

The Relationship Between the Cup and the Fire

by T. Austin-Sparks

The cup and the fire are dependent on each other, with the cup representing the Lord's sufferings and our participation in them, and the fire representing the Gospel's progress and the scattering of Christ's presence in the earth.

Scripture: Mark 10:35

Topics: "Unity in the Church", "Suffering and Sacrifice"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the profound relationship between the cup of the Lord and the scattering of fire on earth, illustrating that true spiritual progress and the advancement of the Gospel are contingent upon partaking in the cup, which symbolizes suffering and sacrifice. He highlights the paradox of the Christian life, where joy and sorrow coexist, and stresses that the cup represents both the holiness of Christ and the unity among believers. Sparks warns against the dangers of division within the Church, asserting that the effectiveness of the Gospel is hindered by a lack of unity and a failure to embrace the cup's implications. Ultimately, he calls for a recognition of the cup's significance in both personal and corporate Christian life, urging believers to accept their share in Christ's sufferings to experience the resulting fire of the Spirit.

Transcript

Reading: Mark 10:35-39; Matthew 26:27,28,39,42; Luke 22:20; John 18:11; 1 Corinthians 10:16; 11:26.

I came to cast fire upon the earth; and would that it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how am I straitened till it be accomplished!

(Luke 12:49,50; RSV; KJV).

With the passages that we have read fresh in our minds, I think that we are able to see that this last passage gathers them all into itself, and that what they all bring before us is the relationship between the cup of the Lord and the scattering of the fire in the earth. The Lord joined these two things together, and showed their relationship; indicating that the scattering of the fire in the earth was dependent upon the drinking of the cup. And in so doing, He only indicated and established a law, a law which history has demonstrated and proved - either negatively or positively - so deeply, so mightily. Where there has been no cup there has been no fire: where there has been the cup, there has always been the fire. It is the story of all the persecutions, all the sufferings of the people of God, which have issued in the progress of the

Gospel. It is something that we have to recognize very clearly and to accept quite definitely, that, right at the very heart of everything in the purpose of God, there is a cup; and only by the drinking of that cup is any kind of real spiritual progress, enlargement, possible. But, to put that in another way, the drinking of that cup will always issue in spiritual progress or increase or enlargement or deepening. It is always gain.

An Apparent Contradiction

Now here we have to pause to clear up the difficulty that is always present to confuse our minds in this matter, a fundamental conflict or confusion. On the one side, the Christian life ought to be characterized by joy, by peace, by rest, by hope, by life. On the other side, the same Christian life - without any contradiction to that - not only can be, but should be, characterized by suffering. The Lord Jesus mingled those two things in the moment when He took the cup. "He took the cup, and gave thanks" - He gave thanks. There should be, I say, no contradiction between these two things: joy and sorrow mingled; rest and peace and hope in the very presence of suffering, adversity and affliction.

If we do not clear up this matter in our minds we are going to get into difficulty. We are going to argue that the Christian life ought to be one continuous, unbroken song, joyfulness and exuberance, enthusiasm and lightheartedness, with no 'wrong' or sombre elements whatever. If you think like that, you have misread your New Testament! On the other hand, it is possible for us to regard the sufferings and the trials, the difficulties and adversities, as the marks of a kind of holy Christian life, which must exclude anything exuberant and joyful and glad. Some people nurse that kind of complex: they are afraid of joy; they are afraid even of spiritual laughter!

We have to recognize that we are not speaking about natural things now. There is that sublime, that wonderful, that Divine paradox - "sorrowful, yet alway rejoicing" (II Cor. 6:10), in the midst of afflictions and trials; "in manifold trials", Peter says, yet "rejoicing with joy unspeakable and full of glory" (I Pet 1:6-8). Somehow that has got to be recognized, or we shall be in trouble. The true apprehension of the Christian life is not that of frivolity and superficiality. It is something, as we have said, that has a cup right at the heart of it. The true apprehension of the cup is not something morbid, something morose; is not eternal sadness.

The peril of having a contradiction in the back of our minds in this matter is far more real than perhaps we recognize. Suppose we are meeting those who are having a very good time. They are in one of those phases of the Christian life where all is good - it is spring-time, or it is summer-time - there are no clouds in their sky, and they are inclined to 'down' the person who is having a bad time, perhaps passing through some temporary darkness or eclipse, and to feel that there is something wrong with their Christianity. On the other side, if it is we who are having the difficult time, let us be very, very patient with those who are not. Let us reconcile these things and see that they may only represent two aspects of one thing and not be contradictory at all.

The Cup Of The Lord

We all know that the cup of the Lord is central and basic to the life of the Church, and to our lives as Christians. It represents the very centre, the very focal point, both of the Church's life and of the believer's life. That is where the Word of God puts it, that is the place that the Scriptures give to it: it is the gathering centre of the people of God, the foundation of their life individually and collectively. But there is, so to speak, a division in the cup, which we must recognize immediately: that is, there is His side and there is ours. Let us get this cleared up before we go further.

