

The Lord's Need of a 'Zion' People

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Lord needs a representative company who have a fuller testimony for all Israel, a company that satisfies Him and knows Him in a fuller way.

Scripture: Psalm 48:2-84, Isaiah 25:7-8, Isaiah 35:10, Isaiah 60:1, Zechariah 8:3, Hebrews 12:22

Topics: "God's Sovereignty", "Zion"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the significance of being a 'Zion' people, representing God's ideal for His Church, which is not merely a reflection of its current state but a fulfillment of His divine purpose. He explains that Zion symbolizes a community that embodies God's full thought, characterized by His sovereignty, life, provision, and revelation. The preacher highlights that this 'Zion' people serve as a testimony to Israel and the world, demonstrating the absolute lordship of Christ and the abundant life found in Him. Sparks encourages believers to strive for this higher calling, reminding them that true spiritual vitality comes through trials and a deep relationship with the Lord. Ultimately, he calls for a return to the essence of Zion, where God's presence and purpose are fully realized.

Transcript

"Let mount Zion be glad, let the daughters of Judah rejoice, because of thy judgments. Walk about Zion, and go round about her; number the towers thereof; mark ye well her bulwarks; consider her palaces: that ye may tell it to the generation following. For this God is our God for ever and ever: he will be our guide even unto death." (Psa. 48:11-14).

"Beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth, is mount Zion, on the sides of the north, the city of the great King." (Psa. 48:2).

"They go from strength to strength; every one of them appeareth before God in Zion." (Psa. 84:7).

"I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go unto the house of the Lord. Our feet are standing within thy gates, O Jerusalem; Jerusalem, that art builded as a city that is compact together; whither the tribes go up, even the tribes of the Lord, for an ordinance for Israel, to give thanks unto the name of the Lord. For there are set thrones for judgment, the thrones of the house of David." (Psa. 122:1-5).

"Whither the tribes go up, even the tribes of the Lord, for an ordinance for Israel," or, "for a testimony unto Israel." We have often pointed out that, in the Old Testament representation of Divine thoughts, Zion is

that which fully expresses God's mind for His people. It is in Zion that are found all those features and characteristics of a people wholly according to the mind of the Lord. Zion is a representative word. Just as a little technical matter, we might point out that in some places in the Scriptures it is stated that the house of the Lord was there, but actually the temple was not on Zion at all, it was on Moriah. But what is indicated by that fact is this, that Zion really does stand for all the Lord's mind about His house. Moriah is in Jerusalem proper and greater; the house is there; the Church is there, if you like. But in Zion, the Church is what the Lord means it to be in thought. I wonder if you catch the significance of that? Viewed as a whole, the Church is not always in itself what the Lord intended it to be. Who, looking at the Church today as a whole, would say that it closely approximates to the revelation of it in the Word of God? Anyone who would say that does not know much about God's revelation of the Church. But God still cleaves to His full thought about the Church. He has not accommodated Himself to the situation which actually exists, and accepted it. He still holds to all that ever He thought and intended, and in His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, He has that full thought. And then He is at work by His Spirit to gather to His Son a people, not distinct from the Church as a whole, not a separate body in reality, but a representative company, who really do satisfy Him at least more fully as to His full thought about the Church; and this is what is meant by Zion. That is the point we reached at the end of our previous meditation, and we have now come to the very heart of our subject.

