

The Starting Point for the Working of God

by T. Austin-Sparks

God's starting point for us is the Cross, where our old self is crucified with Him, and it requires us to despair of ourselves and trust in God's grace.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:18

Topics: "Surrender", "The Cross"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes that God's starting point for working in our lives is the Cross, where we must surrender our own wisdom and strength. He illustrates this through the stories of Naaman and Nicodemus, showing that both the powerful and the religious must recognize their nothingness before God can work through them. The sermon stresses that true spiritual progress depends on acknowledging our need for God and being born again into a new life. Sparks encourages believers to embrace this starting point, as it leads to a genuine relationship with God and the fullness of His blessings. Ultimately, he calls for a complete surrender to God's will, regardless of the cost.

Transcript

Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:18 to 2:2.

"For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent." Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: but we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: but God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in His presence. But of Him are ye in Christ Jesus, Who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption: That, according as it is written, "He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord."

And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified."

In all His dealings with us God has His particular starting point. He will not deviate or change from this starting point. Whenever men have attempted to bring God to their starting point, they have always had to recognize that God insists on His starting point.

We must recognize something of particular importance, that our progress in spiritual life is completely dependent upon this special starting point. Many have discovered this to their cost. They have embarked on many things with every good intention and devoted much time and effort to them, which they have then had to completely undo. They have had to unlearn much. However, that which they considered loss worked to their advantage. Had they not returned to God's starting point, they would have been stunted throughout their whole life, and remained inhibited people unfit to bring forth that which God had determined for them.

God's starting point for us is related to the fact that we must surrender to Him completely. Even though at the beginning we will not know all that this involves, nevertheless it is essential that we take up a position in which we can to some extent say: I do not know what my complete surrender to God involves; into what depths He will bring me; but I am ready for it. May God's will be done in my life.

With such an attitude as this, a living fellowship with God will open for us upon which all else depends. We can call this starting point 'new birth'. Whatever we call it, the main thing is that we have entered into a real living relationship with God, a completely new life: where it is no longer us, but in truth all from God.

We have two examples in the Word of God. In the Second Book of Kings, chapter 5:1-11, we are introduced to Naaman.

"Now Naaman, captain of the host of the king of Syria, was a great man with his master, and honourable, because by him the Lord had given deliverance unto Syria: he was also a mighty man in valour, but he was a leper. And the Syrians had gone out by companies, and had brought away captive out of the land of Israel a little maid; and she waited on Naaman's wife. And she said unto her mistress, "Would God my lord were with the prophet that is in Samaria! for he would recover him of his leprosy." And one went in, and told his lord, saying, "Thus and thus said the maid that is of the land of Israel." And the king of Syria said, "Go to, go, and I will send a letter unto the king of Israel." And he departed, and took with him ten talents of silver, and six thousand pieces of gold, and ten changes of raiment. And he brought the letter to the king of Israel, saying, "Now when this letter is come unto thee, behold, I have therewith sent Naaman my servant to thee, that thou mayest recover him of his leprosy." And it came to pass, when the king of Israel had read the letter, that he rent his clothes, and said, "Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man doth send unto me to recover a man of his leprosy? wherefore consider, I pray you, and see how he seeketh a quarrel against me." And it was so, when Elisha the man of God had heard that the king of Israel had rent his clothes, that he sent to the king, saying, "Wherefore hast thou rent thy clothes? let him come now to me, and he shall know that there is a prophet in Israel."

So Naaman came with his horses and with his chariot, and stood at the door of the house of Elisha. And Elisha sent a messenger unto him, saying, "Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean." But Naaman was wroth, and went away, and said, 'Behold, I thought, He will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the Lord his God, and strike his

hand over the place, and recover the leper."

