

The Maintaining of the Lord's Testimony on the Earth

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Lord desires to have a testimony concerning Himself maintained here in this world while He is in heaven, and He tests us to see if we really mean business with Him and are willing to let go of our old ties.

Scripture: 1 Kings 19:19

Topics: "The Role of the Holy Spirit", "Maintaining God's Testimony"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the importance of maintaining the Lord's testimony on earth during His absence, drawing parallels between the Old Testament figures of Elijah and Elisha and the New Testament apostles. He explains that just as Elisha was chosen and empowered to carry on Elijah's work, believers today are called to uphold Christ's testimony through the Holy Spirit. Sparks highlights the necessity of being spiritually prepared and tested to fulfill this divine purpose, urging Christians to recognize their calling and commitment to God's mission. He illustrates that true freedom comes from surrendering to the Holy Spirit's sovereignty, allowing believers to rise above their natural limitations and fulfill their heavenly vocation.

Transcript

Reading: 1 Kings 19:19-21; 2 Kings 2:9-15 (1st part); Acts 1:1-3; John 11:44.

These passages of Scripture, taken from the Old and the New Testaments, are a part of a revelation of the Lord's will as to the maintaining of His own testimony on this earth. The Old Testament story of Elijah and Elisha contains this truth and this principle, although it is an illustration. The New Testament passage in the Book of the Acts is no illustration: it is the actual, literal fulfilment of the illustration. Put together, you can quite clearly see that the thing they both say is this: The Lord desires to have a testimony concerning Himself maintained here in this world while He is in heaven. During the time that He is away it is His will and purpose that His testimony shall be maintained here.

That is the meaning, of course, of the spirit of Elijah resting upon Elisha when Elijah had been translated to glory. Elisha, by that anointing and enduement and clothing with the Holy Spirit, was to carry on - but even in greater fulness - and maintain the testimony of Elijah after the latter had gone to heaven.

Now you can say quite truly that the whole of the New Testament focuses upon this. Up to the time of His ascension the Lord Jesus was always pointing forward to that day. As we have seen in our earlier meetings, He was saying: "I go away... if I go" (John 16:7). He was always thinking in terms of that time when He would leave them, and was seeking to prepare them for that time. It was hard work for them to accept it, just as it was for Elisha to accept the departure of Elijah. He clung on to him just as long as he could! And these disciples found it exceedingly difficult to accept the fact that their Lord was going away. He had said: "It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you, but if I go, I will send him unto you" (John 16:7).

So the Lord was looking on to this time of His ascension and translation to glory, and was preparing His vessel for that time.

And then the vessel being found in place. That is a very important factor: to be found in place, prepared and on the spot when the Lord went up. Not many days afterwards the mantle of the Lord fell upon the disciples, and He made it perfectly clear to them that the purpose of their calling was to maintain His testimony in this world while He was away. And, of course, that is the very purpose, object and vocation of the Church and of the Lord's people.

Now, that is the setting, the basis of everything. It is well for us to grasp now, immediately, the inclusive implication of that. Why are we here as the Lord's people, individually and collectively? Why have we received the Holy Spirit, as we have done - or ought to have done if we are truly committed people? For one thing, all inclusively - that the Lord may be able, by means of us, to maintain His testimony in this world while He is away, and that He will come back to find that testimony not only intact and undiminished, but enlarged, increased, expanded, deepened and strengthened. That is the answer to the question: Why are we the Lord's people? And in that sense we are just as important to the Lord as Elisha was to Elijah, and as these disciples were to the Master.

Having set the background or basis of things, there are a number of details which come out in this connection.

