side, and gets back into the universal. He says, in effect, "That was a merely local thing, a merely temporal thing. It came in, it served a purpose, and it is now done with. Now let us go back to Abraham, and take things up there. That

is where things began, and we come in with Abraham." "Know therefore", he concludes, "that they which be of faith, the same are sons of Abraham".

You will know that there is a great similarity between this letter and the letter to the Romans. The subject is almost identical, the object the same. The letter to the Romans is a more thorough-going treatise (if we may call it that) on the subject of law and grace. The letter to the Galatians is an impassioned outburst of righteous indignation. The spirit of the apostle is aflame at the outrages against the work of God which were being perpetrated, to which we will refer later. The object is the same, and if you go back to the fourth chapter of the Romans you have this remarkable word: "Now the promise to Abraham that he should be heir of the world..." You have no such thing recorded in the Old Testament. Nothing in the Old Testament says that God made promise to Abraham that he should be heir of the world in this sense. It is there that the apostle takes things up with Abraham. In his letter to the Galatians, he deals with everything along the line of sonship, adoption, heirs of the promise made to Abraham. That is inheritance. When you have grasped that, and recognised what that means, you are getting into the flaming heart of the apostle. We cannot get into this letter unless we understand and recognise the tremendous background of it. In a word, what we are presented with is this: God made a promise to Abraham that he should be heir of the world. Upon that we are told that Abraham looked for a city whose builder and maker was God, and we find Abraham refusing all the cities of this world, choosing to dwell in tents with Isaac and Jacob who were also the heirs of the promise; repudiating this world and its cities, because he looked for a city whose builder and maker was God, with the promise that he should be heir of the world.

Now we look at the apostle's argument in this letter to the Galatians. Who is a Jew? Not he who is one naturally. He is a Jew who is linked with Abraham's seed by faith. "Not unto seeds", says the apostle, "but... to thy seed, which is Christ." Abraham's seed is Christ. Faith in Jesus Christ constitutes us the seed of Abraham. One of the last clauses of this letter to the Galatians refers to the Israel of God, and leading up to that is all this about the "Jerusalem that is beneath, that is in bondage with her children, and the Jerusalem which is above and is free, which is the mother of us all". He looked for a city. We are Abraham's seed by faith in Jesus Christ, related to a city, and that city is to govern the world. The end of the Word of God makes it perfectly clear that the heavenly city, the new Jerusalem, is the church, and in this whole dispensation the church is the object upon which God's heart is set, in order that she may govern the inhabited earth in the ages to come. That is the purpose. That government demands full spiritual growth, and because of the greatness, the seriousness, and the importance of God's eternal purpose as to the government of this world, if in heart you enter into that with God, you also will become aflame as did the apostle, when you discover there are things which are working insidiously against God's purpose in the saints, to frustrate spiritual full growth. Get the range of the thing, and then it goes to your heart. Everything that stands athwart God's purpose is to be met with indignation, with uncompromising zeal, for this matter is so important. It is our loyalty to God. It is our oneness of heart with God's purpose.

God has a cherished purpose concerning His Son. In His infinite grace He has called us according to that purpose. The fact of what we are, as it breaks upon us so continually, is perhaps the thing which discourages us most of all from believing in a thing like this, and yet it is true that you and I, despite what we are, our utter worthlessness -- ah, more than that, despite all the enmity that is in us against God by nature, all that is there that is so utterly contrary to God's nature, all the rebellion against God by nature, of which we are so capable under provocation -- we are, by God's infinite grace, which comes down to us in Jesus Christ, called to govern the inhabited earth in the ages to come, for God, with God, in His Son. That is the purpose. That is what God is seeking in this dispensation, that instrument, that vessel for coming

world-government.

When you and I recognise what the grace of God is, grace which finds a way for our forgiveness, and our deliverance from judgment, grace upon grace, ever mounting up until it sets us on the throne with Himself, in accordance with the word which He has spoken, "...shall sit with me in my throne, as I also overcame and am set down with my Father in his throne"; such grace coming home to our hearts surely would make us intensely jealous for God and deeply loyal to God. Surely if we felt that grace our attitude would be: "Oh, if anything dares to touch God's purpose, God's interest, that which is dearest of all to God's heart, I for one will have no compromise with that, I for one will show that I am utterly with God." That surely ought to be our reaction to the grace of God. It was because the apostle Paul had such a deep, deep sense of the grace of God in eternal purpose calling him that you find him so burning with zeal, so mightily stirred to white heat when there rose up something to interfere with God's purpose.

That explains the letter to the Galatians. Listen to his words in the first chapter. There is no compromise about this: "But though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach unto you any gospel other than that which we preached unto you, let him be anathema." That is very straight language. Let him be accursed. Why? Because he is interfering with God's purpose when he seeks to subvert the saints, when he interferes with their going on to full growth.

Sonship, adoption, is something which lies ahead. The adoption has not yet taken place. We are children of God, we have the Spirit of sonship, but the adoption is not yet; that is coming. The word "adoption" would help us more if it were translated literally; for it bears a different meaning in the New Testament from that which obtains among us today. The word simply means placing as sons, the installation as sons. It is rather the official element than the element of relationship. It occurs only five times in the New Testament, and these are all in Paul's letters, and every occurrence is very interesting and helpful.

So that is ahead, and it is that to which the apostle refers in his letter to the Romans: "The earnest expectation of the creation waiteth for the revealing of the sons of God." That lies in the future, and that is the day when the government of the inhabited earth to come will be taken up in the saints conformed to the image of His Son, in the church as mature.

Now you see, I am sure a little more of the importance, and why there is given such a place of importance to this matter of full growth. It is in maturity that the inheritance is to be possessed, that the placing of sons is to take place, that the subjecting of the inhabited earth to come is to transpire. Hence the need for going on to full growth. Government is important to God, and it is the full meaning of grace in the saints. So much, then, for our further emphasis upon the importance.

