

The Purpose of the Ages

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of divine revelation and the progressive nature of our understanding of Christ, highlighting the eternal purpose of God in His Son.

Topics: "Revelation of Christ", "Eternal Purpose of God"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the profound mystery of knowing Christ, asserting that true knowledge of the Son can only come through divine revelation from the Father. He reflects on the Apostle Paul's journey from self-sufficiency to a deep reliance on God's grace, illustrating how Paul's understanding of Christ evolved throughout his life. Sparks highlights that the purpose of God is to reveal all things in Christ, transcending human limitations and expectations. He encourages believers to recognize the vastness of Christ and the eternal significance of their relationship with Him, which continues to grow and expand through revelation. Ultimately, the sermon calls for a deeper pursuit of knowing Christ, as this journey will last into eternity.

Transcript

"...No one knoweth the Son, save the Father..."--Matt. 11:27.

"...it was the good pleasure of God... to reveal His Son in me..."--Gal. 1:15,16.

"...I count all things to be loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord..."--Phil. 3:8.

"...that I may know Him..."--Phil. 3:10.

"Having made known unto us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Him unto a dispensation of the fulness of the times, to sum up all things in Christ..."--Eph. 1:9,10.

That little clause in verse ten is the word which will govern our meditation--ALL THINGS IN CHRIST.

These scriptures speak for themselves. As we listen to the inner voice of the Spirit in these fragments of the Divine Word, surely we shall begin to feel a sense of tremendous meaning, value and content. We should feel like people who have come to the doors of a new realm full of wonders--unknown, unexplored, unexploited.

The Necessity for Revelation

We are met at the very threshold of that realm with a statement which is calculated to check our steps for the moment, and if we approach with a sense of knowing or possessing anything already, with a sense of contentment, of personal satisfaction, or with any sense other than that of needing to know everything, then this word should bring us to a standstill at once: "...no one knoweth the Son, save the Father...." Maybe we thought we knew something about the Lord Jesus, and that we had ability to know; that study, and listening, and various other forms of our own application and activity could bring us to a knowledge, but at the outset we are told that "...no one knoweth the Son, save the Father...." All that the Son is, is locked up with the Father, and He alone knows.

When, therefore, we have faced that fact, and have recognized its implications, we shall see that here is a land which is locked up, into which we cannot enter, and for which we have no equipment. There is nothing in us of faculty to enter into the secrets of that realm of Christ. Then following the discovery of that somewhat startling fact of man's utter incapacity to know by nature, the next fact that confronts us is this: "...it was the good pleasure of God... to reveal His Son in me...." While God has all that locked up in Himself, in His own possession, and He alone has the knowledge of the Son, it is in His heart, nevertheless, to give revelation. And, given the truth that we are so utterly dependent upon revelation from God, and that all human faculty and facility is ruled out in this respect, since such revelation can only be known by a Divine revealing after an inward kind, we are making it to be very evident that everything is of grace when we renounce all trust in works, when we turn away from self-sufficiency, self-reliance, from all confidence in the flesh, and any pride of advance and approach.

Read these two passages in the light of what Paul was when known as Saul of Tarsus, before the Lord met with him, and afterward as Paul the Apostle, and you will gain something more of their force. Saul of Tarsus would have called himself a master in Israel, one well learned in the Scriptures, with a certain strength of self-assurance, self-confidence, and self-sufficiency in his apprehension and knowledge of the oracles of God. Even such a one as he will have to come to the recognition that none of that is of avail in the realm of Christ; where he realizes that he is utterly blind, utterly ignorant, utterly helpless, altogether ruled out, and needing the grace of God for the very first glimmer of light; to come down very low, and say: "...it was the good pleasure of God... to reveal His Son in me...." That is grace.

That marked the beginning; and for this present meditation we are considering the unexplored fulness of what God has Himself placed within His Son, the Lord Jesus, actually and in purpose, as being the object of His grace toward us. His grace has led Him to seek to bring us by revelation into all that knowledge which He Himself possesses as His own secret knowledge of His fulness in His Son, the Lord Jesus. ALL THINGS IN CHRIST.

