

The Quest of the Eyes of Flame

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Lord's concern with His people is whether they can remain as true witnesses and represent Him, and whether they can continue in their original purpose.

Scripture: Zechariah 4:2, Matthew 5:14, Revelation 1:14, Revelation 2:1, Revelation 2:5, Revelation 3:1

Topics: "Divine Purpose", "Spiritual Vitality"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the Lord's scrutiny of the spiritual state of His people through the imagery of His 'eyes like flames of fire' in Revelation. He discusses the importance of maintaining the undying flame of divine life within the church, warning that past successes or commendable actions do not guarantee God's continued support if the core purpose is lost. The sermon highlights the danger of becoming nominal and the necessity for the church to remain a true witness of Christ's resurrection and life. Sparks urges believers to reflect on their spiritual vitality and the potential loss of their divine calling, stressing that the Lord's judgment is based on the fulfillment of His purpose rather than mere existence. Ultimately, he calls for a return to the original purpose for which God raised His people, emphasizing the critical nature of spiritual life and testimony.

Transcript

Reading: Revelation 1:1-20; 2:1.

By way of a brief introductory word let us focus your attention upon what we feel to be the Lord's concern with His people at this time.

In the second and third chapters of the Book of the Revelation we have the Lord's survey of the seven churches. As those eyes that are as a flame of fire peer into the inner spiritual state and lay bare the condition - analyse, dissect, separate, place on the two sides of debit and credit, and form and pass their final verdict - we see one thing to be at issue with regard to them all. There may be particular differences in them; the aspects may vary; the elements may be very different: yet when all has been surveyed and gathered together it is to establish but one fact, namely, the presence or absence of that which, from the Lord's standpoint, constitutes justification in the continuance of the Lord's full committal to anything which claims to represent Him. The issue for every one of these churches was whether, under the Lord's permission, they could remain as true witnesses, and whether they could continue as really representing Him. The Lord had them before Him - shall we say, had them in His hand - and was determining whether He could keep them or whether He would have to put them away; whether He would have to "remove the

lampstand out of its place" (Revelation 2:5), or whether it could abide with His full approval. So that the question was clearly one of continuing in relation to the Lord's intended purpose or of losing its position. We have seen bodies cross the sky at night, coming from afar, gaining in brilliance, it seemed, as they came nearer, flashing on their way, and then disappearing altogether from view in the darkness of the night. Here are "stars" brought in by the eternal counsels of God, flashing in with the glory of His grace, some of them to cease to fulfil those counsels.

The question concerning every instrumentality raised up by God in relation to His purpose is: How far can He go on with it? It is evident that there are things which do not justify Him in wholly supporting some instrumentalities which He originally raised up and used. These letters make those things clear.

In the first place, the fact that God originally raised up an instrumentality, that it came from Him and was His work initially, does not justify Him in keeping it indefinitely. That is made quite clear. We should take serious account of the fact that, because God raised up a thing, it does not mean that He must of necessity keep that thing right through unconditionally, that is, no matter what its state or character may be eventually or in the course of time. Further, the fact that an instrument has had a wonderful history of devotion to Him and has at some time been a very real and full expression of His grace and power, does not resolve itself into a claim upon Him, and He does not regard Himself as under any obligation to preserve it indefinitely. But we have to press the point still further. Because at any given time many commendable things are to be seen in an instrumentality, which the Lord Himself may praise - and there may be not a few such things - nevertheless, this record shows that even they do not justify God in preserving it in its former place; even the presence of such comparatively good things does not mean that He may never consider putting them out of their original place, or that He is bound to refrain from doing so. There are many things which continue to exist and serve a purpose, but have lost their place in their original value to the Lord.

That is a very thorough sifting of everything. It might be thought that if God raised up a thing, if it came in the first place from His own hand; if God had used it and blessed it; if it had shown the features and characteristics of His grace and His love; if that instrumentality still had in it many commendable things which God, looking with His eyes as a flame, could approve of, surely that is enough to argue for its continuance in the fullness of His blessing? You understand that we are speaking about instrumentalities. We are not speaking about souls. We are not dealing with the question of salvation, but with that of vocation.

What, then, justifies the Lord in preserving and going on with any such instrumentality? We must look to see what motivated Him when He brought it into being, what was in His mind and in His heart. We shall find all we need to know from the very description of the instrumentality itself. In the passage to which we have referred it is called a lampstand - "seven golden lampstands" (R.V.M.). Our knowledge of the Word gives us much light upon what that means, and the Old Testament in particular comes at once to our help, for whether it be the candlestick in the Tabernacle, or the candlestick all of gold shown to Zechariah (Zechariah 4:2), we know that in both cases there was represented the living expression of the Holy Spirit's energies. Take the candlestick all of gold. We remember the pattern of it, with its seven bowls and seven golden pipes; and the oil being emptied out from the living olive trees through the pipes into the bowls, to provide the resource for the light. It is a very complete, very comprehensive illustration, and it is something that is living. At one end there is a living fountain or spring. The prophet does not say that there were cisterns, tanks, some man-made receptacle of oil, but living trees, and oil being poured continually, ever fresh - warm from the arteries of that living organism, as it were - into the candlestick burning with its

steady, undying light, a light which does not vary, which does not go out, which is maintained at full strength continually.