There is the side of the Lord Jesus in that cup, with which we have nothing to do, so far as the drinking of it is concerned. It is uniquely His; it is His alone. It has to do, as we know, with our redemption. It has to do with our sin, it has to do with our judgment under the wrath of God; it has to do with the final outworking of sin and judgment, it has to do with death. And it has to do with the remission of sins: 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for the remission of sins' (Matt. 26:28; Luke 22:20). It has to do with our justification before God, our setting in the position of the Righteous One; it has to do with our very life - "the eternal life" (1 John 1:2). In all that, you and I have no part, except to receive it by faith. In drinking the cup we do not, of course, work out our redemption, or have any part or place in that great atoning, substitutionary, representative work for us: that is isolated to Him. No one can go that path with the Lord in His sufferings; that is His path. Our sufferings with the Lord are not vicarious as His were.

But then there is our path. We are brought in to share the cup, but our part is in another realm. It is that of sharing His reproach. It is because we are standing with Him for His rights which are being disputed and challenged and terribly fought against in this universe and in this world; it is because the Holy Spirit is doing something in us in relation to the character of the Lord Jesus. You know very well that, no sooner is there the slightest sign of any Christlikeness in an individual, than something seems to be provoked: and antagonism breaks out, which says, in effect, 'You must not be like Christ!' Unseen forces 'take knowledge that we have been with Jesus', and they counsel to put us to death.

It is something, you see, in the spiritual realm which hates this character of Jesus, because its presence is an exposure and a condemnation of sin. Evil hates good and cannot bear its presence - the very presence of good causes misery and suffering. And it is in that, just in being Christlike, that we are involved in His cup. It is because we have taken sides with Him against a great enemy, His age-long, sworn enemy, who, with all his vicious malignity, is determined that the last semblance and trace of this One shall be blotted out, if he can do it! You and I are intended to be present here in this world as a semblance of Christ, and we come under those evil counsels. That is our part. We are partners with Him in His position in this world, and that involves the drinking of His cup, the cup of suffering.

That is where we begin with the cup. It is there as our ground: the ground of our salvation, of our redemption, our justification, our life. We stand on that ground. We take the cup gratefully and with thanksgiving. But, in doing so, we commit ourselves to this side of the cup. We become involved in this side of His sufferings, and there is no evading, or avoiding, or getting away from it. This is something to be clearly recognized and definitely and deliberately accepted, right at the outset, and to be kept continually in mind.

The Cup Marks A Separation

But then there are other things about the cup. This cup sets forth and represents the absolute holiness and apartness of Christ, and of all that is related to Christ. You remember I Cor. 10: 'You cannot drink of the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons' (verse 21); you cannot bring these together. It betokens a failure to recognize the utter apartness of two whole realms. This cup speaks of that apartness, that holiness, that separateness of Christ and all that is Christ's. It marks the difference, the fundamental and radical difference, between the Christian and everyone else.

That is the whole argument of the first letter to the Corinthians. Throughout that letter we have an unlawful bringing together of things, focused in that unlawful bringing together at the Lord's Table. It is a terrible letter, which really does centre in this matter of the cup. What the Apostle is doing is seeking to point out

that there is a discrimination that must be exercised, a difference that must be discerned. It is a question, not of degrees of Christian life, but of the very basis and nature of the Christian life - that a Christian is this, and not that. These things are separated by the cup. The cup is something very holy, something very separate, something very different; and if you and I drink the cup, we are supposed to be different from everyone else, that is, from everyone who is not the Lord's. There is a character required by this cup, a character that is different; there is a life that is different, there is a person that is different. The cup declares that. It challenges everything that does not belong to Christ: it stands against that, because that is against the cup. This is a holy thing.

No wonder the Apostle was so strong on this matter - and no wonder that distressing and tragic things were happening in Corinth! "For this cause many among you are weak and sickly, and not a few sleep" (verse 30) - through not discriminating at the Lord's Table. It is searching.

But note again, this cup deals with and removes all the ground of Satan. Satan's ground, of course, is the ground of nature: your nature and mine - what we are in ourselves. That is the playground of Satan. The cup deals with that and takes Satan's ground from him; it puts him out. That is why Judas had to go: the cup drove him out. The very significance of the cup meant that he was not of it: he was of another; he must go. He is Satan's ground in the holy circle, and he must be eliminated.

The Unifying Work Of The Cup

But then again, the cup is the great unifying factor for the Lord's own. It is in the first place the great means of unification with Himself, for it is our common participation with Him. The cup links us with Him. It not only distinguishes us as His, as different, but it declares a relationship which is - to use the symbolism - most truly a blood-relationship. In the second place, it establishes a relationship of that kind between all who are joined to the Lord. The cup is that which unifies His own.

