

The Mystery of the Gospel

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon explores the profound mystery of the Gospel as the incarnation of God in Christ, emphasizing the need for spiritual maturity and the conflict surrounding sonship.

Scripture: Romans 1:3-16, Ephesians 3:3-4, Ephesians 3:9, Ephesians 4:13, Ephesians 6:12, Philippians 1:27, Colossians 1:27, 1 Timothy 3:9

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "The Mystery of the Gospel"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks explores 'The Mystery of the Gospel', emphasizing that the Gospel is more than its individual components like atonement and forgiveness; it is the fullness of God's redemptive plan through Christ. He argues that the current spiritual state of Christians reflects a need for a deeper understanding of the Gospel, which is rooted in the mystery of Christ's incarnation and the call to sonship. Sparks highlights that the conflict faced by believers is centered around their spiritual growth and maturity, which is essential for overcoming the challenges posed by the enemy. He asserts that the true essence of the Gospel is not merely about salvation but about becoming a living expression of God's nature through Christ in us. Ultimately, the sermon calls for a renewed apprehension of the Gospel to fulfill God's purpose in the world.

Transcript

Reading: 1 Tim. 3:9; Phil. 1:27; Rom. 1:3,5; 16:25-26; Eph. 3:3-4,9; 4:13.

I think you will have recognised the familiar thoughts and words in all those passages, and the similar ideas. Some words stand out, such as Gospel, His Son, the mystery, the faith. They are all common words in those passages. And then, of course, there is the associated idea of conflict.

So this morning for a little while we are to be occupied with the mystery of the Gospel, or what the Gospel is. There is a very great need for a new apprehension of the nature of the Gospel. The Gospel has been very much reduced and whittled down, made merely to mean one or more of its parts, and its entirety, its fulness, has really been lost sight of. What I mean is, that so often the Gospel is said to be "the atoning work of the Lord Jesus", "righteousness which is by faith", "the forgiveness of sins"; all these things. All those things and many more like them are in the Gospel, they are parts of the Gospel, but the Gospel is something more than the parts. The Gospel is the sum of all those parts. But even then, when you have catalogued all the elements of the Gospel; God's redeeming love, forgiveness of sins, atonement for sin, when you have catalogued all the parts, you have still to get inside to know really what the Gospel is.

The Present Situation Amongst Christians

I am just wondering in these days - and we are all wondering and thinking very hard in the light of the situation - I am just wondering whether this may not be the matter upon which God is, to a very large extent, suspending operations today. I am just going to talk for a moment out of my heart, because I do feel that we are in a very perplexing, but very significant, situation at this time. There is a sense in which it does seem that the Lord is not doing very much. I mean there are no very manifest movements of God on the earth along certain lines in which we look for God to be moving. I do not mean that He is doing nothing, that there is nothing going on. I believe there is, and in parts a very real work of God going on. But, speaking generally, there is no great movement of God in an outward way spiritually. For a long time such forms of Divine activity seem to have been suspended. We think back to Wesley, and even to Moody, and then see that at a certain time a whole galaxy of great Bible teachers was raised up. We have all the names of the men of a generation ago. They have all gone. There are no movements like that, and have not been for a long time. Moreover the situation has changed so much that I do not believe that if all those men came back today, they could meet the situation. Something has happened. The situation has not only changed but it has become much deeper, and the need is for something more than has been during these past generations, something more potent and something deeper. The need is such as to require something from God of a new order. It was there, of course, in New Testament times. I am not thinking of something extra so far as the New Testament is concerned, but I am wondering very much whether this whole matter is not largely one of a new apprehension of what the Gospel is.

We have a very widespread situation the world over today amongst Christians which is an altogether unsatisfactory one, and I think most leaders and responsible people realise that. I think ministers and missionaries are aware that the state of the converts and the Christians is altogether unsatisfactory and inadequate. It is a real question sometimes whether many of them have really been born again. The spiritual life of the Lord's people is a very shallow thing, speaking generally, a very poor thing. And surely today it is manifest that the Church generally is failing to register itself with any impact upon the world situation. There is not a word, there is not a voice today for the present situation. You may gather leaders together on the present situation and no one has anything to say that really goes to the heart of matters. Why this apparent hiatus, this suspension of any general and impressive working, any working that is adequate to the situation, God seeming to be doing nothing? Oh, I believe that He is doing something inwardly, but that is not what I am talking about. Why does this situation obtain?

