

The Significance of the Death of Christ

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon explores the profound significance of Christ's death, emphasizing the themes of sin, independence from God, and the dual aspects of the Cross as both judgment and acceptance.

Scripture: Genesis 3:1, Isaiah 53:5, Ezekiel 28:13, John 8:44, Romans 7:19, Romans 10:3, 2 Corinthians 5:21, Philippians 2:8, 1 Peter 1:18-19, 1 John 4:20

Topics: "The Cross", "Independence from God"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the profound significance of Christ's death, illustrating how it addresses the essence of sin, which is independence from God. He explains that this independence leads to enmity with God, creating distance and impotence in our spiritual lives. The sermon highlights the dual aspects of the Cross: the judgment of sin and the acceptance of Christ as the perfect sacrifice, which bridges the gap between humanity and God. Sparks urges believers to recognize the cost of salvation and the necessity of surrendering their independence to fully embrace the power of the Cross. Ultimately, he calls for a deep reverence and gratitude for the price paid for redemption.

Transcript

"He humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death, yea, the death of the cross" (Phil. 2:8).

So far we have been occupied with that side and aspect of the Cross of the Lord Jesus that has to do with sin, and we have seen that sin is the basis and nature and power of the kingdom of darkness, the kingdom of Satan.

We come now to one further inclusive word on the matter of the nature of sin before we say a word about its result, and then we are brought immediately to the Cross of the Lord Jesus.

The Essence of Sin - Independence of God

What does this whole matter of sin amount to? Can we put it into a word? I think we can, and that word is independence - independence of God. Yes, the kingdom of Satan is really built upon independence. He himself decided to take a course of independence. Before he became Satan he was Lucifer, the covering cherub. The Scripture says "thou wast created" (Eze. 28:13), and a created being must be less than, and dependent upon, the Creator; but this one decided to be independent of Him and to proceed to have everything centred in himself and not in God, to be his own lord, to be god himself and to refer and defer to

no one - absolute independence; and it was that which he introduced into the race by Adam. "Hath God said...? God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:1,5). The inference of his words was this 'Why not have your eyes opened? Why always have to refer to God? Why not be as God?' To that suggestion man fell. He used the greatest gift that God has ever given to created beings - the power of choice, will - he used his great trust, freewill, and chose independence.

There are many ways in which this independence works out. It works out along the line of self-sufficiency, and we see that history right up to date is only the story of independence, self-sufficiency, in one form or another. At different times or in different sections of the race this independence expresses itself variously. Sometimes, and in some places, it takes the form of definite and positive Godlessness, where God is deliberately and openly and unashamedly thrown over, repudiated, denied. That sort of thing covers a very large section of this earth today and is powerfully at work - utter and positive and deliberate Godlessness, giving Him no place. Sometimes and in other places this independence has been, and is, expressed in a system of ideas of human greatness. The word 'ideology' has sprung so much into our vocabulary. It is simply a system or scheme of ideas about human greatness - how great man is and how inherently good he is; you have only to give him scope and facility and suitable conditions, and you see what a wonderful creature he is, both as to his ability, his potentialities, and his inherent goodness. It is only another form of independence of God, of man's blindness; for man's blindness is most of all seen in his inability to recognise his own need.

Or again, the same thing shows itself in religious systems, systems of works, salvation by works. This may be positive or it may be negative, but it is the same thing. The positive form is seen in Judaism and in Romanism and in other systems - the religion of salvation by works. Paul summed it up very well, speaking so sadly about his brethren after the flesh - "Being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God" (Rom. 10:3). That is the point. They have not done that thing which is just the opposite of independence - submission to the righteousness of God. That whole system, however it comes out, is simply the system of 'what a good boy am I!' 'I do this and that, I don't do this and that; see how good I am!' - seeking to establish their own righteousness.

But this Satanic thing is behind it all, and the Lord Jesus uncovered it. He said to these very people who were making broad their phylacteries, making long prayers in the market places, parading themselves like peacocks with their tails spread religiously - "Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father it is your will to do" (John 8:44). Pretty scathing for religion, is it not?

Or it may be negative. It may be the poor ascetic, cringing and begging, with his miserable face and his poor emaciated form, and he is only saying in another way, 'What a good boy am I! I am very religious, I do not do the things that all you other people do. I am a man of prayer, of abstinence.' It is the same thing. He counts on getting to heaven that way - independence of God.

