

The Peculiar Conditions of an End-Time

by T. Austin-Sparks

T. Austin-Sparks explores the unique spiritual dynamics of the end-time, emphasizing the importance of recognizing God's work through figures like Simeon and Anna, and the transition from old to new in Christ.

Scripture: Luke 2:25

Topics: "End Times", "Spiritual Transition"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the peculiar conditions of an end-time, where God performs a unique work amidst upheaval and conflict. He illustrates this through the examples of Simeon and Anna, who represent the culmination of past spiritual values in the person of Christ, signifying a transition from old to new. The sermon highlights the importance of recognizing the spiritual significance of our times and the necessity for believers to focus on the essence of Christ rather than the frameworks that have previously defined their faith. Sparks encourages the church to prepare for a new spiritual dispensation that honors the heritage of past values while embracing the fresh work of God in the present. Ultimately, he calls for a deeper understanding of the intrinsic value of God's work in our lives, which will have lasting significance beyond our time.

Transcript

Reading: Luke 2:25-38; I Cor. 10:11; Heb. 8:13, 9:26.

We are being led at this time to take note of the fact that we are at an end-time, and that God does a peculiar work at such a time. Things become very strange and very difficult at an end-time; everything seems to be thrown into a state of disturbance, upheaval, intense pressure and conflict. The great conflicting faces in this universe register very terribly and intensely upon that which is of God and upon those who are of account to Him, so that there often arises the sense that this is an actual end, and a question as to what more is possible. Inwardly we feel that the way is becoming exceedingly hedged up: 'frustration' is the word which seems to prevail, and outwardly everything is in a state of serious and great question as to the future. Indeed, it becomes more persistently the experience of the true people of God that they could give up and abandon everything. The ways in which this works out are numerous, but the whole effect is to paralyse and put out of commission that which is of God and bring it to a complete standstill. It is this, then, that will govern our consideration at this time - that we are in an end-time and that in end-times the work of God takes a particular form and is of a peculiar nature. It obviously becomes supremely important and necessary for the Lord's people to know the time in which they live, what the

portents are, and what it is that God would do at such a time.

I suggest to you that that constitutes a real reason for getting together in serious and solemn conference, for it is not something that we can take just as a part of a sequence of meditations. Our consideration of it may be supremely crucial and in a peculiar way related to a time in the history of this world, and of God's work in this world, which is of tremendous importance and will not be repeated.

Now, this matter of the end-time and God's work therein is brought very fully and clearly into view by Simeon and Anna. There is no doubt that they represent firstly an end-time - an end-time dispensationally and an end-time with regard to their own age, for they were both advanced in years. And then they also represent God's service at such a time. Simeon used the word of himself - "Now lettest thou thy servant (bondservant, the word is) depart, Lord, according to thy word, in peace." "Thy servant." Anna was found continuing in the temple in fastings and supplications day and night, not leaving it, a prophetess thus occupied in the house of God; and if that is not a picture of service, what is?

FULNESS OF RIPE AGE CARRIED ON IN FRESHNESS OF NEW LIFE

I am, in the first place, going to take up the age factor. Let me say at once that, although I am going to talk about old age, my message is mainly to young people. If that sounds hardly kind and fair to others, let me put it in this way: age is not a matter of years at all. You may be young in years and yet be far beyond your years, or you may be old in years and far behind your years. This is a spiritual matter. This age factor, as represented by Simeon and Anna, corresponds to the word in Hebrews 13, "He hath made the first old. But that which is becoming old and waxeth aged is nigh unto vanishing away"; and again, to the words in I Cor. 10, "upon whom the ends of the ages are come." That makes us very old, does it not?

Well now, what have we as the picture before us? We have an aged man with a babe in his arms, at once bringing an end and a beginning together, an end handed on to a beginning, a beginning taking up all the fulness represented by the old. It is the old passing over into and giving place to the new. If we get the Divine idea, the spiritual thought, about this - an aged man with a babe in his arms - we at once see that from the Divine standpoint that is the Divine principle. Age is not diminution, contraction, declension, depreciation. That is not God's mind about old age. There is a passage in Isaiah which says, "The child shall die a hundred years old" (Isa. 65:20). There is a state, a condition, a realm in which a child shall die one hundred years old. It means there is a principle here - that there is a realm in which age has the child present, has the babe there in its arms. At one hundred years old the child has not gone, it is still the child. The Divine thought about old age is rather that of fulness, fulness unto the enrichment of what is yet to be, and which is about to come in; to provide a heritage; not to pass out and take everything with it and for that to be the end, but to have something very full and rich to be taken up and carried on and expressed in newness, freshness, youthfulness; all the values of a long history brought out in new ways. That is what is here.

