

This Ministry - Part 3

by T. Austin-Sparks

This sermon explores the concept of the living God as a dynamic presence in contrast to dead religion, emphasizing the roles of the cross, resurrection, and the church in experiencing God's reality.

Duration: 54:47

Scripture: Matthew 16:13

Topics: "Ministry"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of recognizing and serving the living God. The phrase 'the living God' is significant because it signifies a real and spiritual relationship with God, rather than a mere formality. The speaker urges the churches to align themselves with the living God and not treat Him as distant or irrelevant. The sermon also highlights the role of resurrection in the history of the true church and spiritual life, emphasizing the need for continual revival and renewal.

Transcript

We are continuing our meditations under the general title of This Ministry. And this evening we are going to consider This Ministry in the light of a fragment which occurs many times throughout the Bible, just a few of which we will look at now. Firstly then, in the Gospel by Matthew, chapter 16, it comes in that section from verse 13 to verse 20, and our words are found in Peter's answer to the Lord's question as to who they, his disciples, would say that he was.

Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. We pass on to the letter to the Romans, chapter 9, verse 25, as he saith also in Hosea, I will call that my people which was not my people, and her beloved which was not beloved. And it shall be that in the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not my people, there shall they be called the sons of the living God.

The second letter to the Corinthians, chapter 3, verse 5. Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to account anything as from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit. For the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life. If the ministration of death written and engraven on stones came with glory, so that the children of Israel could not look steadfastly upon the face of Moses for the glory of his face, which glory was passing away, how shall not rather the ministration of the Spirit be with glory? And verse 12, having therefore such a hope, We use great boldness of speech, and are not as Moses who put a veil upon his face.

The children of Israel should not look steadfastly on the end of that which was passing away. Their minds were hardened, but until this very day at the reading of the old covenant, the same veil remaineth unlifted, which veil is taken away in Christ. But until this day, whensoever Moses is read, a veil lieth upon their heart.

In the first letter to the Thessalonians, chapter 1, verse 9, For they themselves report concerning us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned unto God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven. In the first letter to Timothy, chapter 3, verse 14, These things write I unto thee, hoping to come unto thee shortly. But if I tarry long, that thou mayst know how men ought to behave themselves in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, pillar and ground of the truth.

Letter to the Hebrews, chapter 12, verse 22, But ye are come unto Mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God. And the book of the Revelation, chapter 7, verse 2, I saw another angel ascend from the sun rising, having the seal of the living God, cried with a great voice to the four angels to whom it was given to help the earth and the sea, saying, Help not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees, till we shall have sealed the servants of God, of our God, on their foreheads. So you will have recognized the phrase and the title, the living God.

As I have said, it's a title of the Lord which occurs many times throughout the Bible. Indeed, it is found in no fewer than 17 of the books of the Bible, from the book of Deuteronomy to the book of the Revelation. It is instructive to take note of the occurrences of that phrase and of the particular connections.

Because it's a phrase which is used, or a title of the Lord employed, always with some special object. Usually, of course, to counter or offset something that is contrary to what is represented by that title, the living God. When we have gathered all these references together in which the words occur, we are able to arrange them all mainly in four particular or main connections.

Of course, the first is set over against paganism and heathenism, the other gods of the nations. And the title, the living God, is that which discriminates between the gods of the heathen and of the nations and the Lord. And quite often the title is employed in that connection.

But as we proceed, we find that it is also used in other connections which are even more instructive until we come to the final usage of it, which is the most instructive. In the second place, of course, it is set over against mere ritualism and ceremonialism and sacramentalism and such things of a merely formal outward religious order. Over against that, the words are used, the living God.

The living God is something more than a mere system. Although that system may be related to him, to the Lord, it can exist. As is quite clear from these connections, that whole thing can exist and be carried on and proceeded with and the living God not be in evidence.

There may be quite a contrast between all that and what is meant by the living God. And it is there that the prophets come in, not against paganism and heathenism in its naked form in the nations but against mere formalism in Israel. And there the prophets come along with their word, the living God, as being something much more than all that of a merely formal religion.

But then we proceed further and we are led by this title into another realm, this time of Christianity itself. And to a very large extent, orthodox Christianity. The Christianity of traditionalism, of institutionalism, of

sectarianism, of nominalism.

You see, this phrase, the living God, is found in our New Testament. It's found being used amongst those who bear the name of Christian. And still, it represents a contrast.

Even among Christians, that there can be the Christian doctrine and the Christian practice and the Christian order and the Christian activity and all that belongs to Christianity. And still, the living God is something more than all. It is used in that connection, again in a contrasting way.