So we are introduced to Naaman. We see an eminent man. He is powerful and highly honoured, but--a leper. One day, he stands before the house of Elisha. The king of Syria sends a messenger to inform Elisha of his arrival. Elisha, however, does not take any notice of the position of this great army leader, but simply sends a messenger to tell him, "Go and wash in the river Jordan seven times." Humanly speaking, Naaman's anger is understandable. Had he come all this way simply to be dismissed in this manner? Were not the waters of his own country better than the miserable Jordan? Elisha had not even had the decency to come out and greet him personally. That would have been the very least he could have expected. In anger Naaman turns away; by no means is he ready to follow these instructions.

Naaman expected that God should have begun at his own starting point. God ought to have recognized who Naaman was. Naaman's intention was to make an impression on the prophet and therefore upon God. With this in mind he had brought with him camels loaded down with valuable goods. They all counted for nothing. Elisha did not take the slightest notice of these things. "Go and wash in Jordan seven times." That sounded too humiliating. Did a Naaman have to endure such treatment?

But wait--let us remember that the whole question here is connected with the question of fellowship with God. It concerns our fellowship with God. Either Naaman goes the way of God, where he is no more anything, or he must give up everything. God begins with us there where we recognize and accept our nothingness, that is, God begins with us at the Cross. The starting point for all the blessings in Christ remains the Cross of the Crucified.

What applied to Naaman also applied to Nicodemus. John 3:1-8 says:

"There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto Him, "Rabbi, we know that Thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that Thou doest, except God be with Him." Jesus answered and said unto him, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus saith unto Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?" Jesus answered, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit."

We can think of Naaman as a man of the world; on the other hand, Nicodemus represents the so-called religious people. But with God, none of this matters at all. Even our religion, our piety, our strivings: all are meaningless. God takes no notice of any of these things. Whether we seek healing from leprosy, an illustration of extreme poverty in the midst of great wealth, or whether we have other desires, recognition of our public position--God brings both to the same starting point. Whether the one must dip himself seven times in the Jordan as a sign that a complete death to one's own self must take place, or whether it is said of the other, "Except a man be born again"--in both cases it is the same: the starting point of God with us is the end of all that we are in and of ourselves.

This is as valid for the 'religious' person as it is for the 'man of the world'. There is no such thing as a second-hand knowledge of God. God cannot be 'studied'. All true knowledge of God is a personal, immediate, living experience of Him. All else is so-called theology, our own thoughts about God,

philosophy.

Has it become clear from what we have been saying that God can make no use of that which we are of ourselves? We may have travelled on a long, perhaps 'pious' road; but God cannot use that. God begins with us at the Cross. Living fellowship with God is only for those who are born of God. Naaman did not know God. In the case of Nicodemus, we cannot say this. Nevertheless, Nicodemus had no more life from God than Naaman.

This presents us with some serious questions. It presents us with the question: am I born again? Have I experienced resurrection? Is my relationship with God based on personal experience? Do I know what it means to be dead and buried? Or is this all simply knowledge? Are these 'truths' that I have accepted without having experienced them and stood in their full reality?

If we want to act according to the rights of God, then it is of utmost importance to begin at that point at which the rights of God have their highest confirmation, at the Cross of Calvary, where only one thing remains for us: to give God His rights in continually relinquishing all of 'our' rights.

In the seventh chapter of Mark, and the fifteenth chapter of Matthew, we find the report of the Syrophenician woman. Here too we are faced with the same starting point for all the blessings of God.

God Himself had drawn a line between Jews and Gentiles. Israel was by right heir of the blessing. The Gentiles lived outside the promises. In the case of the Syrophenician woman, we see something different. While Israel insisted upon the blessing of God as being a matter of course, she seeks it. The blessing she seeks is for her a matter of life and death. At the same time, she has no right to it. The Jews were proud of their race. They were the people. What could be lacking in them? They were not aware of any particular need. Everything for them was ordered by tradition. Traditional, yes, but no longer spiritual. And because for them the blessing had become a matter of tradition, they no longer had any longing for it in their hearts. With them there was no yearning, no expectation, no stretching out to receive it. "They that are whole have no need of a physician" (Matt. 9:12). But their health was only in their imagination. They did not know that they were blind--or how blind they were. Therefore Jesus goes way over the boundary to that place where He comes into contact with people who have recognized their need.

