

The Nature of Service and the Marks of the Servant

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of being a bondservant of the Lord, recognizing His absolute mastery over us, and coming to a place of utter heart response to His apprehending in order to serve Him in the fullness of Christ.

Scripture: Luke 2:25

Topics: "Service", "Submission to God"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the nature of service through the example of Simeon, who was chosen to bring Christ in fullness at a time of spiritual need. He highlights that true service is often accompanied by pressure, testing, and a sense of being reduced to refinement, as seen in Simeon's life. The sermon underscores the importance of being a bond-servant of the Lord, fully submitted to His mastery, and the necessity of a heart response to God's sovereign calling. Sparks encourages believers to recognize their role in God's plan during these end times and to seek a deeper relationship with Christ as their Master. Ultimately, he calls for a commitment to serve God in the fullness of Christ amidst the challenges of the world.

Transcript

Reading: Luke 2:25-35

"The end of all things is at hand" (1 Peter 4:7).

I think it unnecessary to stress the fact that not only by reason of time, but also by the clear evidence of world developments, the above words from Peter's letter are obviously very much nearer fulfilment than when they were written. We have only to contemplate some actual, present possibilities, which could develop any day and issue in a very full fulfilment of the end of all things. In a word, there is no doubt that "the end of all things is at hand," that the turn of the dispensation is near. The great transition from what has obtained during this dispensation to what will obtain in the next is approaching rapidly. If that is true, if we are impressed with that, we should look to the Word of God to see if it has anything to say to us as to what the Lord will do at such a time; and we are not left without very clear information as to the nature of things at an end-time and as to what God brings forward as His supreme work at such a time. Here, in the end-time represented by Simeon and Anna and a company in Jerusalem, we have been seeing something

of those abiding spiritual features of such a time.

Our particular point now is the matter of service as represented by Simeon; Simeon and the service of God at an end-time. We shall look at the service and the servant, putting it in that order because it is the service to be fulfilled which explains God's dealings with the servant. You never know why the Lord deals with you in certain ways until you know what He wants to do with you; or, to put that in another way, the Lord's dealings with us are prophetic of what He is going to do through us and by us.

THE SERVICE - THE BRINGING IN OF CHRIST IN FULLNESS

Here was Simeon. The service explained the man, for, as we have so far seen, the service to be fulfilled by Simeon was the bringing in of Christ in fullness. Up to that time Christ had been made known in a fragmentary way, by divers portions, in divers ways, here a little and there a little. It had been a progressive development of that which pointed to or symbolized Christ. But now the end of those times had come - of signs and symbols and parts and diversities. Now had arrived the full, the whole, the complete Christ, the Lord Himself; and Simeon was closely related to the bringing in, and the presenting to the future, of Christ, the embodiment of God's fullness. That was the principle of his service, the thing for which God had reserved him and kept him alive; and when there is a service like that to be fulfilled, the bringing in of Christ essentially - not typically, symbolically or partially but essentially and fully - the course of the servant will be no ordinary, easygoing course. The history will not be simple. It will seem to be very complex, very bewildering, very stressful. There will be all the things in existence which would put the instrument out of commission.

THE SERVANT

(a) PREPARED THROUGH PRESSURE

You need only to read the story of the years between the two Testaments to know at what a low level things were when the Lord Jesus came in. There was plenty going on of the religious system, but the real, spiritual, essential value was very small, the state of things very deplorable; and Simeon had lived long years through that state of things and might well have lost heart. There was plenty, I say, to put him out altogether. You know of the political conditions of his day, which created a well-nigh impossible situation in which to expect the fulfilment of any testimony in glory. The enemy was in the land and the people of God were in poor condition; and much more. The inward spiritual history of this man could have been no easygoing sort of thing, but must have been full of testing and trying, and of much pressure to put him right out. Strange ways with a vessel for fullness! You would think that to be chosen for such a purpose would mean that the history would in some way correspond with fullness, would be marvellous and wonderful, without any difficulty about it at all.

But it is just the contrary. That vessel, chosen and reserved by God to bring in a greater fullness of Christ, is a vessel strangely beset and assailed by all sorts of extraordinary things. It has a complicated course, in which it would never be at all difficult to give up and fade right out and say, 'The situation is hopeless!' The way of this service that has to do with the fullness of Christ is a way of great difficulty and perplexity and anguish, of pressure and stress and seeming complication, and oftentimes of apparent impossibility.