Paul's Revelation of Christ

It is never our desire to make comparisons between Apostles, and God forbid that we should ever set a lesser value upon any Apostle than that which the Lord has set upon him; yet I think that we are quite right in saying that, more than any other, Paul was, and is, the interpreter of Christ; and if we take Paul as our interpreter, as the one who leads us into the secrets of Christ in a fuller way, we mark how he himself embodies and represents that of which he speaks. It is the man himself, after all, and not just what he says which brings us to Christ in fuller and deeper meaning.

The thing that has been very much pressing upon my own heart in this connection is Paul's ever-growing conception of Christ. There is no doubt that Paul's conception of Christ was growing all the time, and by

the time Paul reached the end of his earthly life, full, and rich, and deep as it had been, Paul's vision of Christ was such as to lead him to cry even at that point, "...that I may know Him...." Yes, at the beginning it had pleased God to reveal His Son in him, but at the end it was still as though he had known nothing of Christ. He had come to discover that his Christ was immeasurable beyond his thought and conception, and he was launched into eternity with a cry on his lips: "...that I may know Him..."

I believe (and not as a matter of sentiment) that will be our eternal bliss, the nature of our eternity, namely, discovering Christ. Paul as we have said, had a great knowledge of Christ. At best here we find ourselves shriveling into insignificance every time we approach Him. How many times have we read the Letter to the Ephesians! I am not exaggerating when I say that if we have read it for years, read it scores, hundreds, or even thousands of times, every sentence can hold us afresh each time we come back to it. Paul knew what he was talking about. Paul's conception was a large one, but even so he is still saying at the end, "...that I may know Him...." I do not think we shall know Christ in fulness immediately we pass into His presence. I believe we are to go on--governed by this word, "the ages to come"--discovering, discovering, exploring Christ. That ever-growing conception of Christ was the thing which maintained Paul in life, and maintained Paul's ministry in life. There was never any stagnation with him. He never came to any point or place where there was the suggestion that now he knew. What he seems to say is this: I do not know anything yet, but I see dimly, yet truly, with the eye of the spirit, a Christ so great, so vast as to keep me reaching out, moving on. I press on; I leave the things which are behind; I count all things as refuse for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus, that I may know Him. In this growing conception of Christ, Paul moved a long way from the position of the Jewish teacher, or of the Jew himself at his best.

Paul began with the Jewish conception of the Messiah, whatever that was. It is quite impossible to say what the Jewish conception of Christ was. You have indications of what they expected the Messiah to be and to do, but there is nothing to indicate exactly what their conception of the Messiah was in fulness; it was undoubtedly a limited one. There is a great deal of uncertainty betrayed by the Jewish thought beyond a certain point about their long-looked-for Messiah. Their Messiah represented something earthly and something temporal; an earthly kingdom and a temporal power, with all the earthly and temporal advantages which would accrue to them as people on this earth from His kingdom, from His reign, from His appearing. That is where we begin in our consideration of Paul's conception of Christ. This Jewish conception, it is true, did not confine the thought of blessing to Israel alone, but allowed that Messiah's coming was, through the Jews, to issue in blessing to all the nations; yet it was still earthly, temporal, limited to things here. If you read the Gospels, and especially Matthew's Gospel, you will see that the endeavour of these Gospels, so far as Jewish believers were concerned, was to show that Christ had done three things.

Firstly, how that He had corrected their ideas about the Messiah.

Secondly, how that He had fulfilled the highest hopes that could have been theirs concerning the Messiah.

Thirdly, how that He had far transcended anything that ever they had thought.

