

The Man in the Message

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon explores the unique calling and ministry of the Apostle Paul as a chosen vessel of God, emphasizing the importance of personal experience and divine anointing in effective ministry.

Scripture: Acts 9:16, Ephesians 3:2

Topics: "Divine Calling", "Sovereignty Of God"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the unique significance of the Apostle Paul as a chosen vessel of God, highlighting how his pre-conversion experiences shaped his ministry and understanding of God's sovereignty. He notes that while all apostles shared foundational truths, Paul's specific calling and anointing set him apart for a distinct role in spreading the Gospel to the nations. Sparks illustrates that true ministry arises from personal experience and divine appointment, asserting that God's sovereignty is evident in the preparation and challenges faced by His servants. He draws parallels between Paul and Stephen, suggesting that Stephen's martyrdom foreshadowed the intense opposition Paul would encounter in his ministry. Ultimately, Sparks encourages believers to recognize their own divine calling and the importance of being anointed for their specific roles in God's plan.

Transcript

This is not intended to be a "Life of the Apostle Paul," but has rather to do with the particular significance of this servant of Jesus Christ. While there are those vital and essential factors in his case which must be true of every servant of Christ, and which are basic to every fruitful ministry (as we shall later mention), everything about Paul indicates that he was indeed "a chosen (elect) vessel," foreknown, foreordained and selected. This was true particularly in the nature of the ministry for which he was "apprehended." The same nature of ministry may--in measure--be the "calling" of others, but it was pioneered in Paul. All the Apostles stood on common ground where the fundamentals of the faith were concerned: the Person of Christ; the work of Christ; redemption; justification; sanctification; the world commission to preach salvation in Christ to all the world; the coming again of the Saviour, etc. They had the same foundation. Each one may have had "grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ"; that is, according to their personal gift, whether Apostle, Prophet, Evangelist, Pastor or Teacher, each had "grace"--anointing, enablement--corresponding to the responsibility, but on "fundamentals," i.e. foundation matters, they were agreed and one. Whatever we may say in distinguishing Paul, we would not for a moment take one small fragment from the great ministry of John, or Peter, or James, or others. Never could our New Testament suffer the loss of those ministries, and elsewhere we have gloried in them. When all has been said as to

their value--and it would be an immense "all"--we still have to affirm that there was, and is, that which is unique and particular in what came through Paul. Let us hasten to say a very significant and helpful thing before we proceed.

It would never have been possible for Paul to understand his pre-conversion life until he came under the hand of Jesus Christ. That vocation with which he was called when Jesus became his Lord throws so much illumination upon the sovereignty of God in his past history. This is a principle which will help so many people and servants of God, and it shows how immensely important it is that Jesus shall be--not only Saviour-- but Lord. We shall see this more fully later. Paul's Jewish birth, upbringing, training, education and deep embeddedness in something from which he would be extricated by the power of God, and something which was going to be shown no longer to be what God needed, is in itself of tremendous educative value. Why God, in His foreknowledge, should put a man deeply into something which does not ultimately represent His mind contains a point to be noted. Many there are who argue that, because they have ample reason to know that God put them into a certain way, work, form, association, there they are to abide for ever, willy nilly. Paul's history says No to that argument. God's ways in his case came to show that He may do a thing like that, and all His sovereignty may truly be in it, but only for a purpose, and a temporary purpose; namely, to give a deep and thorough first-hand knowledge of that which is really at best a limitation upon the full purpose of God. It is necessary for an effective servant of God to have personal knowledge of that from which people are to be delivered. Abraham must know Chaldea; Moses must know Egypt; David must know the falsehood of Saul's reign. So Paul must know the proscribed Judaism, so that he can speak with authority, the authority of personal experience. Were we the Psalmist, we should put "Selah" there. "Think of that!"

