

The Ultimate Meaning of the Cross

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon explores the ultimate meaning of the Cross as the expression of Christ's lordship through a spiritually unified body of believers.

Scripture: Philippians 2:5

Topics: "Christ's Lordship", "The Cross"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the ultimate meaning of the Cross of Christ, urging believers to recognize that the Cross is not merely about personal salvation or sanctification, but about establishing the supreme lordship of Christ over all creation. He challenges Christians to live in a conscious spiritual relationship that reflects the impact of the Cross, which should lead to a collective expression of Christ's headship in the world. Sparks highlights the need for believers to occupy a spiritual position above earthly concerns, characterized by ever-increasing spiritual fullness, and to actively extend the kingdom of heaven. Ultimately, he calls for a deeper understanding of the Cross's cosmic significance and the necessity of spiritual discipline to fulfill God's purpose through His people.

Transcript

"...this mind... which was... in Christ Jesus: who, existing in the form of God, counted not the being on an equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, becoming obedient even unto death, yea, the death of the cross. Wherefore also God highly exalted him, and gave unto him the name which is above every name; that in the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven and things on earth and things under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:5-11).

I feel that there is one big question which it is imperative that the Lord's people should face in these days, and if we can answer that question in a living way and enter livingly into the answer, very great spiritual values will be secured. The question is this - What has God revealed as His supreme objective resultant from the Cross of Christ? The question which springs out of that is - how has God revealed that the objective shall be secured and expressed? Probably it will be that subsidiary question which will occupy us largely in these meditations, leading to the answer to the main question.

As we approach this main question, we may do so by a series of enquiries. Is the supreme outcome of the Cross of Christ found in there being so many Christians enjoying the knowledge that they are saved?

Further, is it found in so many saved people seeking to get other people to the same position - enjoying the fact of being saved? Further, is the answer found in having so many saved Christians mainly occupied with their own sanctification, the way of victory, and a fuller life? And, yet again, is it to have so many Christians devoting themselves to the knowledge of deeper things, the deeper things of God? And if we put all the four together, have we got the objective, that is, God's full objective, in the Cross of Christ? All the things that I have mentioned certainly are part of it; but when we have them all - salvation, soul-winning, sanctification, education - does it end there? Are any, or all, of these the end? Will that satisfy God? Will that fill up His desire and expectation and be an adequate outcome of Calvary? Well, that is what we are going to look at, as the Lord enables.

The circle drawn by all the things which we have just mentioned may still be a limited circle in two respects. Firstly, all that may still resolve itself into something personal - my salvation, my service, my sanctification, my spiritual education. Secondly, it may all resolve itself into something very largely, if not entirely, earthly, having to do with life here on this earth - being saved, getting others saved, growing in grace, increasing in spiritual knowledge. It may be quite an earthly thing, although, of course, leading to heaven and having heaven ultimately in view. But is not that, after all, still a circumscribed position? Again, does it represent all the meaning of the Cross?

Now all of these phases that I have mentioned are seen in the New Testament. Indeed, in a certain sense, we may say that the New Testament in sections deals with these respectively. Romans may, in the main, deal with the first - our salvation. Corinthians may deal with the second - our sanctification. The New Testament does definitely provide for each of these in quite a specific and definite way, but what we ought to recognise is this, that we can never, by means of any one section of the Word of God, see the whole purpose of God. We need all the Word of God for all the purpose of God.

A People to Express Christ's Lordship

So when we come really to the Word, we find that the Cross as our basis and as our way leads on to these, but through them ever on and ever up to something much more than they are, either separately or collectively and inclusively, and it is that ultimate something which is the supreme objective resultant from the Cross of the Lord Jesus. When I use that word 'ultimate,' I do not want to divert your mind from the present. I am not using it in the sense of afterward, final, in the sense of time; for that ultimate is now. God has shown that He would have a full vindication of the Cross of His Son now.