That is what God is after - a 'Zion.' It is Jerusalem, but as the Lord would have it to be and not as it actually is. Oh, we could take up a whole mass of Scripture to bear that out; but you have only to look at that section of the Scriptures dealing with the return of a remnant from captivity, and you will see it there. It is a coming back, not to Jerusalem but to Zion, every time. "The ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come with singing unto Zion" (Isa. 35:10); and the Lord says, "I am returned unto Zion" (Zech. 8:3). Yes, "I am returned to Jerusalem" (Zech. 1:16), but, "I am returned unto Zion," for Zion is what Jerusalem should be in His mind. "I am jealous for Zion with great jealousy, and I am jealous for her with great wrath" (Zech.8:2). Zion is God's whole thought as to what His people should be, and it is the focal point of Divine interest. In the New Testament there is a spiritual interpretation of this, a spiritual counterpart to the historical. "Ye are come unto mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (Heb. 12:22). "Ye are come;" not 'ye are coming, ye are on the way, to Zion,' whatever you may mean when you sing 'We're marching to Zion!' We are come to Zion. That is the thought of the letter to the Hebrews - that we are come to something which in heaven is absolute, full, final. We have left the partial, we have left the figures, the types, the pictures of the Old Testament, none of which reached fullness and finality; they only led us so far and left us there, but now we have come to the end of it all. "God... hath at the end of these days spoken unto us in his Son" (Heb. 1:2), and we are come to Zion. In His Son we are come to Zion - God's full thought in Christ. In New Testament interpretation, therefore, it is this - Christ, the embodiment of God's full thought concerning the Church, and a gathering into Him of those who satisfy that full thought, a gathering of a people to be a 'Zion' people. Now that is the basis of everything. Around that are gathered numerous things; if you want to know how numerous, sit down with a concordance and look up the word 'Zion.' That will give you a long task. Zion is a very comprehensive thought of God, with numerous aspects.

Zion A Testimony unto Israel

We come to one of the main things connected with this desire of God. It is here in this Psalm 122. "Whither the tribes go up... for a testimony unto Israel." A people in Zion for a testimony, not to the unsaved in this case, but to Israel. It will go beyond Israel to the unsaved, but this is God's method - from

the centre to the circumference and beyond; Zion, Israel, the nations. But here for the moment we are confined to the first reach of the testimony, from Zion unto Israel. Now, that that is true in principle is proved by remembering that it was an ordinance established by God. We are back at the beginning when Israel was constituted a nation. You have only to look at one fragment in the book of Deuteronomy - "Three times in a year shall all thy males appear before the Lord thy God in the place which he shall choose: in the feast of unleavened bread, and in the feast of weeks, and in the feast of tabernacles, and they shall not appear before the Lord empty" (Deut. 17:16). Now you would be wrong, of course, if you read into this passage in Psalm 122 that all Israel went up to Jerusalem three times a year, or even once a year. They could not all get into Jerusalem, to start with; they could get nowhere near to Jerusalem; but they went up representatively. All the males went up three times a year; Israel went up in representation, and when they came to Zion, well, there a number of things happened.

They came, of course, into a wonderful renewal of the realisation of the love of God. How? The High Priest was there with the names of the tribes on his breast in the breastplate. They were before the Lord in the high priestly love - the love of God in Christ bearing them all on his heart. On his shoulders, again, their names were borne - the strength of God in Christ sustaining them through their lives. They came into a renewed apprehension of the love and the strength of God on their behalf in the high priest.

Well, I dare not stay to say all the things that happened when they went up. We have a little taste of that when from the distances of the earth, the hard places, and the spiritually cold and lonely places, we come together like this and touch the love and the strength of God, and feel anew the oneness of the Lord's people. When we have been apart and have felt we were the only Christians on the earth - sometimes you do feel like Elijah, "I, even I only, am left" (1 Kings 19:14) - we come together, and all things go that are not true, and the real truths are strengthened, and it is all good. They came up three times in a year in representation, and they took back to all Israel the good of Zion - a testimony for Israel.

My point now is just this - they were a representative company in Zion; Zion was representative in the matter of a testimony. Can I put that more explicitly? A company came to what Zion represented, and that company had a testimony for all the rest of the Lord's people. When you grasp that, you can see one of God's sovereign ways. I wonder if you have thought about the course of things in the New Testament. You start with the day of Pentecost, and the following period, however long or short it was, when things were really in fullness, very satisfying and gratifying to the Lord; He was having His thought very largely expressed in those first days, months, or, it may have been, even a few years. But then things began to change. You find a lowering of the temperature, the standard is being dropped, mixture is coming in; it is found necessary to correct a lot that is wrong in the Church; things are not the same. And it would appear that that process went on and developed. But what did the Lord do about it? Did He say, 'It was very grand while it lasted, but they cannot stand up to this, they cannot meet this standard, it is quite evident that they will not be able to maintain the original level, so I must accommodate Myself to the situation and accept this lower level and try to be satisfied with it'? Did the Lord do that? He never did. The impressive and remarkable thing is this, that the Lord began giving ever fuller and enlarging revelation - yes, to a Church which was no longer what it was at one time. You come to these closing letters of the Apostle Paul's life. Who can stand up to their contents? Look at the condition, the weaknesses, the defects, the limitations of the Lord's people, and yet He goes on like this, simply piling it on. He is not accommodating Himself to smallness, He is not accepting the situation, He is answering back with more and more and more. And what is the point? If they will not or cannot all have it, some will, and through that nucleus, that representative company, He will keep the lamp of full testimony alight. Even when shadows creep into and

