

The Object of His Travail

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon explores the profound love and sacrifice of God for His people, emphasizing the infinite value of the church and the call for believers to respond in obedience and service.

Scripture: Isaiah 53:10

Topics: "God's Love", "The Church"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the profound love and travail of God for His people, illustrating the infinite value of the church and the personal relationship believers have with Christ. He reflects on the deep sorrow and passion of Christ, particularly in His suffering and sacrifice, which reveals the immense worth of those He calls His own. Sparks challenges the audience to recognize the cost of salvation and the importance of responding to God's love with obedience and service. He highlights that the church is not merely a concept but a living entity that embodies God's heart and purpose. Ultimately, he calls for a deeper understanding of God's love and a commitment to live in response to that love.

Transcript

In this concluding message, beyond bringing forward a number of fragments from the Word of God, I shall do little more than make some statements, and leave the Lord to speak out of those statements Himself. The message itself will lie deeper than anything that can be said.

First of all, we will recall the passage that has been running through this whole series:

"Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied" (Isaiah 53:10,11).

Then:

"Who hath heard such a thing? who hath seen such things? Shall a land be born in one day? shall a nation be brought forth at once? for as soon as Zion travailed, she brought forth her children" (Isaiah 66:8).

"So the angel that talked with me said unto me, Cry thou, saying, Thus saith the Lord of hosts: I am jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion with a great jealousy" (Zechariah 1:14).

"And the word of the Lord of hosts came to me, saying, Thus saith the Lord of hosts: I am jealous for Zion with great jealousy, and I am jealous for her with great fury" (Zechariah 8:1,2).

"But ye are come unto mount Zion" (Hebrews 12:22).

(Note those two statements: "I am jealous for Zion"; "Ye are come unto mount Zion".)

"And he saith unto them, My soul is exceeding sorrowful even unto death... And he went forward a little, and fell on the ground, and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass away from him. And he said, Abba, Father, all things are possible unto thee; remove this cup from me: howbeit not what I will, but what thou wilt" (Mark 14:34-36).

"Christ... loved the church, and gave himself up for it" (Ephesians 5:25).

Its Infinite Value to God

All these passages, in principle and in ultimate meaning, relate to one thing. In them and by them certain things, in themselves altogether inexpressible, incomprehensible, are somehow brought to our hearts. In the first place, you notice that they all have to do with the travailing love of God in Christ, the passion of God in Christ. Therein lies a mystery -- the mystery of the infinite value of the object of His travail. There MUST be something that justifies it; there must be something of unspeakable preciousness to Him that would lead to this -- the travail of His soul. "My soul is exceeding sorrowful even unto death." "I am jealous for Zion with a great jealousy... I am jealous for her with great wrath." Because of this tearing of the heart of God to its very depths, something of infinite preciousness and value must be in view.

Of course this is all centred in the Cross, as we know. The Cross forms the link with that which is of eternal, supreme importance to the Son of God; it links with His inheritance in the saints. It is not some inanimate, insensate "thing"; it is not that God has an objective interest in some THING. It is quite clear that a heart-relationship is here involved -- the kind of thing that just tears your very being to pieces. It is as though this inheritance were a very part of Himself. That is borne out, as you will see, by these Scriptures. Not to have it would mean that a very part of Himself would be missing. It is a heart matter, a soul matter; it is something that touches all the sensibilities of God. The inheritance is, in fact, a LIVING thing. Paul speaks of it as corresponding to the wife. "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself up for it"; and the law that governs the husband-wife relationship is: "And they twain shall become one flesh" (Matt. 19:5). Divide them, and you tear apart and in pieces something that is one thing; and that is the relationship here. But, of course, such a character transcends any human analogy. We are here touching the eternal.

All this, then, about His love, His suffering, His travail, His anguish, at least implies, if it does not declare with a very loud voice, that the object of it all is of infinite value to Him. What is it? "He shall see HIS SEED... He shall see of the travail of his soul." It is this of which we have been thinking all through these messages; this that is represented by that phrase, "his seed" -- a people for Himself. It is beyond us, altogether beyond us. We might hear it, and have some kind of objective acceptance of it as truth -- yes: but the wonder is that this comes right down to us -- to you, to me. WE are in this. It is a question of the infinite preciousness and value that you and I are to Him. It is beyond us.

