

The Overcomer

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of being an overcomer, who is moved by the constraint of a great Divine vision, and standing for the testimony of God in the earth, despite the encounter with Satan and the supreme assault.

Scripture: Psalm 137:4, Jeremiah 33:3, Zechariah 4:6, Matthew 4:10, 1 Corinthians 3:15, Hebrews 9:14, 1 John 3:12, 1 John 5:4, Revelation 2:7, Revelation 5:9

Topics: "Worship of God", "Overcoming"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the concept of 'overcomers' in the Christian faith, highlighting that God uses advance parties to secure His purpose and inheritance. He argues that the spiritual reality of being an overcomer is not about selectiveness but about fulfilling a divine mission that reflects God's glory. The sermon stresses the importance of recognizing the rights of God through worship and the centrality of the Cross in achieving this. Sparks warns against complacency and encourages believers to fully commit to God's purpose, as the ultimate goal is the universal worship of God. He concludes that the Holy Spirit empowers believers to live out this calling, demanding a life dedicated to God's glory.

Transcript

Before we proceed to consider more definitely the nature of that 'new cruse' of which we have been speaking, a few further words on the relative aspect of this vessel are needed. In the Scriptures, as we have pointed out, it is clearly seen that all the reactionary instruments of God are of a relative character; that is, that they are related to and on behalf of a body larger than themselves. This is an underlying principle in the progressive activities of God. The point which needs to have extra emphasis is that, in SECURING all the elect territory, habitation and inheritance, whether as His first choice or as of necessity by reason of so general an apathy and worldliness on the part of His people, the Lord uses what might be termed 'advance parties'. It is not necessary in this connection to present or argue for any theory or teaching concerning 'selectiveness', or 'partial' or 'first-fruits' in the matter of 'rapture'. The historical, literal and time aspect is of secondary importance. What is of primary account is the SPIRITUAL fact, and this, we believe, is incontrovertible. It is a principle in every realm of creation and Divine method. There are -

HARBINGERS IN EVERY SPHERE.

Originally a harbinger was one who went before to provide lodgings, but the term has now come to be applied to any forerunner. An adequate recognition of the SPIRITUAL element in this universal fact, and

especially in relation to "the eternal purpose", would correct and adjust much on both sides - acceptance and rejection - of a set teaching of 'partial rapture'. That is, if the vocational factor were kept in view it would supply the motive and stimulus so commonly lacking amongst many who reject that teaching; which lack has very largely become the strength of the teaching and its propagation. And, on the other hand, it would both obviate the difficulty concerning 'all being of Grace' and not of works, and remove any 'selectiveness' of spirit and temper - as 'the elect of the elect'. Let us repeat with strength: There is undoubtedly an advance party in every movement of God. This is spiritual before anything else, and it is vocational rather than meritorious. That there will be special rewards for such seems quite clear and beyond doubt, but rewards do not contradict grace.

When we contemplate the churches in Asia as presented in the Revelation, and admit the respective age application, it is difficult, if not impossible, in respect of at least five, to conclude that we are dealing with the unsaved and ungodly - with assemblies of religious people without any true spiritual history. It is undoubtedly a case of declension, of failure to go on with the Lord. Are all these to be eternally lost? And yet they represent the majority in every age.

We know that one answer to this is that all will be adjusted at the Judgment Seat of Christ; but what concerns us is - what about the others, the 'overcomers'? Surely more is involved than being different from the rest and getting a better reward. Yes: the point is that the Lord must and will have His testimony in the earth according to His mind, and those who provide Him with the instrument for this fulfil a special mission, not only in the earth, but in the heavenlies - both now, and then.

Really, the focal point of this whole matter is not the two or more raptures. The fact is that the Lord has shown unmistakably that He has made no provision for a 'second-best' in the life of a believer or of the Church, but has called all His people to the fullest degree of faithfulness and devotion. There IS a second-best, as see 1 Corinthians 3:15, etc. Let us not fasten upon unscriptural labels, such as 'partial rapture' or 'selective rapture', but upon the facts - that there ARE such people as 'overcomers' and also, evidently, those who are NOT, and that there is a difference of no mean importance between the two.

It is all just an appeal to take no chances - "make no provision for the flesh" - but to be utter for God, whatever it costs.

We are now able to come to the more definite consideration of the nature and function of this peculiar vessel for God.

There is a great difference between a people moved by mere disaffection, discontent, 'disgruntledness', difference of opinion, personal dislike or preference, and one moved by the constraint of a great Divine vision - by the inwrought reaction of God, registered with pain in the heart.