over the Church, He will maintain a full testimony, even if it be only in a few.

And that is where you are in the first chapters of the book of the Revelation. The Church as a whole is far from what it was at the beginning and far from what God intended and had revealed as His mind, but He does not excuse and accommodate and accept. He comes right back with the full revelation and calls for the nucleus from all the churches. That is how God reacts. Why? For a testimony unto Israel, a representation for all Israel. Oh, do grasp that. Even if you do not understand fully what the Lord is after, it is for you to decide whether you are going to be with the general, nominal, ordinary, or whether you are going to be of Zion. That is a point we shall have to emphasize more perhaps before we have finished. But after all, this remains - what God is after is this which is meant by Zion, that is, a representative company who have a fuller testimony for all Israel, and who are in the good of it on behalf of others. That is the way in which the Lord seeks to meet the great need, by having amongst them some who are a satisfaction to Him and know Him in this fuller way.

A Testimony to the Absolute Sovereignty of the Lord

"Whither the tribes go up for a testimony unto Israel." What testimony? What is the testimony? Well, the answer is Zion. That is the testimony itself. But what is Zion? Well, look at the history of Zion and you have the explanation of what the testimony is. In the first place, the testimony is to and of the absolute sovereignty of the Lord, and, in our own present meaning, the Lord Jesus. That is where the testimony begins. It is out from that that all testimony flows - the absolute sovereignty of the Lord Jesus. Zion is "the city of the great King" (Psa. 48:2). Solomon lived in Zion, David lived in Zion. Look at the history of it very briefly. Probably you recall that the first mention of Jerusalem in Gen. 14:18 was in connection with Melchizedek, who was king of Salem - that is the first name of Jerusalem. Melchizedek was priest of the Most High God, but he was king of Salem. The very first mention of Zion or Jerusalem is in connection with kingship in relation to priesthood.

Then we move on, and we find that Zion was the citadel or the stronghold of Jerusalem in the hands of the Jebusites. It was called first Jebus, the stronghold of the Jebusites, and it was in the hands of the Jebusites through the whole period of the Judges and the reign of Saul and the reign of David in Hebron. But when all Israel came to Hebron to make David king and he was doubly established in his kingship, then he went up to Jebus. He threw out his challenge to his mighty men, "Whosoever smiteth the Jebusites first shall be chief and captain" (1 Chron. 11:6), and Joab broke through; but it was such a stronghold as to be considered absolutely impregnable by the Jebusites, for they said, 'Why, the blind and the lame are sufficient to defend this!' Now that is not just a story, there is something wrapped up in that of tremendous significance where you and I are concerned. Believe me, the establishment of the Lord Jesus in absolute sovereignty is no child's play. Take it in His own case. What a tremendous thing it was to gain that absolute ascendancy over all the forces of evil! What a grip the powers of evil had upon the citadel of man's soul, upon this world - such a grip as to make the enemy feel that his position was impregnable; and we know that there is something in that. Have you never been defeated by an enemy stronghold in a life? We have all come up against situations in individual lives in which Satan had such a purchase that it required something infinitely greater than the strength or the ingenuity of man to solve the problem. The problem of the deliverance of that soul, the establishment of Christ's lordship in that life or in that place, was no small thing.