The Need for a New Apprehension of the Gospel

Well I say, I wonder whether it is not because there has to be a new apprehension of the Gospel. I believe that it really is the demand of a late hour in the dispensation; that we have advanced in this dispensation toward the end so much that the Lord cannot any longer accept the elementary. He must have the mature, He must have the fuller. Everything surely along the line of intensification as we see it demands that.

Now, of course, until His people have come to realise the ineffectiveness and the futility, the weakness and the failure of the partial, He cannot do anything; because the Lord always works with His people, and therefore He must have them in a state which makes it possible for Him to do something. If His people are content with something less, it would be a very unwise thing for Him to give His full thought in revelation. It would be perfectly useless. They would have no sense of need of it. May it not be that that is one of the deeper things He is doing, namely, creating and intensifying the sense of the weakness and futility of things, raising big questions even about the Gospel. I think there is reason to think that it is so. Thus it may

be - I only put it in that form - that His answer is a new apprehension of the Gospel and what the Gospel is.

God's Secret

Now is it not interesting that here in the Scriptures you have such a phrase as this - "the mystery of the Gospel", and that word "mystery" is definitely stated to be a secret which God has deliberately held through ages and generations, an undisclosed, undivulged thought of His. He has verily in things throughout the ages deliberately kept a secret, had a secret, an unrevealed intention in relation to means and methods of reaching His end. And note again, it is not the mystery of some profound extra teaching, it is not that some revelation over and above the simple Gospel is the message. Oh, if that has got into your mind, get rid of it at once. The mystery is not some extra revelation of Divine truth, it is not something apart from the Gospel. I think a lot of people, when they hear words like those, "the mystery which hath been hid for ages", think that is higher truth, or something for people who are in another realm altogether from the ordinary person, that it is for some sort of spiritual aristocracy. No, it says here it is the mystery of the Gospel.

And then again the same word - "the mystery of Christ": and then, as we have noted, the bringing of these two things together, the Gospel of God concerning His Son, which is the mystery, the secret that had been hidden through all the ages and the generations, but which is now revealed: and Paul says, "my gospel".

Well now, what is this mystery of the Gospel which is the mystery of Christ, which is the mystery now disclosed? What is it? Can we put it into few words? We will try. In brief, the mystery is the incarnation of God in Christ in terms of sonship, with the intent that He should be the firstborn among many brethren, so that there shall be a Divine seed or family or Body. Oh, if we could but get inside of a statement like that! God's secret!

How did God decide to solve the whole problem of this universe after the chaos and ruin resultant from the working of Satan, and men's complicity with him, and the entrance of sin? How was God going to deal with this whole situation? By Himself coming right down in the form of man in terms of sonship and begetting a new race of beings as sharers of His own Divine life; not His Deity but His Divine life, partaking of His own Divine nature, becoming as a family, His own moral and spiritual reproduction in the universe. I say that is infinitely - may I use the word of God? - infinitely ingenious. There is wisdom about that that is profound. Not a working from the outside to try and remedy and patch up a broken down situation, not a dealing with the thing objectively at all but Himself coming right into it, God incarnate, God manifest in the flesh in terms of sonship; that is, in generic terms, to reproduce after His own kind. That is a secret which God kept hidden through ages and generations. God had that secret.

But how was He going to handle the whole thing? You can trace it now in the types and see it there. It is there in the tabernacle, in the ark of the testimony, it is there throughout the Old Testament in symbols. But they saw it not; God hid it. Now it is disclosed, the revelation is out. It is the mystery of the Gospel.