Our Difficulty in Believing it

That is one thing -- I speak at least for myself over this -- one thing that gives the greatest difficulty to believe when it comes to oneself. Is it not so? Perhaps there are two things, in the main, that constitute our difficulty in believing a thing like this.

The first is, just what we are in ourselves. We know something of ourselves -- our sinfulness, our worthlessness. When it is really true, and not put on -- not just language, not feigned or pretended, but really true -- that we know our utter worthlessness, realise how abjectly worthless we are; and then we are told that all this is true, that it relates to and applies to US: ah, then we are presented with a problem; we are called upon to believe something that is not easy to believe! But I could take you through the Bible and show you how, after all, it is so. I wonder what you find the most comforting fragment in the Bible. May I tell you which I do? "Faithful is the saying... that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief" (1 Tim. 1:15). It is brought right down to the personal. Yes, there are many comforting things in the Bible, but you cannot get deeper than that, you cannot get behind that. All this infinite passion and travail for such as we! The Bible says it! I said that I would simply make statements, without attempting to define or explain.

That is one reason why we find such difficulty in believing and accepting. The other probably is the mystery of God's ways with us. So often, in the mystery of His ways, we are sorely tempted to wonder whether anything like this can be true. It may be true, we feel, of some people, but His ways with us do not seem to bear it out at all. A love like this? Unto death? An estimate or valuation of a soul to this degree? Is that really borne out by these strange, mysterious dealings of God with us? -- by these darkneses, these perplexities, these problems, these disappointments? Satan is always at our elbow to say, "That is not His love for you!"

I am not attempting to argue that out philosophically, or even from the Scripture; I am simply making the statement: THE BIBLE SAYS... Here it is! What is all this -- this about the travail of His soul? What is it for? HIS seed. Who are His seed? Those who have believed on Him unto eternal life. No more than that, no less than that. And they become enwrapped in this unspeakable thing -- His soul's travail. Oh, that we could believe it, at all times! -- that you and I could believe that, behind all the mystery of His ways, the strangeness of His dealings, the bewilderment and perplexity as to what it is that He is after, there lies such a love as this!

That is the second thing -- and, again, it is only a statement. But, oh! the infinite suffering behind our belonging to the Lord, the infinite suffering behind a soul's salvation -- a soul that might be yours or mine. What suffering! Peter draws this contrast: "Ye were redeemed, not with corruptible things, with silver or gold... but" -- here is the contrast -- "with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Pet. 1:18,19). As you know, the word "blood" is a simile for "soul". In biblical symbolism, the soul is in the blood (Lev. 17:11, mg.). And so, when He poured out His blood, He "poured out his soul unto death" (Is. 53:12). His soul is set forth by Peter as something that is infinitely, transcendently more precious than gold or silver; and He has given that for our redemption! Behind your belonging to the Lord and my belonging to the Lord there lies that whole travail.

In saying this, I am trying to redeem this whole thing from cheapness. We have made our salvation too cheap and too easy; we have pulled it down to such a low level. We need to ponder the infinite cost and suffering which lies behind the salvation of one soul.

Christ's Infinite Love for His Own

Further, there is the infinite love which Christ has for His own when He has got them. Paul seems to make some tremendous statements. Sometimes they almost sound like exaggeration. "Who shall separate us from... the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus..." he asks (Rom. 8:35,39). He catalogues every conceivable thing that might be thought to be capable of doing that, and then, lumping them all together, he says: "Nay, I am persuaded that NONE of these things": in them all and over them all the love will triumph. The love that He has for those who are His own, when He has got them, is a tremendous thing, is it not? Sometimes we are prepared to believe, or inclined to think and accept, that the Gospel of our salvation is based upon all this in order to get us; but then, as we go on a bit further, we may sometimes feel tempted to wonder whether He still loves us as much now as He did at the beginning, whether He is still as concerned to have us now as He was then. I trust that that statement will not be misunderstood.