But listen. Let us come away from the objective to ourselves; and this is the point for the present. We can sing our hymns, 'Crown Him, crown Him,' we can proclaim with strength and vehemence that Jesus is

Lord, but it is just on that very point that all our own battles rage. Have you never been locked up in a controversy with the Lord, in a situation in your own life where the one issue was this - Is He going to be Lord in this? Have you never come into situations and circumstances where it looked for all the world as though the devil were in the mastery and had gained the ground and were holding it - as though he were lord and master?

Are we not constantly up against things like that where it looks as though the devil and not Jesus is lord? It comes right home to our own spiritual lives as a tremendous test of faith. I am thinking of those experiences into which the 'Zion' people are brought which are not the ordinary experiences of Christian life, not the ordinary temptations and persecutions and difficulties of being a Christian, but situations which are much more deeply spiritual and involved, and sometimes their faith is tested right on this question - Is Jesus Lord after all?

Look at the situation, look at the conditions, look at the forces which seem to be in control! Is Jesus Lord? I hope I am not scandalising anyone. You may not have had that experience. Well, all right, do not be scandalised and do not worry about it. But there are some who know what I am talking about, who have been there in the vortex of such spiritual trials and testings as to raise the issue as to whether the Lord is really Lord after all. Down in our hearts as a matter of our faith we believe it and we cling to it, but we are thrown about a good deal on this matter.

We do not get through this easily. It is like that with Zion. The lordship of Christ is only established at great cost. It is only by terrific conflict and trial and testing that you get through to that place where in your own heart He is Lord; but when you are through, oh, something tremendous has happened and you are in a position where you know the Lord in no usual and ordinary way, and you have a testimony for people who are to go through similar trial, and you can help them because you have fought through terrific conflicts on faith as to the lordship of Christ.

May that not explain why some of you are having such extraordinary experiences? You look at other Christians and you see them go through comparatively easily; they get what they want or what they think they ought to have, but with you everything is a matter of conflict, nothing comes easily at all. That experience may be explained by this, that the Lord has put His hand on you, with a view to putting into your life something of His lordship, and putting you into that lordship, in a way that will make you a peculiarly useful vessel and servant for Him. Some of you have been through it and know it is true; some of you may be going through it now.

Isaiah, the great prophet of recovery, the great prophet of Zion as the ultimate issue, went through some terrific testings, and his family came into his experience, and he gave his children names expressive of his deep experience. "Behold, I and the children whom the Lord hath given me are for signs and for wonders" (for testimonies) (Isa. 8:18). His very family was engulfed in the deep and terrible experiences through which he went, because he was a prophet, not to the nations alone, but specifically to Zion. You see the place of Zion in the second part of his prophecies. This is very true, that Zion - that is, the company who come to be of greatest value to the Lord in representing His mind - will have to come to the place where the sovereignty of the Lord is something established on very solid ground. It is not doctrine, teaching, theory, historic fact, that Jesus ascended to the right hand of God: not something that we study from a book: but something that has been wrought into our very being by the bitterest way and the deepest experiences, so that our knowledge of Him is no ordinary knowledge, but is for a special purpose. Oh, the temptations while we are going through! What ground there is for the enemy to play upon when the Lord is

putting us through those fires! But you see, Zion is something wrought in the fires. First of all it is the testimony unto Israel as to the absolute sovereignty of the Lord Jesus.

Let me conclude that for the moment by saying again that there is a very great need today for the Church to be recovered into the place of the absolute lordship of Christ. Its impact upon this world has very largely been lost, and the reason is that the Lord Jesus has not His place as absolute Sovereign. All sorts of things have come into the place of the absolute sovereignty of Jesus Christ - that is, of the complete government of the Holy Spirit. Councils and committees and boards and anything you like but the exclusive government of the Holy Spirit. But the Zion way is a costly way, it is not an easy way at all; that is why it has been surrendered and easier things have been put into its place. It is not easy to wait for the Lord, to have your government entirely by the Holy Spirit. It is a difficult way, and it tests you out as to whether you are going to put your hand on things - whether like Saul, the man of flesh, you are not going to tarry for the Lord, but to take things into your own hands. It is along those lines and in those ways that the whole question is raised - Is He Lord? The Church has not been prepared to pay that price, and it has lost its testimony. The Lord recover that testimony for the Church in the midst of the Church!