THE UNDYING FLAME

It is the testimony of an unfailing, undying, all-sufficient life; the testimony of a life which is not abstract, not something stored up, but something which is coming all the time from an inexhaustible stream, a mighty, glorious life. As the light burns, it is a constant declaration of victory, and that, a victory over death, which would seek to smother the flame. It burns in the midst of surrounding death, a continuous declaration that death has no power to quench it.

To come back to the Book of Revelation: What is it, and what is it that alone justifies God in maintaining any instrumentality in full relation to Himself and His purpose? It is not that the instrumentality has many good things. It is not that it had its origin with God. It is not that it has a great history, a great past, a good tradition. It is not that it has a name, a reputation, the name of its more glorious days. It is that there is today the same undying flame of Divine life in it, a testimony against the power of death all around. That is God's justification.

You notice that in relation to the seven golden lampstands there is reference to the seven Spirits of God, meaning spiritual fullness, and to Jesus Christ the Faithful Witness. He is identified with these lamps. He is in the midst of them, closely associated with them. They were called into being in order that they might be an abiding testimony to the Lord Himself as the Faithful Witness, the Living One, in the power of the Spirit of God.

When we come to analyse the state of these churches, we find that in five of them, at least, there is a variety of elements, each of which is an expression of something that is a contradiction to the Holy Spirit, a contradiction to the Spirit of Life. When such a thing is found amongst the Lord's people - within the vessel, the instrument - it constitutes an element of death and provides Satan with his foothold, and all unconsciously for the most part among those people the testimony is contradicted.

The point is this. Satan will resort to anything - his methods and his means are numerous - to get some foothold for death in a Divinely-constituted instrumentality, so that the thing becomes a contradiction right at its very centre. It has a name; it has good works; it has many things which even the Lord Himself cannot judge because they are good; but the vital thing by which alone the Lord can be justified in maintaining that instrumentality in its former position has been countered. It is not a question of what there once was of good and whether it still flourishes today, but rather: Has the Lord that central, basic, essential, indispensable thing for which He has ever raised up His instrumentalities, whether individuals or companies, and brought them into relationship with Himself, that for which He apprehended them, that which was intended to be their specific vocation? It is not a matter of its bulk, size, or earthly quantity, but its intrinsic quality.

Let us look again at the particular case in point (Rev. 2:1 et seq). The Lord is saying: "From whence thou hast fallen." "The first works." "Think again, reconsider, and change back" ("Repent"). "I will remove thy lampstand out of its place." To whom does He so address Himself? To Ephesus. Ephesus! Only thirty years before had Ephesus received that deposit of revelation above which there is nothing to excel in the New Testament, that wonderful disclosure of the eternal counsels and calling of God which came to bear the name 'Ephesians'. Oh, the tragedy of Ephesus! Time was when it could be said that, through her, "all Asia" was affected. Her intrinsic value registered over that wide area.

What did the Lord mean by removing her lampstand out of its place? Not necessarily that by one stroke what was there would be wiped out or blotted out. Not a geographical removal or a literal extinction. Ephesus and its church went on for many years. But its essentially spiritual position in the "vocation wherewith it was called" was lost. It became something else. It may have grown numerically. It might have been accepted in Ephesus. Its "good works" may have remained and been many. But its spiritual measure, intrinsic virtue, and resources for the Church beyond its locality were lost. "Its place" spiritually could be removed without its temporal and material location being touched. Is this not the sad history of so many things which had a beginning and went on in spiritual power and spontaneous effectiveness for some years, but eventually lost their spiritual place and position in the "whole counsel of God"? In many cases, both of individual and personal and of collective ministries, we have to say: 'They have lost out'; 'they do not correspond to their beginning'. Many places which once were centres of far-reaching influence, while still existing, only do so on an earlier tradition. Many ministries under which we felt the Divine impact have - with the extra tragic factor of insensibility to the fact - lost that Divine unction. Is it expansion without commensurate spiritual resource? Is it popularity and acceptance which has robbed of the sense of crisis and urgency? Has the vision faded because of success or adversity? Have elements of contradiction found a loophole somewhere and worked like secret leaven to corrupt? Whatever it might be, there it is, and such a thing is on record in the Word of God as a warning for all time that this is the peril which besets anything which God raised up as a lamp of true testimony. Some of us inwardly weep as, in our own lifetime, we have seen this tragedy in servants of God, in movements and instrumentalities which have lost out. Spiritual pride is a major and certain cause of such disaster. When the 'Institution', 'Mission', 'Centre', or any thing becomes the object of talk and gratification, and it is not the Lord in growing fullness, then the days of the Lord's full committal to it are numbered.