Sonship the Occasion of the Conflict

What is the Gospel? It is Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh in terms of sonship, to generate a new race after His own kind, to bring many sons to glory. That is it in brief. Oh, that is something very much more than getting your sins forgiven, that is very much more than justification by faith. It is that, but it is infinitely more than that, and all the other things included; the deep, deep inner secret of God, how He is eventually going to have triumph in His original purpose; and what we have been seeing is this, that the

faith is not a system of doctrine at all. The faith, according to the New Testament, is sonship, and it is in relation to sonship as an inward, spiritual reality brought about by this work of God in generation, it is that which is the occasion of all the conflict. The Son came and, right at His coming, hell was moved from beneath to withstand Him and to make His entrance into this world impossible, and to get Him out of it as soon as could be. All the way along it was upon this very point - "If thou be the Son..." Hear it in the wilderness, Satan saying, "If thou be the Son..." It is an assault upon sonship in terms of doubt, to try to paralyse the effect of that sonship by introducing some question about it. "If thou be the Son..." So it was all the way through; and then on the Cross you hear that Satanic hiss again, coming through the Jews who cried, "If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross" (Matt. 27:40). Only when we are in conditions and circumstances of extreme pressure and adversity, only then are we able to understand a little of what it meant to have that question raised at such a time. You the Son of God! Poor Son of God! Look at you, look at your condition, look at your situation! God has left you! This is the outworking of your own foolish ways, your own self-chosen way; there is no trace of sonship about this! "If thou be the Son..." - raising the question again in the light of the awful conditions. It is the assault upon sonship.

And then the assault was transferred from the Son to His seed, and we know quite well that the real nature of spiritual conflict is not around our creed, our profession; it is over the spiritual life that is in us. It is about that mystery in us of a difference. We are going the same way as He went, we are being subjected to the testing fires of adversity. The Lord allows conditions to arise in our lives which seem wholeheartedly to deny that we are sons, that we have been born out from God, that God is with us, that God is in us by His Spirit. All the conditions seem at times to put God far from us, and there is nothing whatever to argue that we are sons. That is the test of faith.

And the faith is just that; not only faith in Him but the faith is that we are sons, sons of God, in the midst of a wicked and perverse generation, in the midst of a world that is hostile, in the midst of a cosmos full of antagonistic spirits. Yes, the fact of sonship is there through new birth, but sonship is something more than birth, sonship is maturity. That is where the consideration at this time comes in. It is so clear that the New Testament shows that the continuation unto the full growth of sonship is as vital and as important as the beginning of sonship; that is, the bringing of the Lord's people to full spiritual growth is as important as bringing them to new birth. That is where there has been a breakdown.

That brings us right back to what I was saying at the beginning. Today, and for a long time, evangelical leaders have put all the emphasis, or the main emphasis, upon getting people saved. They are interested in that more than anything else, and that is the direction of their main occupation. With what result? That we see a most unsatisfactory state among Christians, and that too in the face of the fact that the very existence of the New Testament itself is the evidence that to bring converted people to full spiritual growth is as important as bringing them to new birth. Why have we the New Testament, with Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and all the other letters, occupied with the fight of the faith to bring believers to full growth? Every one of them is a battleground.

Look at Paul's fight for Galatia. What a fight it was against those Judaizers who had come in, and were causing arrest to the spiritual progress of the believers there. Paul had to say, "I marvel that you are so soon removed... unto another gospel". Hebrews is another battleground. All these letters are battlegrounds, and they all have to do, not with the conversion of the unsaved but the going on of the saved, the terrific fight of sonship. Why? Because the issue is not that babes are going to oust the powers of darkness, but full-grown believers. The Church has to come to maturity.

So the Apostle says, "When he ascended on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men... and he gave some apostles: and some, prophets"; and so on. What for? "The perfecting of the saints... till we all attain unto the unity of the faith... unto a full-grown man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" (Eph. 4:8,11-13). The unity of the faith, the fulness of Christ. You see, that is the thing that comes to light. It is just as important for the seed or the family or the Body to come to spiritual full-growth as it is for it to be begotten at all. That is a tremendous thing. The mystery of the Gospel is not just getting people born again. The mystery of the Gospel is the fulness of Christ, and that only begins at new birth. This is the disclosed secret, this Gospel, and it is the occasion of the tremendous, unrelenting conflict, a cosmic conflict with principalities, powers, world-rulers of this darkness, spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenlies (Eph. 6:12). That is where the wrestling goes on.

