

The Lord's Travail

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon explores Peter's journey of failure and redemption, illustrating the hope and practical living expected in the new spiritual Israel.

Scripture: Matthew 14:28, Matthew 16:22, Matthew 17:4, Matthew 26:31, Mark 4:38, Luke 5:5, Galatians 2:11, 1 Peter 1:13-17, 1 Peter 2:9, 1 Peter 3:1-7

Topics: "Hope in Christ", "Transformation"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks explores the life of the Apostle Peter, emphasizing his failures and the Lord's enduring patience and love towards him. Through various instances, Peter's struggles with faith and understanding are highlighted, showcasing his journey from doubt to becoming a foundational figure in the new spiritual Israel. Sparks illustrates that despite Peter's shortcomings, the Lord's travail was not in vain, as Peter ultimately became a vessel of hope and encouragement for others. The sermon underscores the practical implications of living as part of the new Israel, focusing on relationships and conduct that reflect God's grace. Ultimately, it conveys that no one is beyond redemption and that our lives should manifest the excellencies of God.

Transcript

We continue our consideration of, and meditation concerning, the significance of the Apostle Peter and his ministry. As we have seen, and shall continue to see, he was the one who introduced the new dispensation, and fulfilled in himself the work of the Lord Jesus in laying the foundation for the new spiritual, heavenly Israel which was to supplant and take the place of the old Israel, according to the word of the Lord. Peter, as we have said, is himself a representation of that spiritual Israel, which we are, and in his own person and life he so clearly sets forth the nature of this new Israel.

There is one thing that I think will be very helpful to us, and we will mention it here, before going further.

The Lord's Travail with Peter

I have already said that I have collected some forty instances in the life of Peter when he was with the Lord Jesus, and in many of those instances he did not show up very well. It was only just occasionally that he came out brightly. So often he emerged rather - perhaps it is a strong word to use - dishonourably rather than honourably. I will not take you through all those forty instances, but if I put my finger upon a few examples, you will see what I mean.

Take the first, a quite simple one: Peter coming in from a fishing expedition, and the Lord standing on the shore, commanding him to let down the net for a draught. It was the Lord who said that, but Peter immediately answered: "Master, we toiled all night, and took nothing" (Luke 5:5), implying, of course, that it would be altogether contrary to an experienced fisherman's reputation to let down a net in broad daylight, for it was night when they did their business. So, although he subsequently obeyed, he did so with a question, and with some reserve - almost as though he said: 'All right, you want me to do it, so I will do it'. And no one was more surprised at the result than Peter was! There is some weakness here in his attitude.

Then on the lake again, during the storm, with Jesus asleep in the boat, it is Peter who comes to Him and wakes Him, saying: "Master, carest thou not that we perish?" (Mark 4:38). The Lord's answer indicates that here again Peter has failed to grasp the real significance of the Lord Jesus: "Have ye not yet faith?"

Again on the lake: Jesus coming out in the night, walking on the water. This time Peter seems to begin well: "Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee upon the waters" (Matthew 14:28), and he stepped out. But then, seeing the big waves and the wind, he began to sink... "Lord, save me!" He has broken down again in the middle.

The Lord Jesus is rebuking the Pharisees, and Peter as good as rebukes the Lord for doing it. He is dismayed that the Lord Jesus should rebuke the Pharisees. Why? Well, obviously, if He gets into the Pharisees' bad books, it will go ill both for Jesus - and for Peter. 'Keep on good terms with these people!' You see the principle that is governing him? He is quite annoyed with the Lord Jesus for taking this attitude toward the Pharisees.

Then again: Jesus speaks of His going up to Jerusalem and of what is going to happen to Him there. He would be betrayed into the hands of wicked men and crucified. Peter takes Him and begins to rebuke Him: "Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall never be unto thee" (Matthew 16:22). Again there is this whole idea of self-preservation, and Jesus rebukes him: "Get thee behind me, Satan; thou art a stumblingblock unto me."

Once more: on the Mount of Transfiguration, with all the wonder of it. Poor Peter! "Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, I will make here three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah" (Matthew 17:4), putting them all on to an equal basis. Evidently the voice out of heaven which rebuked him made that point; "This is my beloved Son... hear ye him" ... 'He cannot be put on a level even with the greatest men of the old dispensation. You hear Him!' Peter is rebuked, for here is presumption. Yes, he is failing all the way along.