We have all been apprehended of Jesus Christ, and there has been a purpose behind that apprehending. We have not been apprehended just to be saved. Our salvation is but basic and introductory to something very much more. The Lord gathers His own together to form them into a corporate vessel of Divine purpose. He raises up such instrumentalities from time to time; but whether it be individuals or whether it be companies, one constant danger is that the 'essential thing' in the Divine thought in raising it up, in apprehending that vessel, should somehow be lost while many other things may continue.

THE LORD'S STANDARD OF JUDGMENT

One inclusive thing arises from this survey of the churches. It is that the Lord deals with every life or vessel in the light of His specific purpose for it, and not of its general usefulness. These chapters would never have been written if the Lord were simply taking this view: 'Well, this vessel is not wholly bad; there is much yet of value here; it has not altogether gone away from Me; therefore I must look after it and support it, preserve it, and commit Myself wholly to it'; but the Lord is not doing that. We may be thankful to the Lord for anything that there is in this world which is good and is of Himself, and as we ourselves go into it we are grateful that the Lord should have any witness in a world like this; but, oh, so far as His own people are concerned, so far as the Church is concerned, that never satisfies Him. Of that we may be quite sure.

Why are we saying this? Because so many people say: 'Well, you know, you are trying to get something so perfect! Why not be satisfied with what is commendable about the Church today? Take it as it is! Accept it and be thankful that there are so many who belong to the Lord and bear His name in a world like this!' I find that this record does not allow of that. God knows that we are grateful that there are believers in this world, be they but poor ones. You cannot go abroad in a world like this and see its state, its Godlessness, its sinfulness, without being thankful to find even a very poor specimen of a believer who

has some love in his heart for the Lord. You are thankful for the smallest thing that speaks of Him. Oh, but when you come to see God's purpose, when you see that what He has designed for His Church is the occasion of His call, His choosing in Christ, you can never be satisfied with nominalism, or with general goodness.

When you come to a word like this you find it taking you right on - if you like to call it 'extreme' you may - right on to the end. It tells you quite plainly that whether there be a great past, a great history of Divine blessing and usefulness, a great reputation for good works, and many good things still obtaining, none of these things is an adequate justification for the Lord to commit Himself wholly to that vessel, for He has some reservations. He must have questions unless the purpose for which that vessel was raised up is being fulfilled. None of the New Testament Letters would have been written if the Lord was satisfied with the merely nominal. There has never been anything perfect but the serious matter is that of our attitude to "not having yet attained". Paul said: "I am not yet perfect, but...", and very much hung upon that "but". These churches in Revelation had accepted their imperfect condition.

THE NOMINAL IS ULTIMATELY REJECTED

For what was the Church raised up? I do not believe that the Lord originally thought of having a general Church, and then a special one within it; a general mass of believers, and then a company called 'overcomers' in the midst. That has never been the design of God. It is what we might call an emergency state of things, and is essential because of general failure. It seems to me that the very word 'overcomers' presupposes that there is failure somewhere. The Lord's purpose for all His Church, as a vessel - which nevertheless may only be realized in a few - is that it should maintain the testimony of a life which has conquered death, and will conquer death right to the end. It is a life question.

The Lord Jesus is constituted the great Witness upon the ground of the power of God which was exercised in Him when He was raised from the dead. Remember that the testimony of Jesus is always related to His being raised from the dead; that is, that He lives by a power which has conquered death. He is the Life on that ground, on that basis, in that sense, and those whom the New Testament approves as witnesses to Jesus are not those who talk the truth about Him, but are witnesses of His resurrection - that is, of course, in a spiritual way - witnesses to Christ as risen. The New Testament's testimony of Jesus is that God raised Him from the dead and that He is alive for evermore. That is the essence of the testimony. Thus the whole question resolves itself into one of testimony in life, a testimony of life. It is not a testimony of doctrine in the first place, but a testimony of life. Is the flame burning as at the beginning, witnessing that Jesus lives and is triumphant, even over the dark, deadly background of this world? That is the question for the Lord's people; the question for your life and for mine, and for every collective instrumentality.

As we proceed we shall see a great deal of what that means. For the moment we simply focus our thoughts upon the issue. I have no doubt in my heart as to what the issue of our time is. I trust that in this matter we may rightly claim to be of the tribe of Issachar, so to speak, to know what the time is saying and what Israel ought to do. I have not the slightest shadow of a doubt but that the issue of our day, of this hour in the Church's history is, more than ever, the issue of life and death in a spiritual sense. Are you not more and more experiencing that awful sapping of your very vitality, that draining of your life, that exhausting of your energy, perhaps especially in relation to prayer? Is it not true that it often requires a supreme effort to pray, and to get through when you have started to pray? You need energizing from a source other than that of your own natural energies in this matter, and that increasingly so. There is a

strange, deep, terrible sapping of vitality, mental and physical vitality as well as spiritual. Spiritual people, at least, know something of that. And lying at the back of it is the final conflict of this age. It is the spiritual issue of life and death.

The Lord would say to us something about that at this time, and we have to direct our eyes in the the way of the Lord's thought to the great issue which is at stake for His people. I trust that we shall know that He is not only making us aware of it and not only warning us about the perils of it, but that He comes mightily to our aid and shows us what is on our side in the battle.

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