

# The Nature of the Dispensation in Which We Live

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*The nature of the dispensation in which we live is heavenly and spiritual, governed by the Holy Spirit and requiring suffering and adversity for spiritual growth and conformity to the heavenly Christ.*

**Scripture:** Romans 8:16

**Topics:** "Spiritual Growth", "The Role of Suffering"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the significance of understanding the nature of the current dispensation, which is characterized by the absence of Jesus on earth and the presence of the Holy Spirit. He explains that this spiritual reality leads to internal conflicts when believers fail to recognize their heavenly calling and the purpose of suffering in their lives. The preacher highlights that true spiritual growth comes through adversity and that the Holy Spirit is essential for achieving spiritual fullness. Ultimately, he encourages believers to focus on eternal values rather than temporal concerns, as the Lord is more interested in their spiritual measure than in their earthly achievements.

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## Transcript

Reading:

"The spirit himself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are children of God: and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified with him. For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed to us-ward." (Rom. 8:16-18).

"For we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning our affliction which befell us in Asia, that we were weighed down exceedingly, beyond our power, insomuch that we despaired even of life: yea, we ourselves have had the sentence of death within ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raiseth the dead; who delivered us out of so great a death, and will deliver; on whom we have set our hope that he will also still deliver us; ye also helping together by your supplication." (2 Cor. 1:8-11).

"For our light affliction, which is for the moment, worketh for us more and more exceedingly an eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal." (2 Cor. 4:17-18).

Just leave those words in the background, while we come to stand before the general prospect or presentation.

First of all, it surely is of very great importance that we, the Lord's children, should be able to recognise those governing features of the dispensation in which we live, that which gives to this dispensation its character, its nature. The importance of recognising that is, that unless we do, we shall be out of joint all the time, we shall be found in a state of inward conflict, we shall have a battle continually going on inside us which completely unfits us for the battle outside; and I am sure that you will agree that it is no use trying to fight a situation outside, an enemy outside, while you are all the time occupied with one inside. Until we have got something settled, we are weakened, if not altogether paralysed, in the real work and warfare to which we are called, and the thing that has got to be settled is this matter of what is the nature of the dispensation in which we live. If we have got some wrong ideas about that, then we are constantly turning in and back upon ourselves, not making very much progress, a state of strife and strain and uncertainty and questions all the time.

Well then, I suggest to you that that which gives to this dispensation its particular character, that from which this dispensation derives its real nature, that is, as to God's mind, is in the fact that the Lord Jesus is in heaven and that He is known, only known, but known and ministered by the Holy Spirit. If you and I really could grasp what that means we are going to be taken a long way. The first half is that the Lord Jesus is in heaven, that is, He is not on the earth. If He were on the earth, an entirely different system of things would obtain. You think about that. If He were on the earth, the same things would be happening as did happen when He was on the earth. Everybody who had aches and pains would be going after Him wherever He might be, if He were in Palestine or in any other part of the world, they would be going after Him with aches and pains to get these cleared up.

There would be people who would take all their temporal difficulties and troubles and situations to Him and all the problems of this life as here on the earth. And then the whole world situation, political and so on, to have this whole temporal realm of things dealt with, and it would resolve itself into a matter of Jesus constituting a temporal order. As they did then, so they would now, want Him to be the leader of a new political or social movement, to deal with the political situations and the social difficulties, and so on.

Supposing you heard that the Lord Jesus was just round the corner. You would be after Him like a shot with some of your troubles, perhaps your physical troubles, or domestic quarrels, to get them put right. What shall I do with my brother? How am I to deal with my wife, my husband? All that would be going on, and when He was here on the earth, they were all the time seeking to get Him to deal with a whole temporal state of things on this earth. We do not find very many coming to Him really with spiritual troubles when He was here, not directly and deliberately with spiritual troubles. Not many raised the question of sin and how they were to be forgiven and have it dealt with. He had to go behind to deal with that, refer to that; they did not.

Well, you see, Jesus is in heaven. He is not on earth, and that means that everything in this dispensation from the Divine standpoint is heavenly in its essence and nature. It is not firstly, primarily, but quite subserviently, of secondary account, that He touches the temporal situation. Until you and I have got this adjusted, we are going to be in trouble all the time. Why does not the Lord do this and that and the other thing, a thousand and one temporal things? Why does the Lord allow this and that and the other? "Our light affliction..." (2 Cor. 4:17). "If we suffer with Him..." (Rom. 8:17). Look at all the suffering that there is in the New Testament when you get past the Lord's days on the earth - the suffering amongst the Lord's

people. Why, why does not the Lord come in? Yes, we would bring Him down to earth again, into that realm, but He is not coming down. He is in heaven, and that is a governing thing for this dispensation. He is in heaven, and everything primarily with Him is heavenly.