Called According to Purpose

Let us look at the figure, the type, the illustration, in the case of Elijah and Elisha. (We shall find the corresponding truths in the New Testament.) First of all, there was the most definite act of choosing. We read: "So he departed thence, and found Elisha the son of Shaphat... and cast his mantle upon him." Here is a crisis in the life of a man, and a very definite crisis indeed; a turning-point; the end of one phase and the beginning of another. It is clear cut. And although Elisha did make that request about going and kissing his father, he knew in himself that the day of transition from one phase of things to another had come for him. The hour had broken when one order was past and another order was beginning. And when Elijah seemed to give him his liberty and discharge (and it is very interesting to note that the Lord sometimes does that, to try us out. He says: 'All right, what have I done to you? Go back.') Elisha found he could not take it. Something had happened to him and he just could not take his liberty. He could not return to the old order of things. He went aside, slew his oxen, made a fire of the wood of the instruments, offered his sacrifice, gave to the people to eat, and went after Elijah. Something had happened. He knew that he was a chosen vessel. He knew that the hand of the Lord had come upon him. He knew that that mantle signified a succession to his Lord here on this earth, the endowment with a heavenly vocation.

So it proved. And, dear friends, if that sounds very specific and too wonderful, I want to remind you that the New Testament teaches us that that is true of every believer. "He chose us in him before the foundation of the world" (Ephesians 1:4). Who is the 'us'? That is not an exclusive call according to the order of Elisha or Paul, or Peter or John. The 'us' is the inclusive 'us' of the Church into which we are baptized in one Spirit.

I could quote much more. This choice, this election, falls upon all those who come under the apprehending hand of Jesus Christ when they, like Elisha, let go, capitulate, and commit themselves. They know that from that time onward they are not their own proprietors. They are the bond-slaves of Jesus Christ. They are the captives of a great and heavenly purpose.

That is not only something stated. It is a challenge to you and to me. There should be something like that, in the nature of an experience or a crisis, a definite transition, in the life of every child of God, where that child knows that 'something has happened and I am no longer the master of my own life. I am no longer the master of my own destiny. I am no longer free to go the way that I have been going, even if it has been with twelve yoke of oxen - a very thorough-going, all-out kind of life in that world. It is finished now, however big and great it was. I am in another realm and belong to another Master. I am called with another calling. There is another vocation resting upon me.' I do not mean that you have to give up your business in this world, but over and above everything else rests this heavenly vocation, wherever you are. The point is, dear friends, that we are "called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28), chosen "in him before the foundation of the world" (Ephesians 1:4), an elect vessel as "members of his body" (Ephesians 5:30) the Church.

I don't want to smother everything by putting a lot on top of these things. I do want the full force of every fragment to come upon us. If you are not aware that this hand has come upon you, that you, as Paul put it, have been "apprehended by Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:12) - apprehended, arrested, taken in charge was how Paul thought of himself, and that is how it ought to be with every one of us. We have just been taken in charge by Jesus Christ - there is something defective in your committal to the Lord and in your relationship. And be sure that there will be a defectiveness in your testimony, or in the Lord's testimony in and through your life. That is where things begin.

But note: that was but the beginning. You may think that is enough. No, it is not, and you will find that other things follow.

Tested as to Reality

And the next thing that will follow this call, this outstretched hand of the Lord toward you, this apprehending, this encounter with the Lord, will mean that He will try you out as to whether you really do mean business. He is not going to have anybody in this great business of maintaining His testimony who does not really mean business. "Go back again; for what have I done to thee?" Can you go back? If you can, then do. I always say that to people. It means that you really have not come into anything very real if you can. That is a test on every matter which can be followed through to a thousand details. If you can say: 'Why can't I? May I not? Is this not allowed? Can I not go here, go there?' If you can, go... if you can, do it! But I venture to say that if something has happened, as you go to it you begin to have a bad time and say: 'No, I cannot. I just cannot'. You know that! However, the point is that you will be tested.

And then follows this. Elijah said to Elisha: "Tarry here, I pray thee; for the Lord hath sent me as far as Bethel. And Elisha said, As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. So they went down

to Bethel." We don't know what happened at Bethel, but it seems as though Elijah immediately moved on further. He said: "Tarry here, I pray thee; for the Lord hath sent me to Jericho. And he said, As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee." And yet again: "Tarry here, I pray thee: for the Lord hath sent me to Jordan." And Elisha said: "As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee" (2 Kings 2:2,4,6).

You have heard this many times before, but the point is this: The Lord is going to prove us right up to the hilt, to the fourth dimension, as to whether we mean business with Him, how far our relationship with Him, for the sake of His testimony, takes pre-eminence over everything else, and how necessary this is to our life. Can we let it go? Can we be put off? Can we put something else in its place?