Or again, it may come in the most subtle form of all - spiritual pride amongst the real children of God. There is no worse pride than spiritual pride. I think there is nothing more abominable to the Lord, because it exists just where much better knowledge ought to exist; it exists right in the realm of grace. If you think it is too strong a thing to say, remember, we are poor little pygmies compared with such a man as the Apostle Paul: we cannot match up to him as to spiritual stature, as to his knowledge of God: and even such a spiritual giant as he will say, "That I should not be exalted overmuch, there was given to me a thorn

in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me" (2 Cor. 12:7). It is there, it is always there, it is always present - some form of self-congratulation; and the peril is greatest, always greatest, where blessing is the greatest. Oh, the infinite peril running side by side with the blessing of God! How very difficult it is for the Lord to trust us with blessing! How very difficult it is for Him to use us! How pleased we feel! Yes, it is in the highest of all realms that Satan appears - amongst the sons of God (Job 1:6). Yes, in heaven. I cannot understand that literally, but I can understand it spiritually - that in heaven Satan appears amongst the sons of God; and Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light when the Lord is using and blessing His people. 'This is great! We are becoming somebody!' - and there it is amongst the sons of God in heaven. Independence - trying to get us unwatchfully, imperceptibly, unconsciously, unintentionally, to presume, because the Lord has done something. How terrible this sin is! You can never track it down and finally lay it to rest.

Now you see, power is based upon authority, and, as we have said before, like can never cast out like, Satan can never cast out Satan, the flesh cannot cast out the flesh. "If a house be divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand" (Mark 3:25). Authority rests upon right, and right is moral. Hence, we have got to know what the kingdom of God rests upon, and there has to be a very wide cleavage between the two kingdoms.

The Result of Independence

(a) Enmity Against God

What is the effect, the result, of all this which we have summed up in this word independence? It is firstly, enmity, so far as our relationship with God is concerned. All that is the sum and the essence of enmity with God, and there is enmity on God's part toward it. Any form of independence on our part where the Lord is concerned is a positive factor of warfare with God. Perhaps that needs a word adding to it, because probably no one here will deliberately take a line independent of the Lord. If it came to the immediate issue of the Lord and you, you would not do it. But there is a good deal of independence about us that does so often seek to evade the Lord. The independence may show itself in various directions. The Lord therefore has constituted His house in such a way that the test of our willingness to rely upon the Lord, to trust Him, to commit our way unto Him, is found in relationships, in matters of the House. We cannot say that we trust the Lord, that we commit everything to Him, that we depend upon Him, and then perhaps take an independent course where another child of God is concerned. That is a contradiction. "If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar" (1 John 4:20). The proof of your love for God is your relationship to your brother. So in this matter of independence, it is tested out in many practical ways in the Christian relationships of the house of God. I speak of 'the house of God' as a spiritual thing - the relatedness of all believers. That by the way.

Now this all comes to be something positively set against God - enmity. If this is Satan's nature, then Satan is enmity against God. That is in us. There is the innate enmity against God in us. We have only got to be put to the test in a suitable situation and it comes out. I have only to ask you, have you never in your life been put into a situation in which you have found it difficult to yield to the Lord? Have you always, in all circumstances, at all times, in all conditions, in every trial and difficulty, found it perfectly easy to say, Yes, to the Lord? Have you? But here we are, we are put to the test in numerous practical ways as to whether, after all, there is not something in us that has got to be overcome in this matter of natural enmity against God.

(b) Distance from God

And the enmity, of course, creates distance. That is how it was at the beginning. Immediately the enmity came into Adam, God withdrew, distance was created. It was distance of nature, not only distance of Persons. God had to put man apart from Himself, and man knows perfectly well by nature that he is at a distance from God. One of the characteristics of the unregenerate man is that he feels that God is such a long way off. Where is God? - somewhere out on the rim of the universe. God is far away. One of the first blessed characteristics of a born-again soul is a sense that God is near; the gap is closed up; God is at hand.

(c) Impotence

And sin brings impotence, helplessness. It is a fact, whether we realise it or not, which is brought out very clearly and strongly immediately the question of real salvation arises. Even though you may be one who has most thoroughly stood for salvation by works, as did Saul of Tarsus, when it comes to the real matter of the relatedness of salvation to your inner life, you have to say, "The good which I would I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I practise... Wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me out of the body of this death?" (Rom. 7:19,24). Impotence, helplessness - that is the result of sin.

The Issue of Independence - Death

That leads us at once to what that amounts to, what that is. It is death. What is death? We know it is not cessation of being. It is the change of the nature of our being, change in our relationships in being. Here death is the awful sense that God is against you - enmity working itself out in fear and dread of God; your full consciousness awakened to the wrath of God. That is the realm of enmity; that is death. Distance? - ah, yes; far, far away, far out of reach, out of call. You cannot get Him, you cannot find Him. You cry, but no response; He is far away. That is death, when your consciousness is fully alive to it. Impotence? - no hope, no resource, no recourse, helpless, abandoned; that is death. That is the result of sin.