You know the instances in the Bible of infancy linked with old age. How much is made of this spiritual principle in relation to Abraham and Isaac! When Abraham was old, Isaac was born. The fact is taken up to express this - that when there is a great accumulation of history and spiritual knowledge, God will reproduce that, He will give it form again and yet again. "In Isaac shall thy seed be called" (Gen.21:12). Or again, Jacob and Benjamin, the child of his old age; and what a lot Benjamin represents spiritually. Then we have the case of Eli, who was very old, and the child Samuel. It is not only a beautiful picture, but it is a very significant one, that child along side of the aged Eli. God started there again, right in the presence of

something that was in itself about to pass out, but taking up all its spiritual values to reproduce them and bring out all their intrinsic worth. Here again are the aged Simeon and Anna, - by certain computations we arrive at the conclusion that Anna was 106 years old at this point - these two with a babe. It is not an end with God; it is something very much more than that.

ALL FORMER SPIRITUAL VALUES NOW CENTERED IN CHRIST

So the inclusive thing represented by Simeon and Anna is fulness by fulfilment. Firstly, it was the completing of a phase, the gathering up of all past spiritual values, as represented in these two, into a new and wholly spiritual order, the order of Christ.

Simeon so clearly speaks of that transition mentioned in the first chapter of the letter to the Hebrews: "God, having of old time spoken unto the fathers in the prophets by divers portions and in divers manners, hath at the end of these days spoken unto us in his Son." It is a transition from the fragmentary, the partial, the occasional, the diverse, to the complete, to the inclusiveness of the unified, and to the final. That is the transition here represented. The bringing in of the Babe, the Christ, holding Him in his arms, was in figure, simply the gathering up of all that had been of God in the past, and centering it in Christ, and seeing how He takes it up and is the fulfilment of it and transcends it.

See Simeon, then as to the past. Something was happening now with the coming in of this Babe, the coming in of the Christ. It is not without a certain significance that Matthew's Gospel has been put out of chronological order and put into the first place in our New Testament. In that Gospel, again and again Matthew uses this phrase, "that the scriptures might be fulfilled," or, "that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Prophet." It is characteristic of Matthew's Gospel. It pointed backward to all the Scriptures which were looking toward this Christ in Whom they were to find their fulfilment, their realisation, their finality and their transcendence. All the hopes, all the expectations all the promises, all the foreshadowings and all the forecastings, were gathered into the hands of Simeon that day as he held that Babe. The Hope Of Israel was in his hands. What a long hope, what a chequered hope! Even through all their failure, when black and dark despair seemed sometimes to have settled down upon them and they cried that their way was hidden from the Lord and their judgment passed away from their God, still they cherished a hope. Through all their failure, through all their sufferings, they still held to the hope that there was something yet to be. Through all the judgments which were poured upon them from heaven for their sins, they still clung to the promises and believed that they would one day see the salvation of the Lord. Oh, here it is all in the hands of Simeon! All that past is here present in those arms. That Little One answers to it all. The Hope of Israel!

This expectation and hope has reached its consummation in these very two who with others were looking for the consolation of Israel, the redemption of Jerusalem. They were looking; and what a day it was of little prospect, of seeming hopelessness! and yet there were those who were still hoping, still believing, still clinging. And there that day stood Simeon, holding in his arms the fulfilment of all the hopes and expectations and promises - holding the complete embodiment of the full thought of God. Simeon held all that in his hands, and by his words and attitude and spirit you can see him projecting that into the future, holding it forth. "This child is set for..." - the whole future is going to be affected by Him. It was a tremendous moment.