This inward heart-longing found expression long ago in classic words:

"By the rivers of Babylon

There we sat down, yea, we wept,

When we remembered Zion.

Upon the willows in the midst thereof

We hanged up our harps...

How can we sing Jehovah's song,

In a strange land?

If I forget thee, O Jerusalem,

Let my right hand forget her skill.

Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth,

If I remember not thee;

If I prefer not Jerusalem above my chiefest joy."

(Psalm 137:1, 2, 4-6)

The implications of these great heart-yearnings represent the crystallizing of the Divine purpose from before times eternal. The ultimate thing in the heart of God, and that into which all the interests of those in real oneness of spirit with Him will be gathered, is presented in what is known as -

THE HOUSE OF GOD AND THE CITY OF GOD

When we speak of the 'ULTIMATE' thing, we mean that which is to be the eternal consummation of all the Divine method and means. The thing which is primary and final is the place, worship and glory of God in the universe. This factor will be implicit in all that we have to say. Were we asked what are the major lines and subjects of Divine revelation throughout the whole Scriptures, we should say with considerable conviction that they are: -

1. The Person of the Lord Jesus Christ.
2. His Cross - death, burial and resurrection.
3. The Church or House of God.
4. The Coming again of Christ.
5. The City of God.

There are other phases, but these TAKEN RELATIVELY are the primary themes, or aspects of one theme.

While the Person of the Lord Jesus as God manifest in the flesh is the sum of all revelations, it requires the Cross to give the full MEANING and reveal the full VALUE of that manifestation; it demands the Church to display the full CONTENT of that manifestation ultimately; and it calls for the City to define the NATURE of that manifestation. In leading men on to the appreciation of the Person, God begins with the Cross. If the House is the House of the Divine Son, and if the City is the City of the great King, then the House and the City are based upon the Cross. Moreover, if the House and the City are for the glory of God in Christ and His universal worship, then the Cross represents the nature of worship and the way of glory.

To put this more precisely: If the Lord has in view a people for His glory, by whom the content of the Son of Man is ultimately displayed to the universe, then this people will be fundamentally A PEOPLE OF THE ALTAR. This we believe to be the all-inclusive theme of Scripture. The Cross is the central recognition of the eternal rights of God. At the Cross and in the Cross all the rights of God from eternity to eternity are recognised and acknowledged. That is central to Calvary. God has rights. God's rights are that the whole universe should render Him undivided, unrivalled, unreserved worship, acknowledging that all things are His by right, and that no one else in the universe has a right before Him. That great fact is here gathered up in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ, and He brings to God in His own Person His rights, offering Himself in the greatness of who He is and what He is - the rights of God.

God, by His Son, created the world for His Glory. The Holy Spirit was agent in the creation of the world for the Glory of God, in order that the whole earth should be full of His Glory. The Holy Spirit is likewise agent in the redemption of the world for the Glory of God. It is of perhaps deeper significance than we have recognised that the great song of the redeemed at the end, when the work of Calvary is consummated, is gathered up into one sentence: "Hast redeemed... to God" (Rev. 5:9). Redemption is unto God: it is bringing back to God His rights, and the Holy Spirit is the agent in this redemptive work which has the Glory of God as its objective, just as the Holy Spirit was the agent in creation for the same end.

Worship, then, with all its depth and fullness, is the key word. In the great consummation when God is to be worshipped in the whole universe, and the different songs of worship break forth - the song of one company, "a hundred and forty and four thousand", worshipping God and the Lamb (Rev. 7:4), and then the song of the 'great multitude which no man can number' worshipping God and the Lamb (7:9) - there is the unveiling of the worship of the beast, and that is another consummation. The consummations of worship are there unveiled.

The worship of the beast is one which has been going on ever since Lucifer secured a following, a reverence from angels in high estate in heaven. When he found it in his own heart to make a bid for the place of the Almighty - to exalt his throne above the clouds, to ascend into the heavens, to be equal with the Most High (Is. 14:13-14) - he managed to gather to himself a company, all with the intent of drawing heaven's worship away from God to himself; and ever since that lifting up of his heart in that infamous ambition another worship has been going on. He drew that company with him, the company of angels "who kept not their own principality", and are "kept in everlasting bonds under darkness" (Jude 6). Then he appeared on the earth, and sought again to usurp the place of God in the worship of His Creation here; and in this he succeeded, and became, by reason of a conquest and the consent of man, "the god of this age", "the prince of this world".