There is a wonderful picture of this in the Old Testament, in that temple that Solomon built -- perhaps the most magnificent structure that had ever been built up to his time. The predominant feature of that temple was gold: everything was overlaid with gold: there was pure gold everywhere -- gold, gold, over everything. It symbolizes the obtaining by the Lord, at last, of something that He had set His heart upon. At last the Lord has got that toward which He has been all the time working with His people: a place in which He can dwell. Now gold is always a figure of the divine love; and so everywhere His dwelling-place is simply covered and smothered with gold. He has got what He wanted, and it is to Him exceedingly precious; and so He writes that preciousness everywhere, lavishly. Oh, the lavishness of that gold in the days of Solomon! It is just a picture of God's love for and in something long desired, when He has come into possession of it. No, His love does not change after He has come into possession. It is still the same.

The Infinite Importance to Him of the Church

So we are led to the next thing: the infinite importance attached by the Lord to His church. The word "church" is only another title for that which is elsewhere referred to as His temple, His wife, His bride. They are all in reality the same thing, and they all emphasize the infinite importance of the church in the eyes of the Lord. There are many people, I fear, who think that "church" is "teaching". It is what they call "church teaching". There is nothing that makes me shudder more than to hear people use that phrase, "church teaching"! I have even heard people speak about "the church teaching of Honor Oak" -- "church teaching"! The Lord pity us, the Lord save us! The church is not a truth, it is not a teaching, it is not an idea. The church is a Gethsemane -- the church is a bloody sweat. The church is a Golgotha -- the church is the cry of a broken heart from the Cross, the pouring out of His soul unto death. The church is the great sob of God in this universe.

I am not exaggerating; that is not just words. I could take you to the prophets, and show you from them that all that is true. Oh, go back to some of those prophets and hear them! Do you not hear the sob of God as they speak? "O Ephraim... O Judah... How shall I give thee up, Ephraim?" (Hos. 6:4, 11:8). God is broken-hearted, just broken-hearted; and that broken heart is reflected in the words of the prophets, as they cry and weep over the Lord's people, as an unfaithful bride, a wayward daughter, a prodigal son, a family repudiating the best of fathers. Do not talk about "church truth", "church teaching" -- oh, no, "Christ loved the church, and gave himself for it". "I am jealous for Zion" -- that is only a title for the church -- "with great jealousy... with great wrath".

He loved the church -- there is an infinite importance to Him in His church. Again I say, I cannot explain it; but there is the truth. Oh, that you and I might see THROUGH the truth and the doctrine and the teaching, to the REALITY, might see that THIS is the thing involved in that ruptured heart, in that agonized cry, in

that sweating as it were great drops of blood. It is the church that is involved. That is not a "thing", not a "theory", not a "line of truth". It is something tremendous.

The Infinite Motive for our Response

What, then, does it lead to? Surely it leads, finally, to the infinite motive for our response to the Lord. To a first response, yes, for any who have never yet responded to Him: there is an infinite motive for your responding to Him -- no less a motive than all this that we have seen. But then, there is the infinite motive for our own response -- His own people's response to Him on all matters. Why should I settle any controversy with the Lord, why should I set aside my own personal interests, why should I do this and that? Why...? In the light of all this, WHY NOT?! Is there anything that can really be set against this? For going on with the Lord, for responding, being obedient, giving Him everything, we have an infinite motive.

And this is the infinite motive for service. Why should we give Him our life in service? Just for this reason. In the first days of the Moravian Brethren, when everything was so pure, so true, the Lord used them marvellously all over this world. It was a wonderful thing that happened. At the Edinburgh Conference in 1910, John R. Mott said that, if the whole Christian church had proceeded on the lines of the Moravian Brethren, the entire world would have been evangelized long ago. They had one missionary for every ten members of their fellowship. Yes, it was a wonderful story of sacrifice, of suffering, of giving themselves. What was the secret? They had a motto, which was written on everything and which they took with them wherever they went. It was this: "To win for the Lamb that was slain the reward of His suffering." That is the infinite motive -- the reward of His suffering for the Lamb that was slain.

I make the statement -- that is all. It is something that is altogether beyond us; but this is what is here. That is the heart of Isaiah 53, and of all these other Scriptures. If this is true, He is not going to give us up easily; He is not going to abandon and forsake His purpose. He is going to return to it again and again. He will say: "I am returned unto Zion" (Zech. 8:3); He will come back again and again for what He has set His heart upon. But oh, may we have something of this same love of God shed abroad in our own hearts by the Holy Spirit.

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