Dear friends, the question here, or the issue involved in this whole matter, is the issue of spiritual capacity for this great thing to which the Lord has called us. We need capacity, you know. We know quite well that we are not going to get through with this thing just willy-nilly, superficially. We are finding all the way along that we need more and more spiritual life, spiritual increase and spiritual measure, and it is a matter of our capacity in this thing for going on to the end. There are many who are falling out by the way, many who are returning, and many who are giving up and are put off and discouraged. The Lord knows that. Many went away from Him. "Jesus said therefore unto the twelve, Would ye also go away?" (John 6:67). You see, it is this testing all the time as to how much this really means to us, whether we are just camp-followers, as we say, whether we are just religionists, attenders at meetings, listeners to addresses, readers of books, members of some Christian fraternity; whether we are nominally bearing the name 'Christian', or whether we are of this order, able to say truly from the heart: 'Look here, I have no alternatives. There is no other way for me. This is very life, and the alternative, if there is one, is death.'

The Lord will bring us, as Elijah brought Elisha, to that severe testing in which Elijah took great risks of being misunderstood. I cannot dwell upon that, but he did. He could have involved himself in a lot of misunderstanding with Elisha, and Elisha might have said: 'Look here, this man does not want me. He is trying to get rid of me. Evidently I am mistaken about this whole thing', and, offended, he might have turned away. Well, Elijah took risks like that, and the Lord takes risks like that with us. I don't know how many of you have got to the place (if you haven't, don't worry. You may get there sooner or later) where the Lord's dealings with us sometimes make us wonder whether He really wants us after all. It does seem as though He is trying to put us off. The ways of the Lord are to our flesh sometimes very discouraging! We don't find a great deal of natural, soulical zest when we are passing through times of trial.

Well, leave that. Now then, how much do you really need what you are in by the call of God? How much is it really vital to you in consequence? Is it a matter of life or death? Now, you will need capacity, depth and spiritual enlargement, and you will need to be brought to the place where you are spiritually competent, reliable, able to take responsibility, and the only way of coming there is as Elisha came there, under the full endowment of the Holy Spirit, for this great vocation is being tested as to whether you really do mean business.

In the course of many years I have had quite a lot of letters written to me about the ministry in print, and this is one type of letter that I have often received: 'When I first came into possession of this ministry in print (referring to the magazine) I could not understand it, I could not appreciate it. It did not mean anything to me, so I just put the thing away. But then, for a year or two, or more, I went through deep waters and into such spiritual trial that I had to cry out to the Lord for something to help me in my difficulty. And then perchance I came on that printed ministry. My word, I would never have believed what was in it! It just met

my need because I had gone through something that made it necessary.'

Forgive me illustrating in that way. I am not drawing attention to anything in particular, but am simply saying this: that we come to this place of evaluating our calling and setting a right estimate and value upon it only by way of deep trial and testing, where it becomes absolutely necessary to us, and if we don't know the Lord in some new way, it is the end of everything. The Lord tests us, you see, to enlarge our spiritual measure and capacity unto the going through with this great thing to which He has called us, to lay the deposit at His feet at last, undiminished, but rather increased.

This is what Paul said to Timothy: "O Timothy, guard that which is committed unto thee" (1 Timothy 6:20). Translated more literally that says: 'O Timothy, guard the deposit. Something has been committed to you, deposited with you, and you have got to hand it back to the Lord at the last day. See to it that nothing is lost.'

Well, we come to the capacity for that along this same line as Elisha, and you can see how it was with the apostles. How discouraged they might have been, especially during those strange forty days! Indeed, I think Peter showed some signs of giving way. It was so strange, this coming and going of the Lord during forty days! You could not be sure of Him. It all seemed so unreal. He was here one moment, and then He was gone, and you never knew when He would be here again, if ever. It was all so intangible, and, you know, this flesh must have something it can hold on to, and can see and be sure of. This spiritual life is such a trying thing to the natural man, and at last Peter said: "I go a fishing" (John 21:3) ... 'Fishes are more tangible. I know something about fishing, but I don't know much about the spiritual life. It is too much for me, so I go a fishing.' And the others said: "We also come with thee." But you know what happened and I need not follow that through. It did not work. They had been called to something more than that - fishers of men.