THE TWO WORSHIPS

From that moment he set up a spiritual system of worship which is perceivable behind the whole record of history. We have the breaking in of this evil element all along the line of worship, wherever and whenever the rights of God are recognised by sacrifice. Immediately Abel recognised the rights of God and erected his altar, slaying his sacrifice and shedding sacrificial blood, in the simplicity of the testimony of faith that here on the earth God has sole rights, there broke in this very thing against that testimony. The murderer came in to withstand and destroy the testimony, with Cain as his instrument, who also set up an altar and made a pretence in his darkened understanding to worship God. But he never got through to God, and that was the very ground upon which the Satanic element of jealousy and pride was churned up within him, and he became, because the Devil had got a purchase upon him, the instrument against the worship

of God. The enemy's scheme is deep laid; he knows what he is doing. Through the other worship he breaks in against the recognition of the Divine Rights, the worship of God; and from Abel onward it is always so.

Noah set up his altar upon the renewed earth, and in so doing declared that "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof". But very quickly there broke in the other thing again. Even in that representative one the element of evil rises up to contradict the testimony, and before long the worship of God becomes associated with shame, and the glory is hidden again. We see the testimony on the one hand and the breaking in to contradict on the other.

Abram's life-story heads up to the incident in Genesis 15, where that altar is finally set and the sacrifice is offered - and then the battle begins. While Abram holds on to God and waits and stands, the vultures descend, and a mighty conflict ensues for the preservation of that testimony to the rights of God, the worship of God; and then comes the horror of great darkness. When Israel, in the fulfilment of the vision which was then given to Abram in that very hour of conflict, came out into the wilderness and the worship of God was set up, there broke in this very same element, and you find the golden calf.

And so the story goes on. You come to Balaam seeking to curse Israel, but not permitted, and then setting up by insinuation the evil thing, fornication - a form of idolatry - and the Lord's glory obscured once more. It was a beautiful picture that Balaam gave in his prophecy, perhaps one of the most beautiful things in the Old Testament. As Balaam stands, desiring for gain to curse, but constrained by the Spirit of God to bless, and as he speaks concerning this people dwelling alone, wonderful things are said and the glory of the Lord is presented concerning Israel; and then, as round by a back door, for that gain he teaches Israel to commit fornication. The glorious picture fades, and the glory of God is again obscured in Israel, because of this other worship. The rights of God are all the time disputed.

Then we have the wonderful story of Solomon. On the one hand, his building of the House, his setting up of the altar, and the glory of God descending. Here you have the Cross and the Church and the Spirit. On the other hand, the after-story of Solomon. What a tragedy - what a ghastly tragedy! The glory of God contradicted again by the very man who had so beautifully set up the testimony in Israel. The Devil is breaking in all the time to take God's rights from Him, to rob Him of His glory.

It is the story of Elijah, fighting for the testimony in Israel in a day when the glory of God was hidden. On Carmel the great issue is the altar - the Cross, and the fire - the Spirit. The testimony is once more established in Israel; but the reaction of the powers of darkness is then through Jezebel to destroy the man who has restored the testimony. The issue in the word of Elijah is: "How long halt ye between two opinions? if the Lord be God, follow Him: but if Baal, then follow him" (1 Kings 18:21). You cannot divide the issue - it is one thing or the other. That is the testimony of God having His rights utterly and no one else getting a look in. And let the critics say what they like about Elijah destroying the prophets of Baal, four hundred on the spot - there is a very deep principle involved, a deep principle. The destroying of the prophets of Baal is the outward demonstration of the spiritual principle that there can be no quarter given to that which is set against the Throne of God. Whether it be Agag (1 Sam. 15) or the prophets of Baal, the point at issue is God's rights. Is HE having the worship and the honour and the glory in this universe?

That is a very brief survey, through the Old Testament, of the constant breaking in of this evil element along the line of worship.

THE DEPTH OF CALVARY

Now, the Cross of the Lord Jesus gathered all this up, and "through the eternal Spirit" Christ secured the rights of God in His own Risen Person: so that "through the eternal Spirit" Christ met the whole of this thing in the universe at Calvary - He met it all.

Let us get behind Calvary, ever more and more behind, until we get to the ultimate. The Lord has led us by degrees deeper and deeper into the meaning of the Cross. There was a time when we thought that we had fathomed the Cross, when we saw the "old man" being dealt with, but we find that there are still ranges that we have not before seen. It was the Throne of God that Christ was standing for at Calvary; it was the ultimate and universal glory of God that He was fighting for in Calvary; and He met all this that was set against the Throne, and met it victoriously, and secured those eternal universal rights of God in His own risen Person: which means that Christ risen and ascended has secured in His own Person all the rights of God for the glory of God for evermore. In the Lord Jesus God has His rights secured.