He is to be known and ministered by the Spirit, the Holy Spirit. He is not known as He was known in the days of His flesh. He is not known after the flesh. "Though we have known Christ after the flesh," said Paul, "yet now we know him so no more" (2 Cor. 5:16). He is not known temporally in the first instance. He is known and only known by the Holy Spirit and ministered to us, given to us, imparted to us, by the Holy Spirit alone, which means that this dispensation is pre-eminently spiritual in the mind of the Lord; heavenly and spiritual.

The Lord Jesus has been perfected, that is brought to completion, fullness, finality, and has been filled by God, filled unto all fullness, and has therefore become the pattern and the standard for believers. He is in heaven and in heavenly fullness as a Man, and has been set forth as God's heavenly pattern for the people of God. So that this dispensation is above all things, from God's standpoint, governed by this - our being brought to that which Christ is, to heavenly completeness and spiritual fullness. It is heavenly and it is spiritual, heavenly completeness, spiritual fullness, and the Lord is devoted to that object in this dispensation, and looks at and deals with everything in the light of that.

#### A LIVING WAY

The next thing, in line with that, is that everything unto that end is a matter of moving in Divine, heavenly, spiritual life. It is the living way, the living way, of reaching God's end. That is, it has got to be, it can only be, by the Holy Spirit getting us there. We can never reach that goal, that object of God, Christ in heaven and in Divine fullness, we can never reach that goal of God along any lines, by any means, save by a definite work of the Holy Spirit, that is, by a living way. Man cannot do this; no means of man can accomplish it. You see, you may, for instance, attend meetings. You can attend them three times a day or more every day of your life as long as your life can possibly be and not be one iota spiritually advanced. It is not the number of meetings or the nature of the meetings that we attend, it is not the addresses to which we listen. It is not anything of that kind at all that gets us to God's end. It is the Holy Spirit doing something in a living way, our coming by the way of Divine life to Divine fullness.

If one thing is true among others, it is this, that you and I are utterly hopeless in the matter of making people spiritual. You may put them into institutions and colleges, and make them preachers, and make them organizers, and make them workers, and make them a hundred and one things, but you can never make them spiritual. It is no use having homes and places for gathering together the Lord's people with a view to making them spiritual. If ever you think that that is what you are going to do with them, let me tell you, you cannot do it. You can give them a lot of knowledge, teach them what is in the Bible, can turn them out very different from what they were when they came in in many respects, but you cannot make them spiritual. I cannot make myself spiritual, you cannot make yourself spiritual. You are helpless in that matter. Unless the Spirit of God comes and does something, we are helpless, and that is the great mistake many have made, that they have thought by imparting Biblical knowledge and knowledge of spiritual things and how to work for the Lord, they are qualifying people for the Lord's use. Does it work out like that? Not necessarily; unless there is something extra to all that which is God's own work, then that does not count with God, it does not get anywhere with God, and really it only provides the background of fresh tragedies. It is true of many. I am not saying that those things are wrong and useless. I am speaking of one thing. We cannot make people spiritual, in that matter we are helpless. Only the Holy Spirit can do it,

and that is done only on the basis of life or in a living way. It can only be accomplished by real, inward, spiritual history under the hand of the Holy Ghost.

## THE PURPOSE OF SUFFERING

Now, it is just there that suffering, affliction, adversity, frustration and all those things have their place. Why adversity in the Lord's work and in relation to the Lord? Why frustration, why suffering, why affliction? When the story is told at last, when it is fully told at last - and what an immense story it will be - what we shall discover is that it was the frustration, it was the suffering, the affliction, the adversity, the sorrow, the trial, that was the means of making us spiritual, nothing else - it was that that did it. We have to say, by the grace of God, that we owe our spiritual measure of increase to the suffering through which the Lord allowed us to go.

"Our light affliction, which is for the moment, worketh for us more and more exceedingly an eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Cor. 4:17-18).