Let me stay for a moment for an extra word on what I have just said. We Christians ought to be tremendously interested in our Christianity, interested not merely as a mental matter, but as a heart matter; interested in heart really to discover where we are being led by the whole Word of God. We read the Bible; I suppose we read a few verses every day; some do a great deal more than that; but the Bible is the book of Christians, and we read it more or less. I wonder how many of us really do approach the Bible with this one heart enquiry - where is this leading? What is it all unto? This is not just something by the way in itself. There is something tremendous, something immense, involved. There is always a forward look, a prospect, something in view, something being pointed to, something toward which we are being urged, drawn on; and, putting it all together, where shall we arrive if we see what God has really put into this Word? How many of you do that? If we do approach the Word of God with that spirit - with that enquiry coming from our hearts, that is, born of the very love which has been begotten in us by the love of God: if we are not merely interested in Christianity as our religion but as a heart relationship with the Lord for His satisfaction - if we approach the Bible like that, desiring to know what it is His heart is set upon, and

therefore what our hearts ought to be set upon, and if we take the Cross of the Lord Jesus as the key to it all, we shall find ourselves led to some very great conclusions, a very great position.

Can we try - for it will be no more than an endeavour - to set down in a mere phrase what that ultimate something is? May I put it in this way? The ultimate is shown to be the supreme lordship and headship of Christ expressed and manifested in the whole cosmic realm in and by a body of Christians in whom the Divine meaning of the Cross is an experimental reality.

A Conscious Spiritual Relationship, the Fruit of the Cross

Breaking that up further, what does it amount to? Well, in other words it is this. Firstly, believers living in a conscious, spiritual relationship which is the fruit of the Cross. That is the first fragment - a conscious spiritual relationship which is the fruit of the Cross. It cannot be anything but a spiritual relationship. We cannot live in an actual, personal, physical, conscious relationship with all believers. We do not know them. We know but a mere fragment of all those who exist. We cannot organise this thing, bring it within the compass of an organisation, a society, or anything of that kind. It can only be a spiritual relationship, but it can be a conscious spiritual relationship. That it is spiritual does not mean that it has to be unconscious, abstract, nebulous, imaginary, something somewhere but undefined. No; a personal, conscious, spiritual relationship with all believers; though they may be scattered to the ends of the earth, yet something has been done by the Holy Spirit which has constituted those concerned people of a related consciousness with all other believers. That is absolutely essential to the ultimate - the expression of the lordship and headship of Jesus Christ. That is no abstract, ethereal thing. That is very positive and very practical, and if the whole cosmic realm is to feel the impact of that lordship, this conscious, spiritual relationship is absolutely essential.

All those powers which occupy that cosmic realm, which have their government there, have no interest in, or concern with, doctrines of Christian unity; but they have a great deal of interest in actual, spiritual relatedness; so much so, that they have never ceased from the day of Pentecost, to make it one of their primary objectives to divide the people of God in their spiritual consciousness. If they cannot get in between them in other ways, they will try to set up a sense of distance, of unrelatedness or disturbed relatedness, because of the tremendous importance of this matter of a living, practical, real, conscious, spiritual relationship between the people of God - something more than mechanical and organised, something spiritual.

Then, we spoke of this relatedness as being the fruit of the Cross, because this can never be brought about apart from all the tremendous meaning of the Cross of the Lord Jesus in the realm which is now rent and torn and shattered to fragments so far as spiritual relatedness is concerned. This is a universe which has been broken to pieces, endless pieces. Its harmony and unity have been completely disrupted, and those cosmic powers are the forces which have done it, and are doing it. That hardly needs to be argued. We know it within ourselves - the battle for forbearance, for longsuffering, for endurance, for kindness, for patience, for love, for consideration - all those are very practical matters in the Christian life. Look at the way this breaking up is at work, these endless discords in the whole creation, in the whole universe. There is nothing to meet that but the Cross of the Lord Jesus; and that is one of the primary meanings of the Cross to which we are getting at this time - a people in a living, conscious, spiritual relationship which is the fruit of the Cross in them and in this universe. That is why we read those words in Philippians. The goal is His absolute sovereign lordship and headship. How do you reach it? "Have this mind in you..." And what is the contextual implication and application? "I exhort Euodia, and I exhort Syntyche, to be of the

same mind in the Lord" (Phil. 4:2). "Have this mind..." - one mind intervening to overcome two conflicting minds, and the only mind that will do it is the mind of Him Who went to the Cross and let go His own personal and individual position and rights for the sake of others. The Cross alone will meet this situation. Yes, the need is for believers living in a conscious, spiritual relationship which is the fruit of the Cross.