We come to the Cross. Do you understand that aspect of the Cross of our Lord Jesus? There are two aspects to the Cross. We have said that Christianity is a system of paradoxes or contradictions. At one time you will be reading about the Cross as the most awful thing - the place of the wrath of God, the darkness, the terror. At another time you read about the Cross as that in which the Lord Jesus offered Himself without spot to God - God fully satisfied: all the heart longings and cravings of the very nature of God are answered to fully. That is the other side of the Cross. Those two things meet in the Cross of Calvary, and you find that God has in all time given pictures of those two sides.

Types of Sin

(a) Leprosy

You turn to the book of Leviticus where the whole question of relationship is being threshed out. In the fourteenth chapter you have the matter of leprosy and the cleansing of the leper. Two birds are called for for the cleansing of the leper and the cleansing of his house. One bird is killed, its neck is wrung, its blood is shed. It is killed as by an act of anger, of destruction. The other bird is sprinkled with its blood and let go. It lives - touched with that blood, but it lives. That is the cleansing of the leper from his leprosy - a picture of sin dealt with. Leprosy is the Bible's worst picture of sin; leprosy, the thing which is hateful, in which are all the elements of enmity. And leprosy separates; it is so against everything that is lovely and beautiful.

There is an element in it of hostility to all that is good. The enmity leads to separation, and the poor leper has to depart. Lest anybody should come near, he cries with his hollow cry, Unclean! Unclean! He is put aside. And what can a leper do? Of course, today we have remedies, we are able to rescue the leper. But then leprosy was regarded as a hopeless and a helpless thing.

How is the leper cleansed? Well, there are two sides to his cleansing. Typically, he must bear judgment and be destroyed from the presence of the Lord, but, being sprinkled with the blood, he may also live. It is the same person, not two halves. On the one hand, judged, condemned and destroyed from before God; on the other hand saved, the blood sprinkled. Judgment has passed, destruction has been carried out, but somehow 'from the ground there blossoms red, life that shall endless be.' The leper is saved.

(b) The Scapegoat

You pass to Leviticus 16, and you have the ritual of the great day of Atonement, and the central things are two goats. The priest brings the two goats and places them before the Lord. Then lots are cast upon the two goats, one for the Lord, one for the Scapegoat or "Azazel" - meaning for abandonment, dismissal. The latter goat is for judgment, all the sins of Israel being put upon it. It is driven out of the camp, away into the desolation of the wilderness, never to come back again, to be lost forever, never again to be looked upon. I have often thought one of the most pathetic pictures in the whole Bible is that poor goat.

But the other goat - the lot has fallen upon him for God, and he is offered to God.

Now in the Bible and in the Hebrew language, there are two words which are of particular interest in this connection - one, holiness; the other, consecration. Holiness means 'set apart for God.' Consecration means 'devoted.' I do not know why, but in the Authorized Version the translators have strangely translated that word 'devoted' as 'accursed.' You remember, Achan took the accursed thing (Joshua 7:10-26). It is the devoted thing. Saul was commanded 'to devote' Amalek to the sword - man, woman, child, and beast. (1 Sam. 15:3 R.V.M.). Here are two sides of one thing. One, separated unto the Lord as holy unto the Lord; the other, devoted. Ah, but what does devotion mean? It may mean devoted to judgment, devoted to destruction. Achan found that. He, his family, his tent, all that he had, was destroyed. He was devoted, consecrated. You have a new idea of consecration now, have you not? Consecrated; devoted to destruction from the presence of the Lord. That was the goat of dismissal. Devoted to be shut out for ever, never again to come back into the company of what is God's.

The Significance of the Cross

(a) Christ Made Sin for Us

There is the Cross. Looking now on that dark side of the Cross, what happened on that side? Is it too terrible a thing to say that the Son of man took the place of Satan? He took the place of that very nature which had come from Satan into the race, the place of the outpouring of God's wrath because of enmity. He was made sin in our stead (2 Cor. 5:21). What is sin? We find in this dealing with the goats on the day of Atonement, the words are these - "Aaron shall... confess over him all the the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions, even all their sins" (Lev. 16:21). All their sins; their transgressions (their rebellions) and their iniquities (their perversity). That is put on the goat of destruction - rebellion and perversity. Does this not give some new tremendous meaning to that word "obedient unto death"? Why did the Lord Jesus sweat as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground - what the Apostle speaks of as resisting unto blood, striving against sin (Heb. 12:4)? He had been called upon by the Father

to become rebellion, perversity, to take the place of iniquity and transgression, and to have all that laid upon Him. "He was wounded for our transgressions (rebellion), he was bruised for our iniquities (perversity)" (Isa. 53:5). Why did He say "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up" (John 3:14)? Why was it a serpent that was set up? You see the nature that He was asked to accept at that moment. Know Him in the truth of His being, know Him as He really was, know how for three and a half long, weary, bitter years He fought against all that evil, refusing everything that belonged to it - refusing pride, refusing the temptation of the devil to act independently of God, to accept a kingdom independently of God - how He had fought all the way through against that which Satan tried to put upon Him - and at the end to be asked by the Father to accept it for our sake! Can we enter into it? We cannot.