ALL TYPES AND SYSTEMS TRANSCENDED BY CHRIST IN PERSON

Ah, but note, it carried with it a stripping of all framework of earthly systems. It was no longer that which encased Christ, it was Christ Himself. All the encasements of Christ were finished at that moment. What a moment it was! The encasing in types and figures, symbols and prophecies and the whole system of Judaism, that whole framework was shattered and stripped off that day, and the manifest reality of all that had been inherent and intrinsic in the past was in Simeon's hands, to be handed on to the future. It was a crisis, a turning of the dispensations. It was a passing from all that was merely of earthly systems in relation to Christ, to the Christ Himself: and that is no small thing, and that is the mark of the end-time.

See what we come to. Christ Himself emerges from the framework of things, from all the scaffolding of past ages, from all the figurative and typological and symbolical, and transcends the things by His own Person. There is all the difference between Himself and His things. Right up to that time, God's people had been occupied with the things concerning the Christ: now they were to be occupied with the Christ Himself. It was a tremendous moment. This is what will be at an end-time. That is the point. An end-time is transition from a lot that has had to do with Christ to Christ Himself, transition from frameworks to the essential and the intrinsic, transition from all the works and the things related to Christ to that which is known of Him personally. All the other is going to be stripped off, and we are in the day when that stripping off has seriously commenced. The issue is going to be - may I put it this way? - how much we have actually in our hands of the very Christ Himself, how much we are occupied with the things concerning Him, the encasement of Christ.

This work of transition is going to be done, for this is an end-time movement. I see it here so clearly, the pre-figuring of the prophesying of that other end-time which we have in the book of the Revelation, when the man child is brought forth, and the ultimate things are in view. At such a time everything will be tested and challenged by the forces that will be let loose from hell. There started, with the bringing in of this first man child, the Lord Jesus, a loosing of Satanic and hellish forces which has gone on and on, right through this dispensation. Herod heard, and loosed his sword, occasioning a terrible massacre, in an endeavour to compass the death of this One; and from that time onward hell was out (and has continued to be out) not against a system but against a living person. So here we see the man child presented and the tremendous reactions that are immediately provoked.

Pass right on to Revelation 12, and there you see a corporate company called the man child. (It is corporate because the language is " and they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb.") This is the corporate counterpart of the individual, of the personal. When that corporate expression of the man child is presented in the book of the Revelation, what have you? - a most violent release of evil forces for the destruction of everything that speaks of Christ.

GOD'S END-TIME WORK - EVERYTHING ESSENTIALLY SPIRITUAL

Well now, what is the service of God at an end-time? As far as we have gone, surely we are able to see one or two things. The particular work of God at an end-time is, to begin with, the constituting of a new and spiritually inclusive dispensation, a new age of an essentially and wholly spiritual kind. In Heb. 12:27 we have, "And this word, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that have been made, that those things which are not shaken may remain." That word 'removing' really means the transferring or the transposing on to another and different basis. The fact that that comes at the end of the letter to the Hebrews is significant, for that letter is just full of that earthly system of Judaism with all its forms, its ritual, its make-up and constitution. All that is earthly, even in relation to God, is going to be removed, and everything is going to be transferred to another basis - a spiritual, a heavenly basis;

and when things begin to happen on the ground of an end-time, that is the character of what is taking place. The earthly is now going to be forced to give way to the heavenly, the temporal to the spiritual, the outward to the inward. Then it will be proved just how much we have that can be transferred, for there are many things that are not going to be transferred, "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor. 15:50). That signifies and implies that there is a whole order of creation which is not going to constitute that eternal order; it is to pass away. Everything is going to be transferred to another basis, and this kind of thing intensifies at an end-time. Do you see that?

Let me put that more simply. What God will see to, by sheer force of conditions, is that anything that is only temporal will go and that which is spiritual alone will remain. There must therefore be intensifying processes to bring out the spiritual. Is not that where we are? I do not know what your experience is, but touching one and another here and there I find there is some real understanding of this. We never knew such spiritual conflict, pressure and difficulty as we are knowing now; things seem to be getting beyond measure. May this not be the explanation? The Lord seems to be concentrating upon bringing out spiritual values, making spiritual men and women, and if I am not mistaken (and I claim no gift of prophecy, in the foretelling sense), we are going to see, and are already seeing, the removal of so much, the external things, upon which Christians have been relying as though these things constituted their Christian life. We are going to be forced back to the place where the one question that faces us is, After all, what have I got of the Lord Himself? Not, What can I do, where can I go? but, What have I got? I believe that is a very present and appropriate question in many parts of the world just now, and it will be increasingly so as everything outward is brought to an end. Now is the test - What have I got in my hands?

