

The Retrospective Feature

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of remembering Jesus Christ and living an incorruptible life in the face of crises and turning points.

Topics: "Remembering Christ", "Turning Points in Faith"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the significance of turning points in the Christian journey, using the Tabernacle's corners as a metaphor for God's provision during critical moments. He highlights the importance of remembering Jesus Christ during crises, as Paul instructs Timothy to look back to the foundation of Christianity and the embodiment of godliness in Christ. Sparks asserts that Christ's incorruptible life empowers believers to navigate moral corruption and spiritual challenges, reinforcing the need for spiritual knowledge and influence over worldly wisdom. The sermon calls for a renewed focus on Christ to maintain spiritual integrity and strength in the face of adversity.

Transcript

I want at this point to return for a few moments to the matter of the boards of the Tabernacle, referred to in our first chapter, when we saw God's provision for reinforcing the corners, the turning-points, with an extra board. Turning-points or angles are always danger spots, and the Lord has always made special provision for such points in the course of His people's history. It is something to be taken up, if ever you are disposed to do so, in the Bible, and you will see how true it is. I have only to remind you, by way of instance, of the first chapter of the book of Joshua. You could not have any chapter in the Bible which represents a greater reinforcement of everything, taking up the past to carry it on to the future. That was a big turning-point, from the wilderness into the Land, and it certainly needed strength to turn that corner and negotiate that crisis safely.

In using again this illustration of the Tabernacle, the point that I want afresh to indicate is this: that the corners of the Tabernacle may be taken as setting forth an arrival at a certain point. That point had, so to speak, a past. Things had moved up to that point, and from that point there was a future, a new phase, a new course in the road. And the reinforcement at the corner was a taking up of what had been up to that point, and saying, 'Now, we must safeguard that, we must conserve that, we must ratify that; we must be quite sure that that does not suffer loss or is allowed any weakness, in order that everything that is yet to be shall take up those values and continue them in strength.' For God does not intend a fundamental change in things, a change in character, a change of nature, at any point: He just means that all that He

has done and given shall be carried on safely and in strength up to and through the next phase.

Now, when we come to these letters of Paul to Timothy, we have to recognise that they are the last writings of the Apostle - a fact which in itself represents a corner being turned, one phase closing and another phase coming. It was like that; things changed when Paul went. And it was because Paul himself was conscious of this that he wrote to Timothy as he did. These letters are therefore by way of reinforcing the things of God, taking up what has been in the past and confirming and consolidating for the future. That is what God meant by these letters. And so we find in them first of all what we may call a retrospective feature, a look-back to the past. Timothy is taken back, right back to the beginning: to the beginning of Christianity, and to the beginning of his own work and ministry.

"Remember Jesus Christ"

Let us consider the retrospect as to the beginning of Christianity, which is Christ. Paul makes here a very strong and a very comprehensive throw-back to Christ, in two passages - one a recall, the other a very inclusive statement. The first comes in the second letter, chapter two, verse eight: "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, of the seed of David, according to my gospel". "Remember Jesus Christ". We have come to a crisis, we have come to a turn, we have come to a point where things are changing. What is our safeguard at this point? "Remember Jesus Christ". It is only a way of saying: 'Bring HIM into view again.' That is always God's method at any crisis - bring Jesus Christ into view again. Whether it be a crisis in a church, or a personal crisis in our own spiritual lives - "Remember Jesus Christ". How often the Apostle resorted to that method of dealing with difficult situations! At Philippi, for instance, where there was some trouble, some disagreement, some lack of singlemindedness, Paul resorted to this method: "Have this mind in you, which was... in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5).

I will not stay to gather up all the material on this point. Let me just remind you of the big turning-point which we find at the beginning of the book of the Revelation. What a turning-point in the Church's history was there! Remember that the beginning of that book is a representation of Jesus Christ, comprehensively and matchlessly. "Remember Jesus Christ". It is always like that. Suppose you are having a bad time - so bad that it is creating a real crisis for you. "Remember Jesus Christ". It is the greatest help in every such time. Is there some trouble between you and another Christian? "Remember Jesus Christ". Is there trouble in the assembly? "Remember Jesus Christ". The greatest corrective is to REMEMBER JESUS CHRIST.