"He became obedient." Oh, what obedience meant in His case! Obedient to God Who said, 'Will you, for the sake of the race, take all that, be judged as that, be dealt with by Me as that, step right into that very position and let Me deal with you so that My wrath due to enmity against Me is poured out upon you in judgment, and so that the complete withdrawal of My presence becomes known to you in awful reality and you cry, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"' As to helplessness - "He was crucified through weakness" (2 Cor. 13:4); He could not save Himself. The outworking of sin in the Cross was like that; the goat of dismissal sent far, far away. "I cry in the daytime, but thou answerest not" (Psa, 22:2). There is no one to answer the crying from the far desolate wilderness of God-forsakenness, God-abandonment. We cannot enter into it. In order to undo for us that power of Satan, for one terrible, eternal hour, He tasted death; the wrath of God, the remoteness of God, and utter impotence and helplessness.

(b) Christ Accepted of God

Yet there is the other aspect of the Cross (of which we shall have to speak more again if the Lord wills) where, while all that we have been saying is true, and we take nothing from it - the awful darkness and blackness and terror of it all - something else is going on. He offers Himself without spot unto God (Heb. 9:14). He was an offering unto God. That is the other aspect. The word gains strength for us - "who delivered us out of the power (authority) of darkness, and translated us into the kingdom of the Son of his love" (Col. 1:13). That is the value of the Cross. Out of that darkness into this - into God's absolute good pleasure. "The Son of his love." "Accepted in the beloved" (Eph. 1:6). Out of one into the other by the Cross.

Oh, I wish that it were in my power to make the Cross known in more of its wonderful depth and fulness in both its aspects. I trust that you see a little more. We are now thinking of the Cross in both aspects - judgment and acceptance. Let us see what He has done. He has devoured and swallowed up all the wrath of God; there is no more remaining for us if we will believe. He has bridged and closed up the mighty gulf between God and us, and brought us nigh unto God through the Blood of His Cross, if we will believe; and He has brought us back into the place of the power of God out of our impotence, that we should be endued and endowed by the Holy Ghost with the mighty power of God. "...strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inward man" (Eph. 3:16). While in ourselves remaining weak, we are nevertheless able to say, "I can do all things in him that strengtheneth me" (Phil. 4:13). There is the great change over.

The Practical Application

But, you see, the practical application has got to be made. We have got to come definitely to the meaning of the Cross like that, and say, 'Well, if that is what the Cross means so far as I am concerned by nature,

there is no place left for self-will, for independence; that must go to the Cross; and all that belongs to the old creation must go to the Cross.' And, thank God, the Cross is not just some wooden thing set up long years ago, neither is it a crucifix to be worn around our necks; it is a mighty power of God. "Christ crucified... the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:23,24). To do this thing, to save us from the strength of our own will, to break the power of this enmity in us against God, to transform us into the image of His Son, there is the power of God centred in the Cross. Oh, what an immense thing the Cross is! Let us go away from this meditation solemnly - I would almost say brokenly - worshipping for what it cost Him. Obedient! Have a proposition like that put up to you! Even in our sinfulness, in all our great capacity for sin, if a certain proposition were put up to us we should shrink from it, and say, 'God forbid that ever I should have to touch that!' We know a little of shrinking from atmospheres and conditions which are so contrary to the Lord. Think of Him! We cannot, we just cannot, understand what it meant to Him, the Holy One, to be sin, and to be asked by the Father to be placed in a position - not doctrinally and technically, but actually - where the wrath of God was let loose and exhausted itself upon Him, and the far, far abandonment of God broke upon His consciousness; He could not find God. He was helpless, impotent. That is what it cost; that was the meaning of His obedience for our salvation. Oh, how costly is our salvation! Let us dwell upon it with reverent and heart-moved adoration.

But we are not left there, thank God. Not one of us ever need taste the judgment of God; not one of us ever need know God-forsakenness or God even at a distance from us. We know just the opposite of that in our Lord Jesus Christ, by faith in Him.

May the Lord take the feebleness of this presentation and impress upon our hearts how great is the price of our redemption. We were redeemed "not with corruptible things, with silver or gold... but with precious blood" (1 Pet. 1:18-19).

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