The Testimony of a Life Which has Conquered Death

Now the next thing about this testimony. "And he will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering that covereth all peoples, and the veil that is spread over all nations. He hath swallowed up death for ever" (Isa. 25:7-8). In this mountain, Zion, the testimony is to the complete triumph of the Lord over death, the testimony of a life which conquered death. It comes out of His absolute lordship, it is a part of it, but it works out in this way - where the Lord gets a 'Zion' people, there you have an unusual testimony to life. The thing we must ever keep before us (I state it simply as a fact without any exposition now) is that if you get a people who are what Zion means - coming into God's fuller thought as in His Son - the thing that is found when you meet them is life. Oh, I tell you that I cherish this aspect of the testimony very, very dearly and very greatly. To me it means almost everything, that we shall be maintained in life - not merely a people who have a specific teaching, a lot of light and a lot of truth but as dead as anything can be. (And it can be like that: you can have a marvellous amount of truth and be quite dead.) But whether the teaching is understood or not by the people who come, we want that the first thing they shall meet and register shall be - What life there is here! Not, what teaching there is here, but what life! In such an atmosphere you get a tremendous lift-up, you find yourself re-vitalised. Yes, death has been swallowed up. That is the testimony; that is part of the testimony unto Israel, and who will say that the Church as a whole does not need to know in some new and mightier way the power of His risen life? Is that not just what is needed? That is really what many are after. They are trying to get it in great organized movements; they feel the need of life as a mighty reaction against the death that has come in. It is not for us to judge or criticise, but we can say this, that this life can never be manufactured. It can never come by great efforts. It is the uprising of the risen Lord where He has room and capacity; and room and capacity are only made by travail. You have to suffer unto this life. You cannot get it cheaply, you cannot work it up and produce it by any means of man. It can only come as out from death by resurrection. It costs.

The Testimony of Abundant Provision

Then in verse 6 of Isaiah 25 we have this - "In this mountain will the Lord of hosts make unto all peoples a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined." "In this mountain;" "for a testimony unto Israel." Here is rich provision. If the Lord gets a people really into His full thought, they will not be a people who are merely existing on starvation diet, hardly able

to make ends meet, just managing to keep going spiritually; and as for having anything to give away...! Oh, yes, conditions are like that in many places. You would not credit the number of letters that come to me from all over the world in terms like this - 'I cannot find any spiritual food anywhere, there is nothing to be found in this whole district; we are starving.' I am not exaggerating when I say that in the course of a year I could fill volumes with that sort of thing - the cry for food from the Lord's people. Here is the picture and it is not an imaginary one, it is tragically true. But, thank God, the other side is equally true; there is a feast of fat things when you are in the way of the Lord's full thought and are prepared to pay the price - the price of being for Him an instrument; not a price for salvation, but, a price for vocation to serve Him. Then you can have a table well-filled, a feast of fat things, with abundance for yourself and plenty to give to others. Oh yes, it is true, there is no want, no lack; there is abundance, an overflow, in Zion, "in this mountain."

A Testimony of Revelation and Enlightenment

Then finally, "He will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering that covereth all peoples." That simply means that the testimony going out is one of revelation and enlightenment, where people who sit in darkness are made to see. The word to Zion here in Isaiah is, "Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee" (Isa. 60:1). That is to Zion. But what is the counterpart in the New Testament? I think it is in those final letters of Paul for the Church. Look at "Ephesians" with the word 'glory' in your eye, it is notable what a large place the word 'glory' has in those prison epistles. "The glory of the Lord is risen upon thee." Arise, shine! In this mountain, in Zion, in a people wholly abandoned to God's highest and fullest interests, there is given a ministry of enlightenment and revelation, the taking away of the veil. This is the testimony unto Israel, God's spiritual Israel. "Whither the tribes go up for a testimony." All that we have to do is to ask the Lord to give us the energy of heart, the diligence and purpose, to go up to Zion - all that means spiritually - to have the highways to Zion in our hearts. "In whose heart are the highways to Zion" (Psa. 84:5). This way which leads to Zion is a heart matter.

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