A Retrospect of the Letters to the Romans and Corinthians

We have said that these letters of the apostle Paul are each dealing with some aspect of spiritual maturity, or dealing with the matter from respective points of view. The letter to the Romans, as we have already pointed out, represents the work by which relatedness to the Lord is brought about unto His full purpose. The purpose is brought into view right at the outset, the manifestation of the sons of God conformed to the image of His Son. That is the purpose. Then everything is dealt with in order that a relationship shall be brought about, so that God can begin His purpose and proceed to its realisation. Thus, in the letter to the Romans you have a revelation of God's attitude toward men by nature. The whole race is taken into view, and the verdict is, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God", and therefore lie under judgment and death. "There is none righteous, no, not one." Gentile and Jew are all in the same position before God. It is

a startling fact, nevertheless clearly and positively stated; irreligious and religious; those who were without and those who were with the oracles of God. The natural difference that the oracles of God are seen to have made is that they have proved how helpless man is, and how deeply sinful he is by nature. The law came in, and, far from saving man, it only accentuated the natural condition of human weakness and sinfulness, and made manifest how impossible it is for man to stand up to God's requirement. So that universally man by nature is proved to be hopeless and helpless, under sin, condemnation, judgment and death.

Then the cross of the Lord Jesus is brought into view as the place where God's verdict concerning man universally was put into effect in the representative person of the Lord Jesus, who was made sin in our stead. The whole race passed under the actual judgment of God in the cross, and when Christ died, from God's standpoint, the race died under judgment.

Then the resurrection of the Lord Jesus comes in, as marking God's new beginning, a new relationship, where sin has been destroyed in judgment, and now, on the ground of sin having been destroyed and removed, there is a new relationship with God in Christ risen, in which relationship the Holy Spirit is given, the Spirit of the new creation. A new life is given -- "...the law of the Spirit of life in Christ..." -- and then in that new relationship, the purpose is embarked upon by the indwelling Spirit. Conformity to the image of His Son is the end. The call is that believers should apprehend that position of union with Christ in death, in burial, and resurrection, and by faith take their place therein. That becomes the foundation of God's purpose. Without that God cannot even make a beginning.

That is the letter to the Romans in brief. Our position by faith has to correspond to Jesus Christ crucified, dead, buried, risen and receiving the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of sonship, to be led into God's purpose.

The first letter to the Corinthians takes us one step past that, and shows us the kind of person who will move on to God's end, to God's purpose, and what is necessary in believers in order that there may come about full spiritual growth. The key word in Romans is "in Christ": "There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus..." That is relationship. The key word to the first letter to the Corinthians is: "He that is spiritual..." The whole of that first letter has to do with spirituals in men and in things. The first letter to the Corinthians, then, has to do entirely with what a spiritual person is, how a spiritual person will act and speak; or, by contrast, how a spiritual person will not act and will not speak. The whole letter, chapter after chapter, sets carnality over against spirituality, and says, "Now this is carnality, and it blocks the way to God's end, and is the cause of spiritual arrest." It is necessary that a man shall be spiritual in the innermost reality of his being, that he shall be spiritually minded, and that this spiritual mind, the mind of Christ, shall govern him in every consideration.

One mark of the carnality of the Corinthians was their divisions, their natural preferences, likes and dislikes amongst people. Paul says, in effect, "If you were spiritual there would be none of that. If you are going on to full growth then you have to get clear of all that." So you go through the whole letter, and find that the finger of the Spirit lights through the apostle upon point after point, revealing carnality, and how it works out to spiritual arrest. They are seen to be full of contradictions, and full of denials, and full of limitation. He that is spiritual is not like that. Spirituality is essential to full growth.

In the second letter to the Corinthians the key word is "the face of Jesus Christ". By inference we are taken right back to the first creation. "God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness..." (the first act in the creation), "...hath shined into our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the

face of Jesus Christ". What is the object of the creation? Jesus Christ is the object of the creation. Through Him, and unto Him, and by Him all things were created. But that object was not realised in the first creation, and whereas light came first, darkness soon followed on the disobedience of man, and so God's purpose in the face of Jesus Christ was not recognised; it was shut out. Now God begins His new creation: "If any man is in Christ, there is a new creation." What is the first thing that governs the new creation? "God... hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." That is the key to everything.

How shall we reach God's purpose, God's end? How shall we grow in grace? By the continuous unveiling of God in Christ in our hearts. It has to go on, and so the word there heads up into this: "We... beholding (the word indicates continuous activity, maintaining our gaze, fixing our eyes) ...are changed into the same image..." We are coming to God's end, the image of His Son, by the Holy Spirit keeping in our hearts a growing unveiling of the Lord Jesus.

We have the purpose of God set before us, we know what the calling is, we understand why we are urged to give diligence to make our calling and our election sure. We know that, while we may not fall from salvation, we may fall from the inheritance. We know that we may lose God's full purpose by not going on. Otherwise why this urge? We receive our salvation through grace, and I am quite sure that it will be the grace of God that carries us through unto the purpose; for who of us would get through, but by the grace of God? Nevertheless, for the inheritance unto the adoption as sons, coming to the government of the inhabited earth to come, there has to be an attitude of pressing on to full growth, lest we fail of the calling. It is the failure to recognise that which has led so many people into a fog, and into perplexity, and I think, into false teaching concerning certain things in the New Testament. It is the inheritance which governs. Until we are really governed by God's full purpose we do not understand a great deal of the New Testament. In the purpose of God we are "foreordained unto the adoption of sons by Jesus Christ", the placing as sons for governmental purposes in the ages to come.

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