(b) TESTED BY GOD'S HIDDEN WORKING

I want to say here that Simeon was but the individual voice and actor in a corporate end-time ministry. We are told here that Anna, who is a kind of counterpart of Simeon, spoke to all those who looked for the redemption of Jerusalem. There was evidently a company of them in Jerusalem. It may have been, and doubtless was, comparatively small, but there it was. There was a company there, waiting, praying, standing for the fullness of the Lord, and Simeon was but the voice and expression of that corporate vessel. I say that, because we do not want to think too much about the individuals in this matter - considering ourselves as individual Simeons. The Lord raises up a corporate testimony to represent and bring in His greater fullness, and what is true of the individual is true of the company. It goes through strange, unusual ways of testing, of perplexity, of adversity, of strain, and oftentimes its position seems to be an impossible one. Just think yourself into Simeon's position. All these long years he had been standing, praying, waiting, longing, for the coming of the Lord's Christ. Although the Lord Himself had spoken to him and told him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Christ, you know very well that under certain conditions of pressure you are tempted to question even what the Lord has said to you, and it would not have been difficult now for Simeon, as an old man, to have said, 'I wonder if I am deceived. Am I holding on to an illusion? Nothing seems to be happening, there seems to be no development, I am getting older and older, and even the promises of God do not seem to be fulfilled; what God has said seems to be no nearer realisation.' Under stress you can feel and think like that. I have no doubt Simeon suffered the same assaults on his mind as other people of God have done in their relationship to something precious of the Lord.

Do realize, then, that it is perhaps as a part of a vessel, and not as being individually of great significance, that we may be sharing the strange history of that vessel and the peculiar pressure upon it, because it is chosen of God to bring in a greater fullness of His Son in a time when spiritual need is going to be very great and very intense.

The ways of God in Simeon's days were hidden ways. There was no sign of anything, nothing at all that spoke of a mighty work of God. That is the most testing thing - to be able to live through and live on when it seems that God is doing nothing about the thing you have been hoping for and talking about. The signs are all hidden, the ways of God are beyond our finding out. That is a very testing thing, but it is in such testings that the Lord prepares His vessel for that particular service.

(c) REDUCED UNTO REFINEMENT AND EFFECTIVENESS

Now I have said that this was a very small company, and that is borne out again and again by the Word of God. At critical times, times of transition, that is a feature to be taken account of. At an end-time, that which is to be the vessel of fullness is in itself a very small vessel. There may be the big thing, but that which is really going to serve the full end of God will be reduced unto refinement, as was the case with Gideon's thirty-two thousand, who were reduced to three hundred for that purpose. It was not a big company in the end, not a mob, not a mass movement. It is like that and will be like that at the end. That which is related to God's fuller intention will be a comparatively small thing very much refined, and the Lord takes serious pains to see that it is so.

(d) THE BONDSERVANT OF A DESPOT

Now when you come to Simeon in relation to that service, you note, of course, that he speaks of himself as the Lord's servant. There are two words here of considerable significance. "Now lettest thou thy servant depart, Lord, according to thy word, in peace." As we have earlier intimated, the word he used is the one

used so often by the Apostle Paul about himself. "Now lettest thou thy BONDSERVANT..." "Paul, the BOND-SLAVE of Jesus Christ." Simeon looked upon himself as the Lord's bond-slave. And then, when he said, "Now lettest thou thy servant depart, LORD," he did not use the word that is usually employed for Lord, but the word despotes, 'the despot'. 'Now lettest thou thy bond-slave go free, O Despot.' You see what kind of conception he had of himself as a servant, and of the Lord as in the position of complete mastery over him. We so often think of the Lord as the Lord Whom we delight in; we like to call Him Lord, but we do not often think of Him in the sense of a despot. That word for us has an unsavoury element in it. The Lord, the Despot! What I am trying to point out is that, in the usage of this language, Simeon is looking upon himself as the servant of the Lord under absolute mastery. The Lord was his complete master, despot. He was a mastered, a subdued, a subjugated man. For this service of the fullness of Christ, the servant has to be on that basis, a bond-slave, one in complete subjection to the Lord. So much is this the case that here the Greek figure behind the language is that of the slave who has either been inherited or bought, and then branded; he cannot take freedom unless he is either given franchise or bought right out from his bondage by some superior authority. He has no rights whatever. And Simeon is saying, 'Now, Lord, let me go as Thy branded bond-slave; give me my heavenly franchise.'

What a conception of the servant of the Lord! It has to be like that; to serve the Lord in any fullness, we have to come there.

(e) UTTER HEART RESPONSE TO DIVINE APPREHENDING

There were two intertwining factors in Simeon's case. There was the sovereign act of God in his apprehending, and there was the heart response of Simeon to that apprehending. These two things work in both ways. God acted sovereignly to apprehend him, and Simeon, on his part, made a full heart response. Yet it also worked the other way. Because Simeon's heart was so set upon the Lord, the Lord laid hold on him. There is the great truth of the Bible that back of all our spiritual history and experience is election, relating, of course, not to salvation but to service. That lies behind and before anything on our part at all. And yet God looks to see the attitude of our hearts before He will bring that election into realization and express it. The fact does remain that the Lord waits for something on our part, even if only for an attitude, for reality - that we really mean business with Him - before He can bring out clearly that thing which He has foreseen and intended. When our hearts are like Simeon's, wholly and utterly abandoned to the Lord so that he calls the Lord his Despot and himself the Lord's bond-slave, we discover then that the Lord has had us in view for a long time, and His intentions concerning us are brought to light. You see the intertwining of these two things - the sovereignty of God and the abandonment of our hearts. They are like two circles turning in on themselves all the time. Do remember that, because they are very important things.