However, the point is, dear friends, that you and I are put through very real testing and trials to find out whether we really mean business with God, and how much spiritual things count with us. Can we hold them lightly? Can we dispense with them easily, or has this become a master thing in our lives? Do we really know the bond of the Spirit, the bond of the mantle which has laid hold of us? We are men and women who are in the charge of the Spirit of Jesus Christ and it must be like that to fulfil this vocation.

Alive, But in Bondage

Now, there is another thing. And this is a thing that you and I must be very clear about; we must be on very sure ground in this matter. That is why I took that little fragment from John 11 about Lazarus. The Lord had called him out of the tomb, and he came forth "bound hand and foot with graveclothes; and his face was bound about with a napkin". I don't know anything about that, as I am not a mortician. If there is one here he will understand why it is necessary to bind a dead man's hands and feet and tie up his face. We will leave that. But Lazarus came forth like this, bound hand and foot, with a napkin round his face, and the Lord Jesus said: "Loose him, and let him go." He is raised, brought back into life, and is out of the realm of death and of the grave, but he is still terribly tied up. He must be loosed, freed from all traces of that old realm, with all its ties, bonds, limitations, frustrations and burdens, and be a man at liberty, set free for God. There is no need for me to point out that Lazarus was here standing in relation to the testimony of Jesus in a very vital way. Read the story again. "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified thereby" (John 11:4). Here is the testimony - "that the Son of God may be glorified" - and the testimony has these phases and aspects.

First: being brought out from the realm of death into newness of life. Then it has the other aspect of being completely set free from all that which is of the past, a person absolutely at liberty... at liberty? Yes, at liberty, but a liberty in a bondage such as has never been before. It is the bondage of the absolute lordship of Jesus Christ, the absolute sovereignty of the Holy Spirit. A lot of Christians are saved; they are born anew; they pass from death into life; but, oh! what a lot of trappings they have brought with them into the new realm! A lot of the old ties still follow them through, and hold them bound - hand and feet and head. You know what I mean without my illustrating, and it is true.

Let me put it in another way. There are many Christians who have not yet come into and under the absolute sovereignty of the Holy Spirit. What do we mean by the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit? Well, this is a thing that the Lord Jesus was constantly trying to press and impress. Take that fragment with Nicodemus. Undoubtedly, here is a man in bondage, all tied up with natural ties. He is not even yet through from death to life. And the Lord said to him: "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the voice thereof, but knowest not whence it cometh, and whither it goeth; so is every one that is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8). You see what He was saying? Have you ever tried conclusions with a hurricane? Have you ever tried to set yourself against a mighty, rushing wind? Well, look at the day of Pentecost, when the Spirit came like a rushing, mighty wind, and see who can stand up to that! Who can hold on his own independent way when that is happening? The wind blows where it likes, and you cannot say to it: 'You must come this way, or go that way. You must do this, or that.' It just does as it likes. That is all. The wind is sovereign. And if you know anything about it, you know quite well that the only thing to do is to set your sails and let that wind carry you on. To try to withstand it means trouble.

Now the Lord is speaking about the Holy Spirit, and the words to Nicodemus illustrate the day of Pentecost and what followed. He is saying: 'Now, look here, Nicodemus, you are all tied up with your legalities, your traditions, and your natural life. You will have to come to the place where you let go to the Spirit of God and completely capitulate to Him. You will never get into the Kingdom at all until that happens. Capitulate to the Spirit, and do not say this, or that, or the other thing. That is all taken out of your hands and put into the hands of the Holy Spirit to say which way, and what, and so on.' The sovereignty of the Holy Spirit means that all our old ties are removed and these old bonds are taken off. We are brought into a new captivity.

That is just the theme of Paul's letter to the Galatians. On the one side there are the bonds, and ties, and graveclothes of the law. On the other side, how much Paul is saying to them about the Spirit! "Having begun in the Spirit, are ye now perfected in the flesh?" (3:3). He is appealing to them not to be brought again under the yoke of bondage, but to remain under this mighty mastery of the Spirit, which he calls liberty, real liberty.