You must remember that these Gospels were never written merely to convince unbelievers. They were written also to believers, to help the faith of believers by interpretations. Matthew's Gospel, written as it was at a time of transition, was written in order to interpret and confirm faith in Christ by showing what Christ really was, what He really came for, and in that way to correct and adjust their conceptions of the Messiah. Their conceptions of Him were inadequate, distorted, limited, and sometimes wrong. These

records were intended to put them right, to show that Christ had fulfilled the highest, and best, and truest Messianic hopes and expectations, and had infinitely transcended them all. You need Paul to interpret Matthew, and Mark, and Luke, and John; and he does it. He brings Christ into view as One in Whom every hope is realized, every possibility achieved. Were they expecting an earthly kingdom, and deliverance and blessing in relation thereto? Christ had done something infinitely better than that. He had wrought for them a cosmic redemption; not a mere deliverance from the power of Rome or any other temporal power, but deliverance from the whole power of evil in the universe--"Who delivered us out of the power of darkness, and translated us into the kingdom of the Son of His love." Matthew had particularly stressed the fact of the kingdom, but the Jewish idea of the kingdom with which he was confronted was so limited, so earthly, so narrow. With a new emphasis Paul, by the Spirit, brings into view the nature and immensity of the kingdom of the Son of God's love.

Now we can see something of what deliverance from our enemies means. We shall not follow that through, but pass on with just that glimpse of it. Such an unveiling as this was a corrective. It revealed a fulfilment in a deeper sense than they had expected, but it was a transcendence of their fullest hope and expectation. Paul interpreted the Christ for them in His fuller meaning and value. He himself had begun on their level. Their conception of Christ had been his own. But after it pleased God to reveal His Son in him a continuous enlargement in Paul's knowledge of Christ began through an ever-growing unveiling of what He was.

Of course, as Saul of Tarsus, Paul never believed that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah. This takes us a step further back in his conception. He believed that Jesus was an imposter, and so he sought to blot out all that was associated with Him in the world.

Paul, then, had to learn at least two things. He had to learn that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah, but he also had to learn that Jesus of Nazareth far transcended all Jewish conceptions of the Messiah, all his own ideas, all his own expectations as bound up with the Messiah. He not only learned that He was the Messiah, but that as Messiah He was far, far greater and more wonderful than his fullest ideas and conceptions and expectations. Into that revelation he was brought by the grace of God.

The Progressiveness of Revelation as Illustrated in Paul

I do not think the point needs arguing, for it is hard to dispute that there are evidences of progress in Paul's understanding and knowledge of Christ, and it is clear that progress and expansion and development in his knowledge of Christ led to adjustment. Do not misunderstand. They did not lead to a repudiation of anything that Paul had stated, nor to a contradiction of any truth that had come through him, but they led to adjustment. As his knowledge of Christ grew and expanded Paul saw that he had to adjust himself to it.

This is a point at which many have stumbled, but it is a matter about which we should have no fear. There are so many people who are afraid of the idea that such a man as the Apostle Paul--or any man in the Bible who was Divinely inspired--so utterly under the power of the Holy Spirit should ever adjust himself according to new revelation. They seem to think that this necessarily means that the man changes in a way as to leave his original position and more or less repudiate it. It does not mean anything of the kind.

Take an illustration. Paul's letters to the Thessalonians were his first letters. In those letters there is no doubt whatever that Paul expected the Lord to return in his lifetime. Mark his words: "...we that are alive, that are left unto the coming of the Lord..." In his letter to the Philippians, Paul has moved from that

position, while in his letters to Timothy that expectation is no longer with him: "...I am already being offered, and the time of my departure is come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course...." He had anticipated Nero's verdict. He knew now that it was not by way of the rapture that he himself was to go to glory. Are we to say that these two things contradict one another? Not at all! In going on with the Lord, Paul came into fuller revelation about the Lord's coming, and of his personal relationship thereto, but this did not set aside or change any fact of doctrine which had been expressed earlier in his letters to the Thessalonians. All that had been set forth there was fully inspired, given by the Holy Spirit, but it was still capable of development in the heart of the Apostle himself, and as he saw the fuller meaning of the things that had come to him earlier in his life, so he found that in practical matters he had to adjust himself. No fresh revelation, nor advance in understanding, ever placed him in the position of having to repudiate anything that had been given him by revelation in earlier days. It is a matter of recognizing that these differences are not contradictions but the result of progressive, supplemental revelation, enlarging apprehension, clearer conception through going on with the Lord. Surely these are evidences that progress in Paul's understanding and knowledge led to adjustments.