The Focal Point of the Conflict - Its Nature and Outcome

With one word of emphasis, I close for the present. Beloved, the focal point of the conflict is the spiritual advancement of the children of God toward full-growth, and by any means whatever the enemy will seek to interfere with that. He is striking right at the heart of this thing all the time by every means in his power. God will reach His end, He will come in, in His Son in terms of sonship, to take up residence within those begotten of Him, and will grow in them, increase His measure in them, until at last, brought to the unity of the faith, they become a mighty embodiment and revelation of God Himself; not in Deity, but in what He is spiritually and morally in this universe, conformed to the image of His Son, a living expression of God's own thoughts, to fill His universe. The enemy is out against that, and every little step in that direction is challenged, the spiritual growth is countered all the time. He is striking at God's Son. Of course in principle it is quite true that the fight rages round the person of the Lord Jesus. There is a great fight going on between modernism and fundamentalism. The one stands on the ground of the absolute Deity of Christ, Christ manifest in the flesh, and the others will not have it. So the fight rages. But that is an objective fight really, a fight of creeds, philosophies, ideologies. It does not get very far spiritually. I grieve to think that some of the most unspiritual and unkind and unChristlike people have been the most rabid fundamentalists who would fight to the death for the Deity of Christ. It does not get you very far spiritually. It is something more than that, is His Deity. You see what I mean. It goes deeper than that.

The person of the Lord Jesus means something more than what He is in Himself as one apart. It is what He is in this life of sonship as manifested in believers. God manifest in the flesh is not something in the way of a creed to be argued out. God manifest in the flesh is something to be proved by a life. I do not know but that it may have a meaning, that Jesus Christ came into this world and was Emmanuel, God with us, that God did incarnate Himself in that Man, and did some things, and went back to heaven. It might mean something, but I do not know that it would get me very far as something back there. If that fact of God in Christ did not become some reality right at the centre of my life, it would lack something of real value. The mystery is this - "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27). It is the same mystery. There are not a half a dozen mysteries in the New Testament. It is the Gospel of God concerning His Son, and the Gospel is not a system of truth to be preached, the Gospel is a Person, and the power of the Gospel is not that you accept certain things proposed to you about Jesus Christ, but that Jesus Christ comes to reside in you by new birth. That is the Gospel. That, of course, is going back to the very elementary; but oh, that we could get a fresh glimpse of the immense significance of the Gospel, the Gospel of God concerning His Son, Jesus Christ, God's secret! I like to dwell upon that. If you sit down in the presence of the world situation and try to sort it out and find the solution to it, it is beyond us, altogether; but all through the ages God has been perfectly at rest about this whole thing, about the issue. He was able to say, I have the

secret of the whole thing, I have solved the whole problem, I have the means in hand; in the end My method will absolutely succeed! And the secret? - why it is just this: I will go down Myself in terms of sonship and will generate a new race through faith, and that new race will be brought eventually to spiritual full-growth; which simply means that then I shall fill all, I shall occupy all the space; there will be no room for anything else at all! That is the issue for every Christian life. It is whether God is going to fill the whole space or not, or whether we are going to have a bit. All the time that is what is going on. Can the Lord gain the ground, will we give way to Him? Are we holding the ground for ourselves, are we in His way? Are we going to let the Lord have all the territory of our being in every way. It is not so easy as saying, Yes! It becomes a daily challenge. There is a strong, many-sided, subtle self-life. We never know how difficult it is to let the Lord have His way until He lights upon some pet opinion of our self-life. But that is the issue. When the Lord has gained His full way in all His own, as He will at the end, the manifestation of the sons of God will take place, and the whole problem will have been solved, the problem of this universe.

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