Peter had a quarrel with the other disciples as to who was to be the Primate, the principal man in the Kingdom. They were quarrelling for primacy, showing lack of humility, and, again, ambition. He had a wrong, false idea of the Kingdom.

On we go. Jesus said: "All ye shall be offended in me this night: for it is written, I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered abroad" (Matthew 26:31). Peter said: "If all shall be offended in thee, I will never be offended." ... "Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice." ... "Even if I must die with thee, yet will I not deny thee." The point, of course, is so obvious that we need not mention it: Peter's self-confidence, his pride, his boasting as to what he could do.

In the Garden Jesus said: "Abide ye here, and watch with me" (Matthew 26:38). He went a little way away, prayed His great travail prayer, and then came back - and they were asleep. He said to Peter: "Could ye not watch with me one hour?"

Then came the arrival of the mob and the soldiers, and Judas. That was Peter's rash hour - out with his sword and off came the ear of Malchus, the high priest's servant. Rebuked again! Then in the hall, denying Jesus. Jesus emerging from the trial - so-called - and they all forsook Him and fled.

Even that was not the end of things with Peter. We meet with something afterward. You will remember that Paul had to say: "I resisted him to the face, because he stood condemned" (Galatians 2:11).

Now why all this? You say: 'It is a pity to point out the man's faults. Is it fair to talk about him in this way? Would the Lord Jesus do what you are doing, pinpointing all these breakdowns in this man's life?' Well, dear friends, that is not quite the point.

The point is a very glorious, blessed one. I feel sure, and have no question whatever, that when the Lord Jesus bent down (if we may speak in this way) and saw Peter writing his first Letter, and saw what he was writing, sentence by sentence, and clause by clause, He said: 'It was not in vain. My patience, forbearance, and longsuffering in all that I had to put up with in that man, and My loving him unto the end, were not in vain. This is worth all, and more than what I suffered from that man.'

When I thought of that, one little verse of a hymn that we sometimes sing floated into my mind:

"And oh, that He fulfilled may see

The travail of His soul in me,

And with His work contented be,

As I with my dear Saviour."

I am quite sure that the Lord was contented, and satisfied, as He saw the fruit of His travail in this man.

Now, why? Why, for you and for me. I think that again and again, in those three years of Peter's life with the Master, you and I would have said: 'It is no good! That man is no good. He is a failure, and it is no good expecting or hoping anything from him. You had better give him up!' I think that is how we would have felt - for we do feel like that about people, when they repeatedly behave like this. We say: 'Well, they are no good. What do you expect? Don't reckon on anything from that man or that woman!'

Look at Peter now! My, he has really imbibed the Lord Jesus. All that we have in this first Letter of his says: No one is hopeless. If such a man can come through to this, there is hope for me, and for anyone. Is that not true? Pick out only one of Peter's great failures - and that is enough to take the heart out of us! - his denying the Lord three times. If you had done that as vehemently as he had done (and it is amazing that a man who had been on the Mount of Transfiguration, and seen all the miracles and wonders, could say so vehemently: 'I know not the man, I tell you!'), you would say: 'That is the end. There is nothing possible beyond that.' But no: here he is.

Is that not a word of encouragement? We sometimes despair of ourselves, but that is in order that we may learn that our Lord does not despair of us, nor of any man. And here is such a man inaugurating the new Israel on the basis of the life, work and teaching of the Lord Jesus - not as a blueprint, nor as a blue-book

of instructions, doctrines and techniques - but on the basis that that life, work and teaching have come right into this man's very being.

The Manner of Life in the New Israel

Now we can, perhaps, go on a little further with this matter of the new Israel, what it is and what is its nature. We will read from chapter one of this Letter, verses 13 to 17, for it seems to me that the next thing that we should look at is here:

"Wherefore girding up the loins of your mind, be sober and set your hope perfectly on the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; as children of obedience, not fashioning yourselves according to your former lusts in the time of your ignorance: but like as he which called you is holy, be ye yourselves also holy in all manner of living; because it is written, Ye shall be holy; for I am holy. And if ye call on him as Father, who without respect of persons judgeth according to each man's work, pass the time of your sojourning in fear."