I hope the Lord enables you to enter into that. Jesus Christ, "who through the eternal Spirit offered himself" (Heb. 9:4), now standing in the Presence of God, has secured in His own Person all God's rights for ever, and the ultimate filling of the universe with the glory of God is secured in the Risen Person of Christ. There is no longer any doubt about the issue. God is going, without any question, to be universally worshipped, and the glory of God is going to fill the whole universe without any rival, because THE LORD JESUS is in the presence of God, victorious over every other thing that was against the Throne of God. This is something immense. He said: "Lo, I am come... to do thy will" (Heb. 10:7), and the will of God done utterly is the recognition of the utter rights of God, and God becoming possessed of them.

When we talk about doing the will of God and wanting to know the will of God, oh, let us get the immense range of such words. The will of God means nothing else than that God shall be universally glorified and that He shall be the central object of worship in the universe. Read the Revelation again with that thought, and the book will become new. You will find then that the book of the Revelation is the book of worship, and you will see that that worship, which is there in ever widening circles to the ultimate bounds of the universe - that worship is brought about by the Lamb, "through the eternal Spirit": the Lamb in the midst of the Throne.

The Holy Spirit is thus the minister of the glorified Christ, as He was the agent and the dynamic for the accomplishment of this great end in the Cross, and the securing of it in the Person of Christ in the glory. He is now the minister of the glorified Christ to work this out in the earth, and in doing so He will bring us to certain very important issues.

He will bring us first of all to this: that those who enter most fully into the meaning of the Cross - which is the will of God wholly done - will encounter the supreme assault of Satan.

Do you wonder that Satan hates the Cross? Do you wonder that he by any means will get the Cross set on one side? Do you wonder that those who go into the meaning of the Cross spiritually find that they have immediately come up against the whole system of antagonism from the Devil? It is so inevitably. We have seen Abel in the very earliest and simplest form of the presentation of the meaning of the Cross. When he enters into relationship with that blood, that sacrifice, that altar, he immediately and automatically comes up against the adversary. The Holy Spirit, through John, says of Cain that he "was of the evil one" (1 John 3:12).

So with Abraham, so with Joseph, so with Moses; so even in what might be thought to be the simple case of Esther. Let us pause with Esther for a moment. The book of Esther has been thought to be a

commentary upon, an exposition of, the providence and sovereignty of God. Well, it is that, but there is a bigger background to the book. Here is one who is "come to the kingdom for such a time..." (Esth. 4:14). What time? A time when the testimony of God in His people was so set against by the enemy that he wanted the last Jew exterminated. You know the story of Haman - "Haman the Agagite" - a remnant of that Amalakite seed which had always been against God. Haman the Agagite had become inspired with the further purpose, utterly and finally to exterminate the Jews. Esther came to the kingdom for such a time as that, and put her life in the balances - "if I perish, I perish" - and met that awful deep-laid scheme of Satan. It is ever an illustration of the ultimate controversy of the Cross. You meet with that when you stand for the testimony of God in the earth. We will come back to Esther presently.

The story of Daniel is the same thing. Two gods: the god set up by Nebuchadnezzar, and THE God. Who is going to be worshipped? Daniel does not need to deliberate over his decision that Jehovah alone, and no other god, is to be worshipped in the universe; His rights alone are to be recognised. He meets the power behind that world-system and is called upon to pay the price. It is the same issue with Daniel's three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego.

THE SUPREME EFFORT OF SATAN

From the very birth of the Lord Jesus, it is known to Satan who He is and the scheme is put into operation to engulf Him in the massacre of a whole multitude of infants. The cruelty of the evil one to murder a mass to get ONE! He is after One, he is not after the crowd.

We have no record of any efforts of the enemy from that time until the Lord steps across the line which runs between His private life and His public life - and then He meets the enemy immediately. And what is the question? "If Thou wilt... worship me" (Matt. 4:9). That is what he is after. It is right out - he is betrayed at once; and it is that issue right up to the Cross. "If Thou wilt worship me." It comes in a multitude of different ways. Satan only wants an acknowledgment, the ascribing to him of some rights in the universe.