Christ the Embodiment of Godliness

But here is this other great statement, in the first letter, chapter three, verse sixteen: "And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness" (or 'God-likeness'); "He who was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached among the nations, believed on in the world, received up in glory." That is Christianity in a nutshell, a comprehensive and inclusive representation of everything upon which Christianity rests. There are other fragmentary retrospective features in these letters, but that is enough. The first great throw-back of the Apostle at this point of crisis and danger is to Christ, back to Christ; for Christ is ever the standard, not only backward but forward. At any given point where there are dangers, where changes are threatened, we must refer back to Christ, and from that point we have to carry on what has been of Christ from the beginning.

Here it says that Christ is the embodiment of godliness, or Godlikeness. It is a mystery: 'great is the mystery of God-likeness'. The Greek word (eusebeia) combines the thoughts of worship, devotion, and

piety. Here Christ is said to be the inclusive, comprehensive embodiment of all this - God's likeness indeed. Now that has a very practical application in this letter, for the real purpose of God in the Church is God-likeness, or conformity to the likeness of God's Son. It is the great dominating purpose and objective of God in our very lives as His people. How shall we explain or define godliness? It is Christ - the reproduction of Christ, the expression of Christ. It is the bringing of Christ into the present situation. He is the embodiment of godliness.

Incorruptible Life in Christ

Just consider for a moment who Christ is. I am sure that many of us Christians have not really understood Christ - and we do need to understand Him. You see, Christ was more than one man among many, albeit better than the rest, a real improvement on all other men. You might find somewhere a man of very high moral character, of unimpeachable integrity, and you might say, 'A splendid specimen of moral uprightness and goodness - and Jesus goes one better.' No, He is not just one better than the best. He is not one man amongst many, although better than all.

Let me put it another way. The goodness of Jesus was Divine goodness, and not human goodness. It was by Him, Jesus, that life and incorruption were brought to light, through the Gospel (2 Tim. 1:10). The very best specimen of mankind, morally, that you can find is still corruptible: he can still be corrupted - he has the seeds of corruption in his nature. But not so Jesus Christ. There is no corruption, there are no seeds of corruption, in Him. It is incorruptible life that has come with Him. And the life that He gives to the child of God is incorruptible life. That is not ourselves, what we are; it is a distinct gift which, while being in us, is apart from us. And mark you, that is the key to our spiritual survival, in spite of a world of corruption, and a nature of corruption. He has given to us His own incorruptible life. Life and incorruption have been brought to light through the Gospel.

Let me say to young Christians: Be very wary of an insidious deception - partly through unfortunate mistranslations of the Scripture, but more through common language and phraseology about immortality, the 'immortality, of the soul'. The Bible does not teach it! The Bible word, where the translators of the Authorised Version have put 'immortality', is really 'incorruption' (see R.V.) - and incorruption is quite a different thing from what men mean by the immortality of the soul. They lump all men together in this and by their word 'immortality' lift us on to a level to which we do not all belong, and to which we can never come naturally. Incorruption is the TRUE immortality.

But immortality is thought of as continuity of existence, and we will allow that for the soul; but there is a very great difference between continuity of existence and incorruption, incorruptible life. Eternal life is a different thing altogether from just continuity of life. It is a KIND of life, a CHARACTER of life. It is the life which we have IN CHRIST. You see, this goes to the root of the whole matter. We have got to get right back to Jesus Christ. Christ is different from all other men in the essential nature which is in Him; and, when He gives us His own life, we as Christians are different essentially, with the biggest difference possible, from all other creations - because this is an eternal matter.

The Counter to Corruption

Now Paul sees corruption coming into the Church. Moral laxity, and all sorts of things which belong to this fallen creation, to this evil world, were creeping into the Church in Paul's day; corruption was manifesting itself in the life of God's people. What is going to be done about it? "Remember Jesus Christ"! For just consider: you and I have another life, through Christ, and we have got to live on the basis of that life, and

to remember that it is not necessary for us to be corrupted. We have in us a life, the mighty life of God, which in Christ has overcome death and corruption, for man. "Remember Jesus Christ"! Remember that, in Jesus Christ, there is that which went through all corruption untainted, and it is still possible - and blessed be God, it has been proved actual again and again - for a child of God to walk in white raiment in the midst of Sodom and Gomorrah. Where Satan's very seat is you may find saints walking in purity. It is the marvellous miracle of the Christian life that we can be subjected to all the filth and all the horror, all the corruption and pollution of this world around us, and still go on, unstained, untainted.