The two clauses for the moment are: "all manner of living" and "the time of your sojourning". Peter is now referring to the new realm, and the new manner of life which the new Israel occupies. He is saying: 'We, this new Israel of God, are in a new realm altogether, and therefore in that realm there is a manner of life which belongs to it - the manner of life which belongs to the time of our sojourning here. The manner of life, or manner of living, in this time of our sojourning.' And then, on to the end of the Letter, he touches upon many practical points in the manner of life.

I imagine that some of these points may not apply to anyone here, but I am going to mention them for one reason: to show how practical is the manner of life in this new Israel. I used the phrase: 'a new Israel', 'a spiritual Israel'. That to you, perhaps, is something objective, something out there, an idea, a conception, as so much teaching is, but Peter does not leave it there. He brings it right down to the most practical points in our lives. He makes this new Israel business relate to so many things which he calls, in this inclusive phrase, "all manner of living". What a comprehensive phrase that is!

First of all, you will notice that he has something to say about women who have to live with unsaved husbands. I do not know whether that applies to anyone here. It may be that someone has to live with a not altogether saved husband - a difficult man. But Peter is speaking about a marriage relationship which was contracted before one of the partners was saved, and then the question arises: What should the woman who has been saved since her marriage do? Because she is saved, and her husband is not, ought she to get a separation? Should she find some ground of divorce? Should she live a separate life altogether and isolate him? What is she going to do? That is a practical problem, you know. It may not be in your life, and it is not in mine, but I am constantly presented with that very problem. I have met it only in recent days - a really serious case of this very thing: the difficulty in a marriage relationship because one is going on with the Lord and the other is not. It sets up complexes, strains and difficulties for the one who is. So what are you going to do?

Now Peter says that in the new Israel that saved woman has to live with her husband, and before her husband, in the grace of God, so that he may be won by her very manner of life; not driven away from the Lord because she isolates him, or nags him, or constantly tries to get at him, letting him know that he is not saved, but just living. Oh, this is a practical problem, for it is not easy to live before such a man in such a way that if ever he is going to come to the Lord, he will do so on this ground: 'Why, I have seen what God can do. He has done it in my wife. The conviction of my sinfulness has come by the purity, the

patience and the goodness of my wife.'

Now, as I say, that may not apply to you, but what I am saying is this: This new Israel is no mere myth, idea or abstract thing. It is very practical, and comes right down here.

Then Peter goes on with this marriage relationship, but this time he is not speaking about unconverted husbands and wives, either or both. He is saying another thing: 'Husbands, give honour to your wives, as unto the weaker vessel.' Now, of course, the wife may not think that she is the weaker vessel. That is the trouble so often! But how does Peter cover that? He does so in a very beautiful way. You must know that at the time Peter was writing there was a very big difference in this relationship between husbands and wives, wives and husbands, socially, and the wives were looked down upon as an inferior class, and were not honoured by men. How does Peter bring in this matter? "As being joint-heirs of the grace of life." I am always sorry that our English translation so often fails to give us the real meaning of the original words. Again and again you just cannot translate, and that is why we have so many versions. We have a Phillips, an Amplified, and a Modern English, and so many others - a whole bookshelf full of translations. Why? To try to get the real meaning over from the original, and I do not know that they have succeeded yet.

"Joint-heirs of the grace of life." The compound Greek word just means: 'Because you husbands and wives, wives and husbands, have both received the life of the Lord in your salvation, there is no discriminating in that life. You are on one basis, one level. You are fellow-heirs. There is a perfect oneness in life which has been constituted basically, and to despise one is to despise the life of the Lord and say that it is lower in one than it is in the other.' Do you see the point? How impossible it is to put that into English! It is translated 'joint-heirs' here. Peter is saying a beautiful thing, and it meant very much in those days with the strong social differences, especially in the domestic circle. This is a new realm of things, a different manner of life altogether, that husbands should honour the wife as the weaker vessel, recognizing that, after all, whether the man is stronger and the woman is weaker, they both share one life and have to live on the basis of that one life which they share. That is beautiful, is it not? But is it not very practical?