(f) CHRIST ALONE SERVED

Now life can only be definite and meaningful and unified if it is mastered by one Master. The explanation of the dividedness, the disintegration, the distraction, the lack of cohesion and certainty and meaning, is so often that we have not got a Master. Either we are trying to be our own masters, or we are allowing ourselves to be mastered by all sorts of interests and considerations, and thus are playing into the hands of the forces that are at work to destroy our lives. Our great need is of a Master, a Despot, and to be found in utter subjection to Him; what Paul (the man who knew all about this) called 'being apprehended by Christ Jesus.' That was Paul's conception of his conversion. One day the Lord put His hands on him, said, 'Now, Paul, I have got you; what will you do about it?' and the wholehearted response, never gone back

upon, was, "What shall I do, Lord?" (Acts 22:10). From that time, Paul called himself the bond-slave of Jesus Christ, and the one thing that concerned him was to be in subjection to Christ, or for Christ to be absolutely Lord. If it is not like that, life will be a confusion, a civil war inside of ourselves. Unless there is one absolute Master, life will be a misfit; we shall have missed the thing for which God made us, until He is our Master.

Take Paul as an example. Paul was making havoc of his own life as well as of the life of many others while he was in rebellion against the Lord, while he was kicking against the goad. That became perfectly clear after the Lord got the mastery. And what was more (and what is always true, of course, where there is this lack of complete subjection to the Lord) Satan was the driving force behind Paul. He thought he was his own master, but he was being driven; he was helpless before the drive of this evil power. More and more that power of evil was fastening on him and driving him on in desperation to all lengths, involving great cost to himself and much suffering to many others. Oh, what a lot then there is behind this term that Paul came afterwards to use of himself - 'the bond-slave of Jesus Christ.' All those wild, tempestuous forces in his own nature, with which we ourselves are so familiar, those forces that fiercely rise up against the Lord and against all that is of the Lord - all that riot of evil forces was brought into subjection to Jesus Christ, and he could speak of himself as His bond-slave.

(g) NO SATISFACTION SHORT OF THE FULL DIVINE INTENTION

Come back to Simeon. You see, Simeon was a man of great interests. He has been traced by scholars to be the son of Hillel, the great Jewish scholar who founded a school of interpretation of the law. He has also been declared to be the father of the great Gamaliel, at whose feet Paul was brought up. If these facts be true, he must have had a tremendous heritage, a wide field of interest. But, for Simeon, the coming of the hand of the Lord upon him meant that none of that - his scholarly interest, his inheritance, his world, great and full as it was - answered to the deepest thing in him; and it was that same deep thing in him still unanswered, still unsettled, that was his apprehending. We ourselves come to some extent into this very thing when we find that, however much there may be in life and in this world which interests us and occupies much of our time and attention, somehow or other it is not answering to something in us. We may get as far as we can get in that, in success and so on, and yet somehow even the best and the greatest is still a disappointment: there is something remaining. That is the apprehending hand of God, so that nothing just 'fills the bill,' as we say: there is something which has still to be met, some question still to be answered, some compelling sense of our standing in relationship to something more and higher. That is a mark of God's having a greater purpose in our lives, for He never lets us be satisfied with anything less than the full object for which He has called us. We may think we now have our field, but if that is less than all God's thought we may explore and exploit our field but we shall discover that we have not found all that in our heart of hearts we know to be the answer to our existence, to that sense of destiny, of Divine purpose, which casts an emptiness and dissatisfaction upon all else. It was like that, undoubtedly, with Simeon, and yet that something else had not yet come actually into view. But the day that it came, why, his whole world passed out as nothing. He said, 'Now I have it, now I have arrived!' The day when he held the child Jesus in his arms, he knew he had his answer.

Have you had an experience like that? Do you know something of what that means? - waiting, longing, praying, feeling, and then the Lord brings you into touch with that thing which is peculiarly of Himself, and you say, 'This is what I have been sensing the need of, this is it.'

That is the dealing of the Lord with a servant of His, or an instrument, be it personal or corporate, that is chosen for something more than the ordinary, that is called unto the fuller instead of the partial.

Let us then really face this whole question of the Lord's need of an apprehended vessel to bring in the greater measure of the fullness of Christ, and ponder the strange spiritual history through which such a vessel will go - the unusual dealings of God, and the unusual interest of the powers of evil as they concentrate upon putting that vessel out of action, upon frustrating that purpose. Here it is so clearly represented by this man.

You see, I feel the Lord is wanting to say something to us at this time about the end which is at hand, and of His concern to have a vessel that will serve Him in this fuller way regarding His Christ in a time of coming spiritual need; and of what, therefore, we may expect as to our own experience, our own handling, in view of our having to meet forces so unusual, the awful drive of the enemy. How necessary it is for there to be more than an ordinary abandonment to the Lord - coming to the place where He is Master and Lord in very truth, and where we are utterly subject to Him. Let us make this a very definite matter of prayer. If we can at all discern these signs, both as to the world and the coming phase of things, as well as in our own spiritual experience, let us see that they are of tremendous meaning, and get very much to the Lord that He shall find us a vessel to hand, completely under His mastery.

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