So, when corruption is assailing, is seeping in, remember: your life is a different life from that. That is not your life, that is not for you; that is not your way, that is not the way of Christ. THIS life is not one imposed upon you by law - it is something in you by power. Thank God for this miracle. A young man or young woman, without a great deal of knowledge, instruction, or teaching, or experience, has to go out into this world, and, without another Christian anywhere near, be surrounded by people of the lowest type, and that young man or woman can be kept by the power of God unpolluted. This incorruptible life is very practical. Jesus is different. He is not just better than the rest; He is different, basically different from the rest. That is the truth about Jesus, and that is the truth about the child of God: not only a bit better than other people, but different. The life-principle is different. Is that important? Surely it is, if we are to negotiate this course safely to the end.

"Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments" (Rev. 3:4, A.V.). That is a testimony - "even in Sardis". And it is a throw-back to chapter one of Revelation, where Jesus is seen clothed with a robe down to His feet - the white robe of incorruption. "I am... the Living one; and I became dead, and behold, I am alive unto the ages of the ages" (Rev. 1:17,18, R.V, mg.). So He says, as clothed in this white garment down to the feet. What does it mean? Surely this: that He has been thrown in His death into the cesspool of human iniquity for us - "He was made sin for us, he who knew no sin" - and has come out undefiled, triumphant, in a white robe. And "thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments" - what is that? It is just His victory in the lives of these people in Sardis, where things were morally very, very black indeed. "Remember Jesus Christ".

Young man, if you are shortly going to get your call-up into the Forces, well, you are going into it. You may not find another Christian near to help you. You may be out of touch with all means of grace outwardly; it may mean a crisis for your spiritual life. Many have lost out at that turning-point. "Remember Jesus Christ". Remember - Christ in you is there as the power of an incorruptible life. It is possible for you to go through and come out triumphant because of Jesus Christ. And what is true in that connection is true in all others. You see the difference between Jesus Christ and all other men, even the best. His goodness was a different goodness.

Christ's Knowledge Spiritual, Not Academic

Take a move round to another angle from which to look at Him- His KNOWLEDGE. Now, no one will question or dispute that Jesus had a very wide knowledge, was tremendously well informed, was very rich in His understanding. Everybody in His day had both to recognise and to acknowledge it. Even His critics and enemies raised the question: 'Whence hath this man this knowledge?' He spoke as one having authority, and not as the very knowledgeable men, the Scribes; there was something extra here. But His knowledge was not the knowledge of the schools. He never went to college or to university. He had to work at home, hard and long, for that pittance to keep mother and brothers in food and raiment. He was not able to earn in order to put aside a nest-egg against a rainy day - if that is not mixing metaphors! - for,

when it came to going out on His life's work, He could not afford a lodging, He had nowhere to lay His head. He had to work a miracle to pay His taxes.

No wonder they asked: "How knoweth this man letters, having never learned?" (John 7:15). How does He get this knowledge - knowledge which has extended and exhausted all the brains ever since His day? And they are still at it. Look at all the libraries that have been written on Him and His sayings! - and still we come back and wonder what He meant when He said this and that; we still have not fathomed it. So everybody will acknowledge that He had a very, very large knowledge: but whence was it? We say again: It was not the knowledge of the schools; it was something other and something different and something else. Well, we Christians have the answer; we know. But, mark you, that difference is THE difference between Christ and all others - the 'knowledgeable' people; and the difference between every simplest child of God and the wisest amongst men.

"Remember Jesus Christ". There is a source and a kind of knowledge, by which we can be got through, which all this world's princes of knowledge do not possess. It is a KIND of knowledge. I want to enlarge upon that later, but I am making the statement here. Unless we have this kind of knowledge, this spiritual understanding, this spiritual intelligence - this intelligence which is different, which is other, this mind which is the mind of Christ - we are not going to negotiate these critical corners in Christian life and experience and in the work of God. We need understanding more than the best understanding in this world to get round these crises. How are we going to negotiate this situation? It may be that you are facing such things. You are exercised; you are wondering - How are we going to get round this, how are we going to get through this? Well, there is a kind of knowledge, a kind of understanding, a kind of spiritual intelligence, available to the child of God, that will get us through. That is very true in experience and in history. If we had not known the Lord at certain times, where should we have been? Our knowledge of the Lord saved us. And many times our knowledge of spiritual principles has saved, our knowledge of how God does things has been a tremendous standby in times of need.