These may sound simple things, but they are profoundly challenging. Let us look again at this first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 10, verse 16: "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a communion of (eg., a participation in) the blood of Christ?" Now look just over the next chapter (of course it is a continuous narrative in the original letter). We come to this: "First of all, when ye come together in the church" (or: "in assembly"), "I hear that divisions exist among you; and I partly believe it" (11:18). You see the contradiction? It is not just that we participate with Christ, but together we are on common ground in our participation: it is collective, it is corporate - a common participation, a together participation, a one participation. It is the Church. 'Now when you come together as the Church, there are divisions among you' - that is a contradiction, it is a violation of the very meaning of that cup.

You know, when you go back to the beginning of that letter the Apostle has much more to say about this matter of divisions. He so early opens up the matter of divisions (1:10-13). 'There are contentions among you: one says, I am of Paul' (you can put what name you like there), 'and I am of Apollos, and I am of Cephas.' It represents parties, does it not? Parties in the Church. The point is this, that the Apostle is steadily working his way towards the matter of the Table, and he makes that the climax. He is saying, in effect: 'You cannot have the Table in reality while it is like that - the reality of the Table is impossible - the reality of it - while it is like that! It is a contradiction, it is a denial, it is a mockery; it is the fundamental subverting of the very meaning of the cup, if it is like that. You cannot have it in reality - but you can have it to your own undoing and judgment.'

You see, this cup, the cup of the Lord, above all things speaks of love - the love of the Father, the love of the Son, the love of the Spirit, and the mutual love of believers.

The Cup Needed For The Fire

"I have a baptism to be baptized with..." "Are ye able to drink the cup that I drink? or to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" (Mark 10:33). What the Lord was really saying, in other words, was this: 'I have a cup to drink; and, until I have drunk it, that very purpose for which I have come is in suspense. I have come to scatter fire into the earth.' The two things go together.

We shall perhaps see later the fire scattered. You see, we are all very interested in the scattering of the fire - put that how you will: if you like, the progress of the Gospel, the extension of the Kingdom, the salvation of souls, the expansion of testimony. It is all the same thing; it is the scattering of the fire. The earth has got to feel the touch of something from Christ - to register something burning, something living, something consuming, something against which it cannot stand. 'I am come to scatter fire in the earth.'

But note - that is all dependent upon the cup, from first to last, and upon all that the cup implies. You notice that II Corinthians entirely rests upon those two things. "For as the sufferings of Christ abound unto us..." (1:5): there is the cup. "Therefore seeing we have this ministry..." (4:1): the ministry rests upon the cup. This second letter is, as you know, the letter of the ministry, but notice that it begins with the sufferings of Christ abounding unto us. The scattering of the fire, the fulfilment of the ministry, the service of the Lord, the expansion of the Gospel - however we may put it - rests upon the cup: and not merely upon the cup as for our salvation, but the cup in all those other aspects of a holy life, of an inward separateness, of something apart for the Lord.

And it rests upon, not only our oneness with Him, but our oneness in Him. Souls will not be saved while there is disruption in the instrument; souls will not be saved while there are divisions amongst those who are seeking their salvation. The work will not grow and expand and enlarge if Satan is allowed a place to divide the people of God. Christ Himself has pointed to the established law; we cannot get away from it. We may try, make our efforts, do all that we can, but they are just not getting there. What is the matter? The matter is, that there is sin somewhere, or there is division somewhere. There is some circling around people, or making parties; and we are simply destroying our own work if it is like that.

You see, this is corporate - it is the Church that the Apostle is talking about and writing to. He is speaking about the Church again and again in these Corinthian letters. 'When you come together as the assembly, as the Church...' This fellowship in the cup, for the scattering of the fire, is a corporate matter.

We need to ask ourselves: Have we a right to have the table, to have the cup? Have we the ground for this? We have got to get our basis, our foundation right, before we can have anything else. It would be lovely to go on with the scattering of the fire, to see the thing working out on the side of the glory and the power. Yes, we would like to be caught up in that; but we have got to get our basis right, and the basis is the cup.

There is no doubt that the ruin of the Church's testimony and ministry is so often resultant from either or both of these two things: either a contradiction to the cup right in its midst, or else an avoidance of the cup - trying not to face the cup and accept the involvement in the sufferings. We will have a good time, and make everything like that; but the cup - no. The ruination of testimony and ministry comes as much by avoiding the cup as by contradicting it. But the cup is there: you cannot move it. It is established in all its

meaning; it has to be taken.

I think those two disciples were a little frivolous. How profoundly and terribly right the Lord was when He said: 'You know not what you ask.' 'We are able,' they said 'Very well, you shall.' The first one of those was the prototype martyr of the New Testament. We shall think about him perhaps later. He drank the cup. Herod killed James with the sword. 'You shall... you shall...' This is something very real. Nevertheless, we shall see that it worked out for the furtherance of the Gospel.

If our attitude to the cup is right, the other will follow. It will follow quite naturally, quite spontaneously. The cup leads to the scattered fire; the scattered fire waits for the cup. 'He took the cup and gave it to them and said...Take... drink... drink ye all of it.'

Let us ask the Lord just how this word applies, where it applies, what it means. May He give us grace to receive it!

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