GOD'S END-TIME WORK INCLUSIVE OF ALL FORMER VALUES

Yes, the constituting of a new and spiritual dispensation. But I also used the word inclusive - that is, the heritage of all the values that God has ever given. This is, mark you, a dispensation principle. Spiritual history returns upon itself, it goes back to the last point of fulness. Perhaps you do not grasp what I mean by that. If there has come about a decline, whether in our own spiritual life or in the life of the Church, sooner or later we shall be forced back to the point where we left the full measure of God. Cannot you see that happening? We see it in various connections to-day. Take the matter of literature. There is an increasing demand for the old works. Publishers are finding a great demand for something of years ago, and it is coming into the market. The shelves have been full of cheap, superficial Christian stuff with gaudy wrappers and all that, and times have come when people are aware that this is not meeting the need, and the demand for something more is arising. The call is for some of the books which former generations had. That is happening. History is returning upon itself. There has been decline, loss, superficiality, frivolity, cheapness, in Christianity, and the Church is going to perish for want of solid food unless it is provided. Thus the cry is, 'Let us get back to what there was before.' That is happening in many ways. It is a dispensation principle. If God has really given anything, that will never be lost. Time will vindicate it. Sooner or later we shall have to come back to it. We shall be thrown back for our very lives on what God has given. This is where the new takes up the old.

It is a sorry and a superficial day, and one which will not stand up to things, when you think you can dispense with experience. If young people suppose they can think lightly of those who have gone through the fires and grown grey-headed in the service of God, in learning to know the Lord, and that such can be set aside as back numbers, that is a sorry day for the future. With all that is needed of the new generation, do not let us think they can produce all the past in their own lifetime. God will throw them back upon what has gone before. Do not count the past servants of God as back numbers. They are very much up to date.

Simeon was very much up to date when he brought all the wealth, fulness, richness of the past in his hands, and, so to speak, transferred it to the new, to the Babe, Who took it all up, and Who later confessed that He did take it all up. "Think not that I came to destroy the law or the prophets: I came not to destroy, but to fulfill" (Matt. 5:17). There are always, sooner or later, reactions from cheapness and superficiality, and that usually under duress and compulsion and a sense of being unable to go on without something fuller.

Infancy in the arms of age. Yes, and infancy depends upon those arms. I think I am not going too far in saying that here, in the holding of the infant Christ in these arms, there is this signification, that for the fulfilment of His life and ministry the Christ depended very much upon the past, upon all that God had done before. The only Bible He had was the Old Testament. How He lived on it! When He said, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God," He was talking about the only Bible He had, the Word of God, the Old Testament. You see how the Old Testament is used in the New. It is but another aspect of this. One of the richest studies and most profitable lines of inquiry is to mark where the Old Testament is found in the New and why it is found there, the use made of it. Yes, it is a tremendous fact: that which is new depends upon that which has gone before.

THE ABIDING VALUE OF EVERY WORKING OF GOD

We come to a close for the present by noting this. We must live and we must work with our eye upon the after value of our lives. Thank God that can be. Life would be an enigma and intolerable if all that we have learned through suffering and discipline passed out with us and there was nothing more for it. No, it is not like that at all. There is an after value, and we ought to live, I say, and work, with our eye upon that heritage which we are to give beyond our own time. On the principle that God vindicates everything that He Himself has done and given, and makes it necessary, then He is making necessary for His new dispensation what He is doing in you and in me now. That new dispensation is going to be constituted on the basis of what He is doing in his saints now. That is a New Testament principle. What He is doing in the Church now is to be the good of the coming ages. What He is doing in us, it is not presumption to say, is going to be the very life of some beyond our time. So we should not think of this life as something to be got through, to be lived through to ourselves, something in itself. It is something that is to be found again to the glory of God in that which is to be - the passing on of that which has been of God, which can never die but is conserved by Him for ever, and will be necessary. I wonder if that is a new thought to you? What the Lord is doing in you by way of increasing the measure of Christ in you is going to be necessary long after you have gone. It is a principle, a law, that anything that God does is for ever and will be necessary.

We will leave it there for the time being and ask the Lord to exercise us quite strongly about this matter of the intrinsic value of the knowledge of Himself for the time that is to be, through this transition upon which we have now so seriously entered.

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