A Spiritual Position Above this Earth

Secondly, the need is for believers as so related occupying a spiritual position above this earth; being here, and yet with a vast gap spiritually between them and what is here - and that includes what is here on this earth religiously, just as much as in other ways; it is possible to be religiously on and of the earth, in a religious way touching the earth. You understand that when I say 'touching the earth' I am not talking about touching the ground physically, but touching that realm in which a curse resides. There is a spiritual feature and factor - it has been cursed. Is that too strong? We could spend an hour or two in showing how true, that is. The mark of the curse is just this, that it does not matter how far men seem to advance and develop and produce and achieve; running alongside of every 'advance' (?), and keeping pace with everything that is called progress, every achievement, every invention, every production, there is the element of a curse which will turn that against man for his own undoing. The very thing that he discovers, invents, produces, for the good of the world, turns out for the world's destruction. In the day in which we live we are faced with the fullest development of that principle of the curse that has been known in the history of this universe. When men make such a marvellous discovery and achieve such a marvellous thing that in a split second they can wipe out tens of thousands of people from the earth with one experiment, what are they going to do when they let loose the developed thing? Invention? Progress? Oh no, there is a curse attached to everything in this creation. Man's undoing is found in his own ingenuity. But that is a very intense and strong aspect and expression of this principle. This earthliness has become very refined in many respects; very religious; but still earthly, still something tied down here with its expectations, hopes and enterprises all here. It is not necessary, I think, to follow that unpleasant line very much farther.

But to return to this second fragment of the general presentation - we are thinking of believers living in a conscious, spiritual relationship which is the fruit of the Cross, occupying a spiritual position above this earth, and who are concerned with earthly things only so far as those things relate to higher interests, heavenly purposes. They are a people living in the realm described in that unique phrase of the Apostle Paul "in the heavenlies in Christ"; a heavenly people; which means much more, of course, than we are saying at the moment.

Ever-Increasing Spiritual Fulness

Thirdly, the need is for believers who, because of this living, conscious, spiritual relationship, the fruit of the Cross, and because of this spiritual position above the earth, are characterised by ever-increasing spiritual fulness; for when the Lord gets people like that and in that position there is no stagnation, no limitation. There is constant, increasing, spiritual fulness. They have resources, and they have plenty, and far more than they can consume upon themselves. That is not fiction, that is fact. The whole Word of God bears down upon this, that the Divine thought is also a thought of fulness. Wherever you find God reaching His end, it is all by way of fulness. Is it the tabernacle or the temple? - then it is filled with His glory. Is it the river of God? - it is full of water. Is it the trees of the Lord? - they are full of sap. Is it the waterpots? - they are filled to the brim. Is it the Church? - then it is "the fulness of him that filleth all in all" (Eph. 1:23). So we could go on. The Divine thought is always along the line of fulness. And I said, this is

not ultimate in time, this is for now - a people who have more than the ordinary, more than just enough to make ends meet or hardly that. The fulness of Christ - that is God's end by way of the Cross, and to be known now.

The Rule of the Heavens Expressed

Then fourthly, and finally for the moment, there is need of believers who, because of the three things already mentioned, are showing that the kingdom of the heavens is a spiritual reality and who are extending its range actually - showing that the heavens do rule, and that they rule through the medium and by the instrumentality of a people, a heavenly people, after this kind. The bringing of the impact of that supreme rule of the heavens to bear upon the cosmic forces of this universe is the vocation of the Church of which we are speaking, of a people like this; and that is the meaning of the Cross ultimately. Where does the Cross lead to? Your salvation, my salvation? Yes, of course. Is that all? And then that I should be busy to get other people into that position? Oh, yes, of course, without question. And then that you and I should be growing in grace progressively, in sanctification, being conformed to the image of His Son? Oft yes, a hundred times yes, without any question. And that we should be increasing in the knowledge of Him, growing in our apprehension of the things of God, that our spiritual education should go on uninterruptedly? Yes, all that is in the will of God. But is that, or are all those things put together, the end? No, the end of the Cross is that the whole realm of evil spiritual powers and intelligences should meet the impact of all that - that there should be a practical registration of it all objectively.