But then they need to be brought to the starting point that enables God to bless them, to bless them in truth and in fulness. Matthew fifteen, and verses 22-28 says:

"And, behold, a woman of Canaan came out of the same coasts, and cried unto Him, saying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Thou Son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil." But He answered her not a word. And His disciples came and besought Him, saying, "Send her away; for she crieth after us." But He answered and said, "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Then came she and worshipped Him, saying, "Lord, help me." But He answered and said, "It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs." And she said, "Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered and said unto her, "O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt." And her daughter was made whole from that very hour."

The woman pleads: "Have mercy on me, O Lord." He pushes her aside. Why? Because He has to bring her to a certain point. He must test her. Would she be insulted? This may well have been possible. But then she would have had to return home without a blessing. So she remains insistent.

"I was not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel." In other words, "You do not belong to those who come into question. I am not sent to you."

But she remains insistent, saying, "Lord, help me."

The Lord takes yet a further step. "It is not meet to take the children's bread and cast it to the dogs."

Now let us think for a moment. If the Lord were to speak like that to us, what would we do? Would we not turn our backs on Him? Would we not be extremely offended, turn away convinced that He did not want to help us, that He had no sympathy towards us?

Ah, the Lord is putting this woman to the test. However, she does not walk away offended. She seeks the blessing. She does not rest until she has it. She persists until the blessing of God breaks through that particular dispensation and comes to the Gentiles.

"It is true, Lord," she says. "I am not appealing to anything of right. I know that I have no right. I am only a dog, but even dogs eat of the crumbs that fall from their masters' table!"

Then it happened! The victory is there!

"O woman, great is thy faith: be it done unto thee even as thou wilt."

Do we now see what it all comes down to? The starting point of all blessings is there where it enters our consciousness that we have no valid rights, no valid claims; that before the Lord we are nothing other than beggars.

How different is this than the attitude of Naaman! He thinks first and foremost that he possesses rights, that he can expect his elevated position to be recognized. The woman, however, says to herself, "If I despite everything, am still to receive the blessing, then this can only happen in one way, that He gives it to me by His grace."

Let us remember that the sequence of events in this story serves a higher purpose.

We have already said that Israel had refused Him, that they felt no need of the blessing that the Lord wanted to give them. For this reason Jesus went beyond the boundary. For this reason He turned to the Gentiles. The blessing of God is only for those who seek it. But even then nothing will happen until God has come to His starting point. Whether we are speaking of Naaman, Nicodemus, the Syrophenician woman, or ourselves--God's starting point is there where our own self has come to an end.

All the blessings of God flow from the Cross. God must empty us. God must bring us to the place where He can trust us. This will not happen until we despair of ourselves. Nothing could be more dangerous than to place spiritual blessings into carnal hands. Many become proud and self-confident because God has blessed them, because God has given them understanding.

The foundation of all blessings is the Cross. If we want to stand in true fellowship with God, then it is only possible on the grounds of the Cross, only possible where all our own strength has come to an end, where we are completely dependent upon Him.

Be assured that God will put us to the test as to whether this is so. We remind ourselves of Elijah and Elisha; of how Elijah attempted to deter Elisha from accompanying him on his final journey. Elisha

persevered. Elisha went with him right to the end. But as they passed through the Jordan, Elijah said to Elisha, "Ask what I shall do for thee, before I am taken from thee." Had he allowed himself to be shaken off, all blessings would have been lost.

The same is true for us. There is no other way to receive the fulness of God in Christ. In no other way does the Lord come to His right with us without us first returning to the starting point of God, there where our old man was crucified with Him--and only when we are prepared to take the position of being crucified with Him will we receive the blessing whatever the cost. This means, however, at the cost of our own life.

May the Lord bring us to that place, where we can say from the heart: Whatever the cost, I will go with You right to the end.

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