The Eternal Purpose of God in His Son

Now the great effect of Paul's discovery concerning the Lord Jesus on the Damascus road was not only to reveal to him the fact of His Sonship (he undoubtedly discovered there that Jesus of Nazareth was the Son of God, as his words in Galatians one, verses fifteen and sixteen show), but to lift Christ right out of time and to place Him with the Father in the "before times eternal." That does not perhaps for the moment appear to be very striking, but it is a very big step toward what the Lord wants to say to us. Christ has been lifted out of time. The "time" Christ, that is, His coming into this world in time, becomes something like a parenthesis; it is not the main thing. It is the main thing if we look at the whole in the light of the fall and need for recovery, but not the main thing from the Divine standpoint originally. I want you to grasp this, because it is at this point that we come into that greatest of all revelations that has been given to us concerning the Lord Jesus. This effect of his experience on the Damascus road, this lifting of Christ right out of time and placing Him in eternity, came in Paul's conception to be related to eternal purpose, and in eternal purpose there was no fall and no redemption. That is, so to speak, a bend down in the line of God through the ages. God's line was to have gone straight without a bend, without a break, but when it came to a certain point, because of certain contingencies which were never in the purpose, that line had to go down, and then up and on again. The two ends of that line are on the same eternal level. You may, if you like, conceive of a bridge across that bend, and of Christ thus filling the bend, so that what was from eternity is not interrupted at all in Him; it goes on in Him. The coming to earth and all the work of the Cross is something other, the result of a necessity by reason of these contingencies; but in Christ from eternity to eternity the purpose is unbroken, uninterrupted, without a bend. There is no hiatus in Christ. This came to be related to purpose. That is a great word of Paul's: "According to the eternal purpose which He purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord..." (Eph. 3:11); "...called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28). These are eternal conceptions of Christ, and this purpose, and these Divine counsels were related to the universe, and to man in particular. Let us get across that bridge for a moment, leaving the other out; for I want you to notice the course that the Letter to the Ephesians takes. The letter begins with eternity. It says much of things that were before the world was, and it comes back to that point. Just in between it speaks of redemption, and it never speaks of redemption until it has the past eternity in view. Redemption comes in to fill up that gap and then we go on to eternity again.

Now just leave the gap for a moment. Of course it concerns us tremendously and we shall have to come back to it, because everything is bound up with redemption so far as we are concerned in the eternal purpose; but leave it for a moment and turn your attention in this other direction. It is stated definitely and clearly that the whole plan of God without redemption was completed in those eternal counsels concerning His Son, Jesus Christ, and in that plan the ages were created: "...the fulness of the times..." is the phrase used here in our translation.

I have heard such phrases in the New Testament as these interpreted as being the dispensations as we now know them in the Bible; the dispensation of Abraham, the dispensation of the Law, the dispensation of Grace. I wonder if that is right? Mark this expression: "...through Whom also He made the ages" (Heb. 1:2; R.V.M.). Let us think again. Are we right in saying that applies to what we call the dispensations as they are shown to us in the Bible? Without being dogmatic about it, I have a question. Are we to say that in those eternal counsels of God, in relation to the eternal purpose of God concerning His Son, a dispensation of Law had a place, an age like the Old Testament age, those periods of time from Adam to Abraham, Abraham to Moses, Moses to David, David to the Messiah? Are those the ages referred to? Did God create those in relation to the eternal purpose? Remember all this creative work was in, and through, and unto His Son, according to the eternal purpose.

There are ages upon ages yet to come. There are marks through eternity which are not "time" marks in our sense of the word, but represent points of emergence and development, of progress, increase, enlargement. Had you and I been born on the Day of Pentecost, and were we then to have lived through until the return of the Lord (that is a dispensation according to this world's reckoning and order) we should never have discovered all the meaning of Christ. We should have discovered something and have reached a certain point in the knowledge of Christ, but we should then want another age under different conditions, to discover things which it would never be possible to discover under the conditions of this life; and when we had made good that next possibility, probably beyond that there would be new possibilities. There will be no stagnation in eternity--"...of the increase of His government... there shall be no end..." (Isa. 9:7).