Peter goes on, and our next point again may not apply to you, but it does apply very much in Christianity. He has something to say about how the women get themselves up, and dress. Now, of course, you here are not going to come under any condemnation about what I am saying: but how does Peter put it? What a pity that our English fails so utterly at this very point! Notice that it says: "Whose adorning (speaking of Christian women) let it not be the outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing jewels..." You will see that the word "adorning" is in italics, and in this case it does not mean that there is no word there in the original, as italicized words usually do. It means that the translators do not know what to do with the word! You will see their difficulty at once if I point it out. What was the original word there? 'Kosmos', the Greek word. 'Whose kosmos let it not be the plaiting of the hair, and the wearing of jewellery...'. What is 'kosmos'? 'Whose world - the world in which you live.' What is your world? Peter is not saying that it is wrong to plait your hair, and I do not know that he is saying that it is wrong to wear some adornment. That is not the point. He is saying: 'Is your hair your world in which you live? Is this jewellery your world?' Is this not a propos to our time? My word - hair! Well, the least said the better, I think! And the adornments, the get-up, the make-up, the what-not in these days! That is the world of many people. They spend so much of their time on that - how they look, what impression they make, and so on. Now do not believe that Peter is saying: 'Be slovenly in your appearance. Be careless about how you dress.' God forbid! A lot of women, I am afraid, do go to the other extreme in this matter and let the Lord down by carelessness, but Peter is saying: 'What is the world you live in?' 'Kosmos' has several meanings, and one of them is 'manner of life',

the world that occupies you and takes you up. Is this your world?

Peter says that in the new Israel you are in another realm, and are not living in that world. That is the world of the world, and where others outside of Israel live all the time. I sometimes think that if only some of these people in our time who get themselves up as they do could have a look at Jezebel, the wife of Ahab, they would get scared. And yet they are copying Jezebel, with their eyelids, eyelashes, and everything else. Oh, it is frightening, for it has come from there. It is that world. Peter knows all about that and says: 'Dear sisters, don't let that be your world! The holy women of old who hoped in God did not do that. They did not behave like that'; and he cites Sarah. The beauty of life is not the beauty that we try to make. Peter says: 'The ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is priceless.' That is the world of the new Israel.

When Peter has pinpointed these various matters (I assume that he takes it that it is not necessary to distribute his exhortations over a lot of other practical points), he gathers them all up and says: 'And all of you.' Whether it be husbands, wives, servants and masters, in particular, and these relationships in particular, their particular problems, and their particular manner of life, behaviour and conduct before the world... he says 'all of you'. All husbands, all wives, all servants, all masters, all of you, whatever you are, you all belong to a new realm with new behaviour and a new manner of life.

Peter gathers it all up in this way with, mark you, another allusion to the old Israel which failed and now has to be taken up in the new: "That ye may shew forth the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light." That is the all-inclusive object that God has in view, for which the Israel of old was brought out of Egypt's darkness into the light of God - to show forth the excellencies of Him who brought them out. So Peter gathers everything up into this: We have been brought out of all this darkness into light with one purpose and one object - as the new Israel which makes good what the Old Israel lost, fulfils what the old Israel failed to fulfil - showing forth the excellencies of Him.

This is very exacting and very testing, is it not? 'I have to be careful how I live in my home before my family, in the midst of the Lord's people, and before this world as I pass the time of my sojourning here, in order that the excellencies of Him who called me out of darkness into light should not be veiled, not be beclouded, but be seen. That those with whom I live shall not see too much of me, naturally. They are bound to see a little before I am perfected, but not obtruding itself, or forcing itself, so that it is the thing that they meet, and they say: "That is just her - or him. She has made up her mind to do that and nothing will stop her" ... thus veiling the excellencies of Him who called me out of darkness into His marvellous light.'

I hope there is nothing depressing about this, but, you know we have to stand up to our teaching. We have really had so much teaching, and it is necessary for us to measure up to what has been shown to us. It is very practical in everyday life and everyday relationships, and it all amounts to this: 'Are those who are observing me seeing me naturally, or - if they are at all sensitive to spiritual values and have eyes to see - are they able to discern the grace of God in me, neutralising me and making Christ in His preciousness manifested?' If something of this emerges from our little time together we shall not have met in vain - it will have been worthwhile. The Lord make it so!

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