But, ah, the Lord never recognised those rights - just as Mordecai refused to recognise the right of Haman. This is one of the most beautiful things in the book of Esther. Here is Haman claiming to be somebody: he has gained eminence, and everybody is bowing to him. But Mordecai refuses to recognise any of his glory, and ignores it all. And you remember Haman's story to his family. 'I am a great man; I have much goods, many children: but what is the good of it all if this one man will not recognise me?' (Esther 5:9-13). It is a foreshadowing. There is One who counts more than all the rest, and until He can be captured or got out of the war the enemy's fullness is divided. That One will not recognise Satan's and that One is destined to bring about his doom.

The Lord Jesus met that all the way through, refusing to attribute to Satan one atom of right in this universe. He was out to challenge that, to secure all the rights for God in His own Person, and to come to the Throne Himself with those rights. And when He has done it we see the same thing going on with the Church. It is still the Church's great issue: the worshippers and the worshipped, and the place or the no-place of the enemy. We shall deal with that when we come to speak of the Church.

Now, only the Holy Spirit, in the power of the victorious Christ and by virtue of His shed Blood, can meet that challenge. We do not talk glibly, lightly, frivolously, about this thing. We view the ultimate issue with joy and exultation, but we recognise that it is "not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord of Hosts" (Zechariah 4:6). And if the Lord Jesus Himself needed that it should be through the Eternal Spirit that this thing was wrought out, oh, how much more we! How much more we today! We should not rush

into this battle; we recognise that nothing but the mighty energizing of the Holy Spirit could meet this great issue and challenge. But we recognise also with confidence that the Holy Spirit is the minister of the victorious Christ, and that His very advent is on the ground of that victory, to work that victory out in the universe; and we thank God for it. Why has the Holy Spirit come? Oh! not that we might have blessings and what we call power and influence and opportunity and service. No, He has come as Representative and Agent of the Christ, who has secured the rights of God in His own Person. To bring about the recognition and realisation of the rights in this earth - that is the work of the Holy Spirit.

The second thing that comes out of this is that the Holy Spirit always demands the ground of the Cross for His activity, if the glory of God is in view. But then, the Cross registers the removal of all that serves Satan. Now, it would take a long time to cover that ground again to see the things that served Satan. What was it that served Satan in Cain? Covetousness, personal ambition, jealousy, pride! That worked itself out in the murder of Abel - but the murder of Abel as an expression of hatred for God (although Cain may have been blind to the deeper nature of the thing). What was it that served Satan in Balaam? Greed, covetousness, world-gain. The Cross registers the removal by destruction of all that served Satan, and for us it is gathered up in one word: SELF.

What a wide word that is - what a comprehensive word! The stronger term is "the flesh". Some people do not know what you mean when you talk about the "flesh". They begin to think of positive vices and iniquities of deep dye. But the "flesh" is only another term for "self". Self is a very subtle thing, a many-sided thing. It includes self-interest, self-glory, self-preservation, self-realisation, self-advancement - all those considerations of influence and good-standing and prestige and following, and being understood and spoken well of. The phases of "self" are legion, and they, every one of them, serve Satan.

Moreover, they serve him in this other sense, that they divide the rights of God and usurp the place of God: and therefore, wherever there is the slightest suggestion or insinuation of self, the Glory of God is obscured and the Cross has got to be applied there. The Cross is not applied in the work of God just because God wants us out of it for the sake of having us out of it, to humble, to crush, to break us; no, it has this great end in view - HIS GLORY. And our glory depends upon His glory. We cannot come to glory until He receives His rights in the universe; and the Cross is the way there. The Holy Spirit demands the ground of the Cross in us, because the glory of God is in view. The Cross, dear friend, means utter devotion to God's glory. The Holy Spirit only works on that ground - He has only ever worked on that ground. A pure work of the Holy Spirit, completely immune from Satan's touch requires the Cross, which means complete separation from all of the old ground.

Perhaps you have read the wonderful record of what God did in China through His servant, Dr. Jonathan Goforth - a work of the Spirit in mighty revival. I think I have read few things which are more literal fulfilments of words which are often mentioned amongst us: "Call unto me, and I will answer thee, and will shew thee great things, and difficult, which thou knowest not" (Jeremiah 33:3). When this true man of God arrived at a certain place, he was told immediately that he must not expect anything there such as he had had elsewhere, for there were difficulties. But there the Holy Spirit came in, and under His constraint different people got up and confessed such things as were never suspected - confessed them in public - in a mighty movement of God. But the Spirit of the Lord kept very short accounts with His servant, and every suggestion and insinuation of the Devil through his "flesh" had to be met.

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