I said that this can all be personal after all - my salvation, your salvation; my sanctification, your sanctification; my life of victory, your life of victory; my education, your education. It can all be very largely individual and personal, and it can all be something here, so that people gather into little groups on the subject of sanctification, others on spiritual education, others on soul winning. Oh no, that is not God's meaning ultimately in the Cross of the Lord Jesus; but He intends that by all those means, along all those lines, this end should be reached - that the whole system of darkness and evil and wickedness should be cast down and brought into subjection to the absolute lordship and headship of Jesus Christ; that every knee should bow to Him. And that should have a very real beginning now where you and I are concerned in this spiritual relationship. It should be a practical thing now, extending and expanding, so that this kingdom of the heavens, expressed through this people, should be registering itself and occupying widening territory so that the power and dominion and evil of the Evil One is being more and more limited. That is the thing for which the Cross of Christ really stands. It brings in the individuals in every stage and phase of the spiritual life, but it goes beyond. It is this cosmic impact that is the ultimate justification of the Cross of the Lord Jesus.

The Needed Discipline of the Cross

Well, that is a challenge to us. At the outset I said that we, as the Lord's people, have to face a big question and I want to say again I do not think it is the question merely of our personal salvation. And it is not just the question of our being more zealous soul-winners. With us it should have become a reality long ago that there is a deep and earnest concern in our hearts for the salvation of others. It is not a question merely of our personal holiness. God forbid that we should overlook any necessities in that direction, that we should be closing our eyes to sins and defects in the spiritual life; but even so, there is something greater than that in view. And as for our seeking to know the deeper things of God, what shall we say about that if it is not going to work out somehow in this realm where we are conscious of the activities of spiritual forces, in this realm into which we have to move - some in this country and some in other

countries - where the main problem is not flesh and blood but principalities and powers, the dark things of this universe, those awful, sinful, evil forces which are at work? If we do not reach out to that our quest has failed and will leave much to be desired. That is the big issue. What has God revealed as the supreme result of the Cross of Christ? It is that His Son should be in the place of supreme and absolute sovereign headship in this universe, which will necessitate the deposing of every other sovereignty and name and authority. And the Word of God says that that is going to be done by that self-same Cross having been wrought in a body of Christians to bring them to the place where through them, because in them, that sovereignty, that headship, has been established.

It is a big matter, and it involves us in something very real in the way of spiritual discipline. You cannot go to college or institute to learn that. You cannot get that by conferences and meetings. You cannot get that along any academic lines. This involves us in a very real transaction with the Lord that that Cross, with all that He means by it, shall really do its work in us; and He has endless ways of doing it. The very nature of the work of the Cross involves this, that its operation will always be along the line that we do not like, that we would never choose. If we could have the Cross adjusted to our situation, it would be a very easy Cross. But no; it will always go against the grain; that is the nature of it. It will always call for that which we would never choose. When the Lord leads us on to consider the way that He has indicated, the way for reaching His end, we shall come up against those things. We shall then see that this whole cosmic battle has its centre in us by nature, and it has got to be settled there, at the citadel of the individual's being; and the citadel is the will. Oh, it is one thing to talk about cosmic warfare, about authority over the powers of darkness! Looking out into the battle, anybody who has any experience does not talk lightly about that. They talk very carefully and very prayerfully; for the whole thing, after all, is not outside us, it is in us, it begins in us. It is a matter of your will and my will. The dethronement of Satan and of all his mighty kingdom was accomplished by the will of one Man being utterly in subjection to His Father, and so far as He Himself is concerned He has left the enemy completely worsted and cast out. He has left the enemy in being, not annihilated, in order to bring us to the same place as He Himself has come to, and it will be along exactly the same lines - the battle of the will, taken up on countless points, until Satan no longer has any place or ground in our will, and he is undone. If the Lord will, we will follow that out more closely later on.

You see the big question. Oh, it is a big question! For my own part, though I have been convinced about this matter for years I have never been more strongly convinced than I am today that the one need is for a people to rise up in virtue of an in-wrought work of the Cross to meet these evil forces which are against the purpose of God. May the Lord produce such a people in part, though it may be a small part, through these meditations.

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