But we must underline two aspects of this principle. We are referring to what was definitely within the Divine 'working of all things after the counsel of His own will,' and "according to His purpose." Paul was not changing his God at conversion, Jehovah was his God for ever. The change was in the method of God. It was still God working. We say this because no one can say that, because they were born and brought up in this or that, therefore "Providence" (meaning God) intended that to be their way for always. We must be as we are and where we are by the sovereignty of God, and we must know that any major change is equally definitely of God, and the only alternative to making it is clear disobedience to the presented will of God. It has to be a must, or a missing of the way. It certainly will make demands upon faith's walk with God, because the element of apparent contradiction may be present. We do not know what mental and soul battles Paul had. It is not recorded that in facing the immense revolution he reasoned with the Lord--'Well, Lord, by Your own sovereignty I was born a Jew, and that with more than general terms: "of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews... a Pharisee." And now, Lord, you are requiring me to take a course which repudiates all that and contradicts it. It is not like You, Lord, to contradict Yourself; it seems so inconsistent. It is not as though I have not been God-fearing and have been without faith in You.' The change was so revolutionary as to seem to be two contrary ways in the same God. Here was a very big occasion to "trust in the Lord with all thine heart, and lean not upon thine own understanding." We could cite the cases of many servants of God who have been brought to such a crisis between reason and faith when God was demanding a decision which seemed to contradict all His former leading. Some of these have come to be very greatly vindicated by obedience. Some have lived to be examples of having missed the way, or God's best.

All this has had to do with God's sovereign preparation and equipment of a servant so that that servant should truly know by deep experience what he is talking about and what the differences are. This then, in

brief, as to his Jewish relationship.

But this man was elected and destined to be God's special messenger to the nations, not just to a nation. The nations were mainly under Roman government and Greek culture and language. Through his father Paul inherited Roman citizenship and Freemanship, and by his birth and upbringing in Tarsus he had both the Greek language and a first-class familiarity with Greek life and culture. These three things--Jewry, Roman citizenship and Greek language--took him with facility and ease into practically the whole world. But, added to all this natural qualification was that without which Paul would never have been the real factor that history testifies to; he was anointed with the Holy Spirit. Sometimes the anointing has made up for much natural deficiency in education and birth, and men have made spiritual history who would never have been recognized on merely natural grounds. The Lord took very real care that Paul could never make his natural advantages the ground of his true success. This was implied or indicated in the first recorded words of the Lord about him (to Ananias) after his conversion: "I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake" (Acts 9:16).

The sovereignty of God is many-sided and has many ways. It is only when the full story is told that a true explanation is seen. At the beginning and in the course there can be room for many a "why?" A Moses and a Jeremiah may start off with what they are convinced is a definite handicap and contradiction, but history justifies God and in the end His wisdom is vindicated. When God says "He is a chosen vessel," He knows all about the clay of which the vessel is made. As we go on, the two implicit things just referred to will become increasingly apparent. One, that the messenger and his message are one thing; the message is in the man's constitution and very history under the hand of God. And two, the man is not just recognized for his natural qualifications alone, but pre-eminently because God has anointed him for his position and work. No man can be in any but a completely false position who speaks without what he says being born out of real experience. Only, for instance, may a man speak of brokenness if he himself has been broken. Paul's ministry throughout came from a continuous history with God in deep and usually painful experiences of conflict. It was "the spoil of battle." It is absolutely imperative that it should be obvious and manifest that any position, function and ministry on the part of anyone in relation to Christ should be by anointing, and that the impression made and the conclusion drawn by others is that "that man is clearly anointed for that job!" Anointing simply means that God is most evidently with the person concerned in what they are doing and in the position that they hold. To be out of position is to be out of anointing in that particular. We cannot select, choose, decide our place and function. That is an organic thing, and just as it is awkward for a leg to try to do the work of an arm in the human body, so there will always be something wrong when we assume a work or position for which the sovereignty of the Spirit has not chosen us. With all the adversities and oppositions, it is the most helpful thing to know that we are where we are by Divine appointment and not by our own will. It is a good thing when we know what our function is, and what it is not, and act accordingly! There are sufficient functions in the body corporate for every member to have a quite definite one under the one anointing, and the function will as naturally express itself as an eye sees, an ear hears, a hand grips, and so on, if the head (the Head) is in full and right control. Paul, then, has much to teach us on this matter, first by his life and then by his writings. At this point we are brought back to where we diverged from the message to the man, and we must now consider that differentiation of function for which Paul was particularly chosen and apprehended.

Paul's Distinctive Vocation

That there was a difference and peculiar importance in Paul's ministry has a number of strong evidences and attestations. He knew it himself and often referred to it, both as to its substance and the way in which

he received it. This is expressed in such words as these:

"the stewardship (R.V. margin) of that grace of God which was given me to you-ward";

"how that by revelation was made known unto me the mystery... whereby... ye can perceive my understanding in the mystery of Christ"; "Unto me... was this grace given... to make all men see (bring to light--R.V. margin) what is the stewardship of the mystery" (Eph. 3:2-4, 8, 9).