God is working eternal values which are not seen, but only to be grasped by the eye of faith. We have got to settle this, or else we are beaten before we start. Are we not all the time really fighting strongly to get the Lord on to a temporal basis with us? Why have any adversity, why have any suffering? Indeed, why have an enemy at all, why have a devil, why have afflictions and persecutions? Why should we have this if the Lord is Lord almighty, all-powerful, all-gracious, and really is concerned for His interests and for the progress of His work? If the Lord really is with us and on our side as the Mighty One, then the devil ought to be swept out of the way, and all hindrances and frustration ought to go to the wind, and all sufferings at once ought to be subjugated, and we ought to know nothing of this, we ought to ride triumphantly on without any of this sort of thing which is a weight upon us, and is only interrupting and frustrating growth and progress. The devil all the time is hindering and the Lord is not getting. Is He not? That is a matter you and I have got to settle.

The fact is that the New Testament is full of that sort of thing. The one man who has more of the heavenly vision, the knowledge of things spiritual, than any other man in the New Testament is the man who knows more of this other side than any other man. He tells us more about what he had to go through. "Thrice I was shipwrecked" (2 Cor. 11:25). There is something wrong about that - the Lord letting one of His great apostles be shipwrecked again and again, just escaping with his life on a spar! Imprisoned again and again, thrashed with rods, suffering hunger, cold, nakedness. Oh, the list! We do not know when these things happened. He simply tells us that they did happen. Most of them have never been recorded by Luke. Why? Because he was not writing the life of Paul, he was writing the life of the Lord Jesus, but Paul mentions them. Paul says, "I once and again would have come to you, but Satan hindered " (1 Thess. 2:18). Oh, there is something wrong about that! Paul does not explain it, he does not say that it is wrong, he takes it in his stride. You see what I mean.

We are so wanting to bring the Lord again on to the temporal basis, to clear up all these difficulties, to get hindrances out of the way, to have a clear course, to lift us right out of adversity, suffering, affliction, weakness, and very often we are tempted to make that the criterion as to whether the Lord is with us and for us. You know quite well there are plenty of Job's friends about, Christian ones too, always ready to say, 'Yes, it is because you are wrong, you are in error, that is why you have so much of it!' That is a matter that has got to be settled. Here it is. Are we going to expect anything different from what the Lord had Himself,

the heavenly Lord? Are we going to expect anything different from what Paul and the believers of his day had? These letters are so full of references to these afflictions and sufferings of the saints. Do they mean that Satan is triumphant and the Lord is defeated, or that the Lord is not with His own? Let us get that settled.

What, then, is the meaning of all this? Oh, let us look again. Is it not by these means that we are being made conformable to the heavenly Christ? You know the fact remains that the people who live in that infant stage of temporal things and who will not walk with the Lord unless He gives them proof positive in temporal realms of His being with them are not spiritually helpful people, that is, they are not the people to whom you can go in the deepest hours of your life. There is an inward place. People who can help those who really do know the deepest tests of faith, are those who have gone through and been sustained even when the Lord has not shown His hand for their deliverance. Is that not true? It is a level of life. Conformity to the heavenly Lord is by everything being heavenly and the Lord not letting us off in this matter of heavenliness. You want it down here, you want it in the temporal realm, things seen, things that you can bring up as proof positive, all the evidences. You want it like that, but the way of conformity to the heavenly Christ is not along that line. Things will be heavenly, and oh, my word, they are! We have not got much here, the Lord does not give you much here. It is all heavenly, it is HIMSELF. As soon as you and I begin to make a great deal of the THINGS, the Lord may step in and smite the things in order that He might be the object and not the things, the heavenly Lord known and ministered by the Spirit in a living way on the line of life.

#### CONCEPTION, NOT IMITATION

I do wish that we could see and really grasp inwardly this, that our New Testament is not something to be imitated in any matter. Our New Testament is something in the hands of the Holy Spirit to be wrought in us. You see, the New Testament did not come out of a study at all. Paul did not go and shut himself up in his study and think out the doctrines of Christianity as a theologian, look up his commentaries and authorities and so on, giving you the manual of New Testament doctrine. Paul was every day of his life right up against terrible tragedies, actual situations, and the New Testament was written right in the midst of the fight on the battlefield, grappling with problems, grappling with living problems, and when those letters were written they never thought that they were writing Holy Scripture, they never thought that in time to come people would sit down and study every word and resolve it into a doctrine, and crystallize it into "New Testament teaching." They never thought like that. What they were doing was that they were trying to meet a practical situation right on the spot, and it was wrung out of them. Yes, the Holy Spirit came through in that way and revealed the meaning of Christ in a living situation; and unless you and I are right in a living situation, faced with a terrible problem in our own case or someone else's, we will never be conformed to the heavenly Christ. We will never come to that by sitting down and studying New Testament doctrine. It has got to be wrought on the anvil of experience, and that experience is going to be, in a certain sense, tragic experience. It is going to be something of a real question of life and death. Anyone who has really walked with God knows that I am telling the truth, that what they have come really to know of God, what they have come to possess of real spiritual value and strength, has come out of some dark and terribly grim and awful experience in their own life. They were taken into the depths where faith rocked. They did not know but what this was the end of everything. That is how they have grown and become spiritual and heavenly. They have not come there because the Lord has pandered to every childish demand for satisfaction and gratification and answered prayer in everything temporal. They have been tested, and if the Lord has subsequently come in to do things to answer prayer, He has only come in