Now leave the sorry picture of this world's history from the fall to the restitution of all things aside, and you have the launching of ages in which all God's fulness in Christ could be revealed and apprehended progressively, on through successive ages, with changing and enlarging conditions, and facilities, and abilities. That is the meaning of spiritual growth. Our own short Christian life here, if it is a right one, moving under the power of the Holy Spirit, is itself like a series of ages in brief. We start as children, and acquire what we can as children. Then we come to a point where we have increased capacity, where our spiritual senses are exercised. This again issues in a larger apprehension of Christ, and then a little later, as we have gone on, we still find these powers enlarging, under the Holy Spirit, and as the powers enlarge we realize there is more country to be occupied than ever we imagined. As children we thought we had it all! That is, of course, one of the signs of childhood and of youth. The saving thing in our old age is that we recognize there is a vast realm ahead of us to beckon us on and to stop us from settling down. That is eternal youth!

Thus, leaving the whole of this broken-down state in the creation, you can see the creating of ages in Christ, by Christ, through Christ, according to God's eternal purpose that all things should be summed up in Him; not just the "all things" of our little life, of our little day, of our individual salvation, but the "all things" of a vast universe as a revelation of Christ, all being brought by revelation to the spiritual apprehension of man, and man being brought into it. What a Christ!

That is what Paul saw; and this may well be summed up in his own words: "...the excellency of the knowledge (that knowledge which excels) of Christ Jesus my Lord." It is Paul the aged saying, "that I may know Him." Christ is lifted right out of time, and time, so far as Christ was concerned, was only related to eternity by the necessity of redemption unto the eternal purpose.

We must break off here for the time being, but in so doing let me say this, that with his ever-growing conception of Christ, there was a corresponding enlargement in his conception of believers. Believers came to assume a tremendous significance. The saving of men from sin, death, and hell, and getting them to heaven, was as nothing compared with what Paul saw as to the significance of a believer now. All that which he has seen concerning Christ in His eternal purpose--eternal, universal, vast, infinite--now relates to believers: "Even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be... unto the praise of His glory" in the ages to come (Eph. 1:4,12). Believers also are lifted out of time, and are given a significance altogether beyond anything here. We shall have to speak further of that.

There was a third thing. He was able rightly to apprise the range and place of redemption. Redemption could be seen in its full compass and as being something more than what is merely of time. It is called "eternal redemption." Redemption is something more than the saving of men and women from sin and their sinful state. It is getting behind everything to the ultimate ranges of this universe, and touching all its powers; linking up with the eternity past and the eternity yet to be, and embracing all the forces of this universe for man's redemption. Paul is able rightly to apprise the meaning, value, and range of redemption, and also to put it in its right place, and that is important.

Now these are big things. They all need to be broken up, and the Lord may enable us to do this, but if you cannot grasp what has been said you will be able to appreciate this, that Christ is infinitely bigger than you or I ever imagined. That is the thing that comes to us so forcibly through Paul. He started with a comparatively small Jewish Messiah; he ended with a Christ so far beyond all that ever he had yet seen or known, that his last cry is, "...that I may know Him..." and that will take all eternity. What a Christ! It is Christ Who will lift us out, Christ Who will set us free; but let me say this, that it will not be by His coming and putting His hands under us and lifting us out, but by being revealed in our hearts. How did Paul come out of his narrow Jewish conceptions about the Messiah? Simply by the revelation of Christ in him, and as that revelation grew his liberation increased. There were some things which he did not shake off for a long time. He clung to Jerusalem almost to the last. He still had a longing for his brethren after the flesh, and made further attempts for their deliverance on national grounds. But at last he saw the meaning of the heavenly Christ in such a way as to make it possible for him to write the Letter to the Ephesians, and the Letter to the Colossians, and then Judaism as such, Israel after the flesh, ceased to weigh with him. It was the revelation of Christ which was emancipating him, leading him out, freeing him all the time. In that way Christ is our Deliverer and Emancipator. It is just the Lord Jesus that we need to know. Everything small will go as we see Him. Everything of earth and time will go as we see Him, and in the background of our lives there will be something adequate to keep us through difficult and hard times. We shall see the greatness of Christ and the corresponding greatness of our salvation "...according to His eternal purpose...."

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net