Now, you see, with Elisha it came to the point of a final committal, or commitment, at Jordan, and that is what Jordan always means. It is a type of the Cross, where for ever the bound is met and passed through, or over, from the old self-governed, self-directed life and way to the absolute mastery of the Spirit. When Elisha got through that, to that point of complete committal, the mantle of Elijah came down on him, as everybody recognised. "The spirit of Elijah doth rest upon Elisha" (2 Kings 2:15). The final committal is at Jordan, at the Cross, where there is full abandonment to the absolute sovereignty of the Holy Spirit, for Him to say: 'This way, or that way. Hither, or thither', never allowing us to dictate anything at all.

But, oh! What a lot of limitation continues in our life because, well, we want to say which way, what it is to be, and what it is not to be. We have arguments with the Lord and we have controversies with the Holy

Spirit, but once He gets that complete sovereignty you see what happens.

We spoke earlier of the inestimable blessing of an opened heaven. Well, Elisha came into that, didn't he? "Chariots of Israel, and the horsemen thereof." An opened heaven and the Spirit coming through the opened heaven, as the master went into glory. It is the parable of this truth that we have here in the Book of the Acts, and that book is the continuation of this testimony. It has so often been pointed out that it is a book which was never finished. Perhaps you, like me, have often wished that Luke had written his third volume and carried it somewhere nearer to completion, telling us what happened afterwards. But, no, the Holy Spirit never allowed that story to be ended, because it is not ended yet. We are in the third volume of the Acts of Jesus Christ now! That volume of the doings and teachings of Jesus Christ is being written now, and we will read it later on.

But, dear friends, the truth is the same. The same Lord is in heaven. The same Holy Spirit has come forth from heaven to us. The same testimony of Jesus as was committed to those disciples and apostles has been committed to us. The same glorious endowment is ours, the endowment of the Holy Spirit. What an endowment!

I wanted to take you to some of the things in the life of Elisha, to talk to you about that poor widow and her oil, the collecting, the borrowing of very many vessels from all her neighbours, and the miracle of the never-ending oil while there was a need. Well, you can see yourself what that means. The blessed, wonderful sufficiency of the Holy Spirit to meet all need, to pay all obligations and to get through with the testimony to the glory of God. One passage from Paul is enough to include that: "God is able to make all grace abound unto you; that ye, having always all sufficiency in everything, may abound" (2 Corinthians 9:8). That is the woman and her pots of oil overflowing - the all-sufficiency of the Holy Spirit, however long we live, to meet the last demand. What a blessed thing that is!

And I wanted to talk to you about Naaman and his mighty experience of this power of the Spirit, but we must leave him.

And, then what about the sons of the prophets of Jericho, who said: "Behold now, the place where we dwell before thee is too strait for us. Let us go, we pray thee, unto Jordan... and let us make us a place there, where we may dwell" (2 Kings 6:1,2). The question of enlargement again, of capacity for usefulness and service. You know they went down to Jordan, and as they were cutting down the trees for this enlargement, the axe-head of one came off and fell into the water, which was evidently so deep that they could not see where it was. Elisha said: "Where fell it?" And then the result - and by this act of Elisha "the iron did swim" (2 Kings 6:6 - RV margin). That is the focal point of it: that, dear friends, which by nature would always sink and go to the bottom, is made to reverse its course and swim. What a story is in that of spiritual experience through the centuries! You and I by nature are always ready to sink. That is our way! Even in the work of the Lord our way is so often the down way. We say we get down - 'I am down today.' We are gravitating downwards - the forces of gravity are too much for us. And then, by the miracle of the Holy Spirit, ascendancy comes in and takes charge, where the natural course would be downwards. I have no space to enlarge upon that - I just indicate it.

These are things which become very true in the spiritual life when the Holy Spirit is in charge. The order is reversed. You and I naturally have a great propensity for getting down. The Holy Spirit reverses that natural way and brings us up again and again. This heavy iron of our natures is made to swim. You know something about that!

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