when He has done the spiritual thing inside and prepared and made it safe to do that. He has done it after travail. THIS IS THE NATURE OF THIS DISPENSATION. It is heavenly, it is spiritual and God is governing the life of His true children with this fact.

Now, all practical points, all practical matters, have got to arise out of a spiritual quest. They have got to come up by reason of our seeking to know the Lord, to go on with the Lord, to reach the Lord's end, not the other way round. Quite a lot of people think if they do this and that and the other thing, that the Lord will lead them to spiritual things. Oh no, we cannot duplicate, we cannot reproduce, anything that is spiritual. You cannot duplicate a spiritual assembly. You cannot duplicate a spiritual company of the Lord's people. You cannot duplicate a real spiritual order. Now listen to me, brethren. It is no use going about the country saying, 'We are going to set up New Testament companies, order of assemblies!' You cannot do it. You cannot duplicate anything spiritual. You get people together and say, 'We will have a New Testament order and this is it' - and then have your order written down - 'this is the order of a New Testament church!' The thing may be absolutely dead. You cannot reach spiritual things by coming out of this and that and coming to some thing else. Oh no, let it be said very, very strongly, you can never guarantee that you are going to reach any fuller spiritual measure by coming out of something. I would never for a moment suggest to you that if you came out of a certain connection, a certain denomination, a certain church, a certain association, it would be to your spiritual gain, unless that thing, of course, were wrong in some quite positive sense. If you are in some personal relationship which is evil, of course you will not move spiritually until you break that; but I am not talking about that. You can never assure people that they will make spiritual progress if only they will come out of this connection and that, and become connected with something else. Never do it, never hint at it, you may put them into an entirely false position. If ever such questions - I have only mentioned that out of a large number that I might mention - if such questions are ever to arise at all, if you have to leave something, withdraw, associate somewhere else, if ever such questions are to arise at all, they have got to come up as you are seeking the Lord and His fullness, to go on with Him. The Lord will make it perfectly clear to you that that is a hindrance, a spiritual hindrance, that is definitely athwart the path of spiritual progress. It has got to be an issue like that. Do not do anything because somebody else tells you you have got to do it. It has got to arise as a practical issue as you have a quest for God's fullness. It has got to be in the living way, not the legal way, not the technical way.

Let me repeat. It is impossible to duplicate spiritual things. It cannot be done; it is a work of the Spirit of God.

I am speaking of a principle which is so perfectly clear in the New Testament if you look at it. You see, Paul and the other Apostles did not leave the Temple and did not leave Jewry in order to join the Christian Church, in order even to go on with the Lord. No, no, they did not. They went to the Temple, they continued going to the Temple, they continued going to the synagogue, they continued association with the Jews, in fellowship, if you like, with them, until the matter became an inward, spiritual issue, a thing from heaven, a thing by the Holy Ghost, and then you find gravitation according to life, conformity to heavenly type; and when they came to see that the Temple is not that thing at Jerusalem, it is something in heaven, THAT came by revelation of the Holy Ghost, not because someone told them that was so. If ever they came to withdraw from the Temple and the synagogue because they had seen the heavenly, it was a crisis in their spiritual life, a mark of their spiritual progress. It was not because it was said to them, 'You have got to leave this, come out of that, association with that is all wrong!' No, it was a spiritual matter with a living issue, and you cannot find the point at which it happened with them. There is no secession

recorded in the New Testament, no split as a part of the history of Christianity. It happened, and it did not happen with all the Christians at once, just this one and that one. It happened, that is all. In the end, they saw there was a difference. It was a spiritual matter. That is my point.