Yes, remember Jesus Christ. He had a knowledge which was more than all the knowledge of this world, and different: it was that which He had by the Spirit. These letters are themselves proof positive of this. Here is the new situation arising, and the big question is, How is the Church going to get through this crisis without disaster, without calamity? Well, the letters are just full of a knowledge, are they not, which meets the need: it is the knowledge of Christ. Do you know that Christ is mentioned twelve times in each of these letters? They are very brief letters; you can read them through in a few minutes, both of them; and Christ is referred to 24 times. When you get any word dominant like that, it surely gives a clue to what it is all about. Paul here is coming back with Christ: it is CHRIST, it is CHRIST - He is the One upon whom we should draw.

Christ's Influence Spiritual, Not Psychic

So much, then, for the matter of His knowledge. A word about His INFLUENCE. It is indisputable that He had an immense influence. His presence always made itself felt. He could not be anywhere without it being known that He was there. Without any need for Him to speak, things began to come out; His presence was a powerful presence. That does not need proving or enlarging upon. This mysterious influence and impact - what was it? Some people, of course, have tried to explain it psychologically: that He had a powerful psychic effect upon people. They have summed it all up in the phrase, 'a tremendously strong personality'. Well, they may think that if they like, but that is not the answer. His influence, His impact, was something other than the psychic, something other than just a strong personality. It was

essentially SPIRITUAL. Evil spirits recognised His presence - demons cried out in His presence. This is not psychic; these are actual entities and intelligences. It is a registration upon the spiritual world.

Influence is not just a matter of having a strong personality, or being able to make a strong psychic registration wherever you are. That is a false conception of influence. So far as men and this world are concerned, you may be without the training of the schools and all the values of a rich education; you may have had nothing in your birth and inheritance and upbringing to make you an important person or a strong character: and yet you may exercise a very great influence, you may count for something more than all that. It is true again - and here is the miracle of it all - that "God hath chosen the weak things... and the things that are not", that He may destroy, may nullify, may bring down the things that are wise, and the things that are strong, and the things that are. It is so often a, humanly speaking, very insignificant little person who is counting mightily for God. There is a great difference between natural influence and spiritual influence.

In the churches in the book of the Revelation, we find that the testimony had lost its power and its influence in the world; and so it is today, very largely. What is the remedy? It is, as we have sought to indicate, the recovery and the reinforcement of spirituality. Spirituality is a tremendous power. Really spiritual people, be they what they may from this world's standpoint, are the people that count; they are the people of influence, and they are the people that are needed in this world. God needs spiritual men and women for the preserving and carrying on of His testimony. He needs reinforced spirituality. "Remember Jesus Christ". You can only account for Him - in His knowledge, in His influence, as in every other way - by the anointing of the Spirit. "God anointed [Jesus of Nazareth]... who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil; for God was with him" (Acts 10:38). It was the anointing. And we have the anointing - the same anointing. And so His AUTHORITY, to use the word of Scriptures, was not that of personality; it was SPIRITUAL authority. How we need that! His judgment of things, His insight, His power of discrimination, was not just human sagacity, not just a high level of human shrewdness; it was spiritual wisdom. This is what Paul argued out so thoroughly in his first letter to the Corinthians.

The point is this: Jesus Christ, Jesus the Anointed (for that is the meaning of "Christ"), is different, and superior. What was true of Him then is true today. In the way that I have indicated - wisdom, understanding, power, judgment, and everything else - He needs to be brought right into every spiritual crisis. "Remember Jesus Christ". It is all by the anointing. If we have any sense whatever of the real need today in the Church, amongst God's people - yes, and in ourselves - because of things as they are, as they have become, or as they are threatened, do not our hearts beat with Paul's in all this? We can take up Paul's concern. You see, this man just poured out his heart in these letters. There is something of a yearning, if not of a breaking heart, in the way in which Paul here says: "O Timothy" - "O Timothy, guard the deposit". That cry, that ejaculation, that bursting forth of his heart which is found through the letters, not just in that language, but in other forms, reveals Paul's tremendous concern about this matter of spiritual life, the reinforcing of spirituality.

We ought to share that concern with Paul today; we ought to feel like that. Are you concerned about spiritual things? Are you concerned about the way that, speaking generally, things have taken - the declension, the departure, the diversion, the dropping down, the differences, that have come about since the beginning? Are you concerned? Well, remember that it must be not just a sighing and groaning over it, but an intelligent concern, in the full and clear realisation of what the solution is - the reinforcement of spirituality in ourselves and in the Lord's people. May the Lord give us the concern of His servant in this matter!

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