While Paul does not say that he alone had the "mystery" made known to him, he does claim that, as a stewardship, a ministry, it was revealed to him in a distinctly personal and direct-from-heaven manner. He claimed that he was divinely apprehended for this particular ministry. What that revelation was has to spread itself over all that we shall yet write. At the moment we are concerned with the fact of Paul's specific vocation.

Not least among the evidences of this was the fury, invective, hatred, malice and murderous cruelty of the devil and his forces focused upon this man, relentlessly. It was surely because of what was coming through him and not just because of his personality. It began and broke loose on the same issue before Paul was the apprehended vessel of it. To see and understand this we have to go back to the one man who had previously seen what Paul was shown. We refer to Stephen as the first Christian martyr and we are deeply moved when we read the account of his death. But how little Stephen has been understood, and how blind we have been to the real meaning of his death--his destruction by Satan-controlled men.

Stephen--the Precursor of Paul

A thoughtful consideration of Stephen's discourse before the Jewish Sanhedrin will show that Stephen was like a 'preface', an introduction, to Paul's ministry. If Stephen had lived, there is little doubt that he and Paul would have been in a mighty partnership in the Stewardship of the Mystery. This, of course, supposes that the Lord did not foresee that Stephen would die, and that, in that foreknowledge, He did not mark down Paul for the alone steward of this ministry in its fulness.

The Divine sovereignty has rarely been evidenced more than in Saul's presence with Stephen at the time of the latter's death, although an accomplice in it. As we move with Stephen through that long discourse, following his mind from Abraham through Isaac, Jacob, the Patriarchs, Joseph, Israel, Moses, Egypt, the Exodus, Sinai, the Tabernacle, the Wilderness, Joshua, David, Solomon, the Temple, the Prophets, up to Christ, the "Righteous One," there is one thing that is in Stephen's mind throughout, and that one thing is the key to everything and that which--more than anything else--explains, defines and characterizes Paul and his ministry.

That one thing is that God is ever, from eternity to eternity, pressing on to an all-comprehending goal. Through human failure, human and Satanic obstruction and attempted frustration; by a variety and multitude of ways, means, and persons, in all generations and ages, God is ever going on. His desired and selected instruments may become a hindrance rather than a help. Nations, empires and systems may oppose and obstruct; circumstances may seem to limit Him, but--given time-- He is found not to have given up, but still to be going on.

He has set Himself a purpose and a goal, and that goal will be reached. Let Jewry "always resist the Holy Spirit" as Stephen says; so much the worse for Jewry. That is the tremendous upshot of Stephen's discourse. Within that inclusiveness there are other features. God's purpose is a heavenly one, a vast one,

a spiritual one, an eternal one. Neither the Tabernacle, with all its inner beauty and symbolic embodiment of Divine thoughts; nor the Temple of Solomon with all its magnificence and glory; nor Solomon himself with his stunning wisdom and overwhelming wealth--says Stephen--can remotely approximate to that toward which God is moving in relation to His Son.

That is not "made with hands." That is not of the earth. That is not God's House (Acts 7:48,49). The Holy Spirit--says Stephen, in effect--is moving on, ever on to this so-much-greater in every way. Stephen, in one glorious hour met the devastating force of that with which Paul contended all his life, namely the incorrigible disposition of God's people to bring what is essentially heavenly down to earth and fix it there; to crystallize spiritual things into man-made systems; to lay hands upon what is of God and make it something of man, something exclusive and legal under man's control.

Stephen's stand for, and testimony to, this "Heavenly Vision" (that became Paul's phrase) brought him into the most violent and vicious hatred of vested religious interests, so far as systems were concerned, and Satan's fiercest jealousy behind all. Touch religious traditions and established orders and you will find the same thing that Stephen met, a jealousy which issues from blindness to the vastly greater purpose of God. In some way you will be stoned! by ostracism, exclusion, closed doors, suspicion and misrepresentation, all of which are traceable in the case of Paul.

Have we said enough about Stephen to justify and establish our statement that he was--so to speak--Paul in advance? Stephen himself is an example of God going on in spite of hell and men, as Paul was the going on of God in fulness when men put Stephen away. We look back to our beginning statement that a major evidence of the particular ministry for which Paul was chosen is the vehemence of Satanic antagonism.

All that we have said, and much more, will, of course, come out in our consideration of the ministry of Paul himself, but I am sure that we are beginning to see something of his significance.

Still ahead of our contemplation of the crowning and consummate ministry of Paul the Apostle, there are several matters of considerable value which may make a brief chapter of helpfulness by themselves.

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