And so that is the nature of things now. It has got to be like that. If you are in something not on that basis, I ask you to go back and reconsider your whole position. Are you where you are because it has become in you at some time a spiritual issue, a matter in which your spiritual life was involved, something between you and the Lord? Is that the basis on which you are where you are? If not, let me urge you, go back, do not be afraid, don't you think the Lord will be grieved with you. He will not be grieved with you putting things on a right basis. We must be on the basis of what is living, of the Spirit, in a heavenly way, that is, on the basis of Christ in heaven known and ministered by the Holy Spirit.

#### WHY WE ARE WHERE WE ARE

Now, there are many more things I would like to suggest to you. May I just add this little word for each life? You see, the Lord disposes of us entirely on spiritual considerations, that is, our spiritual growth, and through that, the spiritual growth of others. That is the thing that is governing the Lord in His disposing of us all the time. If only I were in such and such a place, in such and such a situation, had such and such a job; if only I were there or here, how much more I could be doing for the Lord, how much more I could be counting for the Lord! But where I am, I am bottled up, I am shut up, I am pressed down, and there seems so little for the Lord, so little, practically nothing, if anything at all, for the Lord. It all seems so inadequate, so insignificant, so unworthwhile, and life is passing, nothing very much to show! Are you up against a situation like that? Things seen; what you want to see, you cannot see. That is the trouble, this matter of the things seen, even spiritual values.

Let me say this, and I understand the position, I know. It is a thing we have got to settle. What is the Lord doing? Have I deliberately taken myself out of the Lord's hands, taken my own way, acted without prayer, without committing my way to the Lord, chosen my own course? Oh well then, if that is true, there may be an explanation of the situation, but if I am where I am without any self-will, where the Lord has been given first place, where I have sought to honour Him, trust Him, put my faith in Him and subject everything to Him, and yet this situation obtains, what is the explanation?

The Lord is more concerned with my, and with your, spiritual and heavenly measure than He is with the number of things we are doing. We would call spiritual success the number of converts, the number of churches, the number of workers. The Lord does not. It is the spiritual measure of ourselves that matters. That is what it is with the Lord. The heavenly measure, the spiritual measure, what there is of the Holy Ghost, that is the thing that matters. "Let him that glorieth, glory in this, that he hath understanding, and knoweth me" (Jeremiah 9:24).

This is a hard school, knowing the Lord, a bitter school, nevertheless, that is what the Lord is after, a spiritual, heavenly measure of Christ. He is more concerned about that than He is about anything else, and remember that you and I can NEVER HELP ANYONE BEYOND OUR OWN SPIRITUAL MEASURE. The Lord is preparing us in this hard school to do something more than the average, to be something more than the average, of spiritual value. Whether it is here or hereafter, that is not the question, but that is the end that He has in view.

Let me repeat. The Lord disposes of us on entirely spiritual principles. He puts us into the place, the situation, the circumstances, where our spiritual life is the thing in question, our spiritual life is the matter in

hand, and we shall usually find that the Lord puts us where everything is contrary to our natural disposition, because that is the difference between Christ and Adam, between the spirit and the flesh, between the new creation and the old. Am I naturally one who shrinks and would not take responsibility, would never do by initiative myself?

Well the school for me is, in the Lord's choosing, going to be one where I will have to take the initiative for my spiritual life, I have to do that from which my whole nature shrinks. I would like to be in a corner where no demands were made on me, where I could be left alone; but the Lord is not going to leave me there. Or the other way. Am I one who naturally would lead, would dominate, would govern, would master, would lord it? Mine is going to be the bitter school of self-emptying where I shall eventually come to a place where I am not doing anything of myself.

It is a bitter school because it lets men ride over your head, it brings you into the net, and all that about you that wants to be vindicated, justified, is simply being ground to powder, being humbled in the dust. That is the school which is going to make way for the Lord Jesus.

I wonder if you have contemplated the Lord Jesus. He was all this, you see, born to be Lord of the universe, and yet knowing how to be a servant. Again, He, the meekest of men, at times had to rise up and take a course, as in the cleansing of the Temple. Do you think it was easy? No, not easy. He did it on principle, on grounds of righteousness, but I believe that the Lord Jesus would rather not have done that. I believe the Spirit of Christ was, If I must come to you with a rod, it hurts Me more than it hurts you; it is not because I love to wield the rod, that is not My nature, nor the nature of the Spirit! - and yet it works both ways.

Now you think of it, and that is what it means. The Spirit is making us, through our afflictions, which afflictions are things which work contrary to our natural constitution, making us to be conformed to Jesus in heaven and that by the Spirit, a spiritual life. Now I have suggested. Do you agree? Is it right? I hope the Lord will make it clear to us all and give us grace.

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