If I only pick out one other fragment, extra to the ones I have quoted, again from the letter to the Hebrews, and that letter was written to Christians. It was written to Christians. And yet there is this statement, it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

A warning to Christians. With Israel's history used, as you know, as the great illustration of warning. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

A word to Christians. Well, that's another connection. But then we come to the fourth and final.

Here, the living God is at home. Here, everything corresponds to that very title. Here, there is no clash and no contrast at all.

Here, things are living. Because they are spiritual and not merely formal or ritualistic. Here, things are essentially real.

They are real. Here are the heavenly things themselves in the custodianship of the Holy Spirit. And here, the title fits.

The living, the living God. So it was with the Thessalonians. The setting of the phrase corresponded to the phrase itself.

He turned from idols to serve the living God. And to wait for his son from glory, from heaven. We're all right now.

We're on the ground. It's a happy ground for the living God. And dear friends, it is this lost connection which we have before us.

We feel that it is what is represented by death. That the Lord has presented to us as the purpose and object of our existence. And it is to this which we have seen in a little way that we are committed.

It is this that defines this ministry. It is that which corresponds to this title, the living God. In a setting that is fitting to that name.

And everything here expresses the living God. It's the living God who is amongst us. That is what we feel we have, as I have said, seen a little of.

And have been drawn toward by the grace of God. It is not first a teaching. It is first the Lord himself.

The living God. It is not first a system of practice and procedure. But it is first livingness or life.

It is not first the letter. But it is first the spirit. This is the realm in which the initiative and the abiding control is not with men but with the Lord.

With the living God. The one supreme feature of what this means is reality. Reality.

If the phrase means anything at all, the living God, that means reality. In every direction and every connection. It is the reality of the Lord himself amongst his people.

It is the reality of the truth which is believed. Which is taught. Which is accepted.

The reality. It is the reality of life. The life is real.

Now there are three main relationships of that reality. I trust that you recognize what it is that we are seeking to say in these times. It is what we believe the Lord is really desiring to have.

And I think we can say that our hearts are set upon that. And we can never be satisfied with anything other or anything less than what the Lord would really have. But if that is so, if that is so, we are really set upon that.

And we say it is reality that we want. But if that is true, then we are committed to the Holy Spirit to make things very real. And keep things very real.

And to deal with everything that is not real. That is artificial. That is false.

That is not real. So the Holy Spirit is concerned with reality. And the Holy Spirit always begins his work of making things real by introducing the cross in a very real way into things.

And the first main connection of this spiritual reality is the cross. Not just as an object. Not as something external to ourselves.

Not as a thing. But the cross as a present, living, potent force and law governing everything. Yes, the cross as a working power in the hands of the Holy Spirit is the ground of reality.

If you and I, dear friends, are really set upon what God wants to have, the essential thing that his heart is set upon, the real thing, we shall find that we are brought into the presence of the operation of the cross in the hands of the Holy Spirit. The cross truly on one side is for our good and our blessing and it works for us. There are boundless blessings in the cross for the people of God.

It is something in which to glory as the apostle said he did. Yes, the cross is a mighty power working for us. But the cross will also work against us.

It is just as potent against us. See, we cannot, we cannot come into the realm of God without discovering how unsuited we are for that realm. And that something has got to be done to deal with this that is so unsuited to the Lord.

And what I am saying to you, dear friends, is this. Not to give you further teaching on the cross, but simply to point out that if you and I are really with the Lord for that which is closest to his heart, our lives will be kept very near to the cross and the cross will be kept very near to our lives. We shall find that while we come into the good and blessing that the cross provides, we also come into very strong and exact dealing with all that is contrary to the Lord by the power of that cross.

It is a working thing. Doctor, maybe many years ago, long before the atomic age opened, used this phrase, the radioactive cross. You can't touch it without meeting something that burns you, that sears you.

It's radioactive. Well, that's a very good phrase. It's like that.

Cross is not just a doctrine. It is certainly not a wooden object to be carried round the neck. Cross is a present and continuous force and law in the life where God is going to have things according to his mind.

Cross is for us, but the cross is also against us. That is an essential of reality. It is glorious on the one side, but it is terrible on the other.

We cannot abide in its presence without being real with God. We shall find that this thing is no merely formal thing of teaching truth. Here we meet something.

We meet the living God in terms of the cross of his Son. See, the Holy Spirit does all his work, all his work on the basis of the cross. He begins the work on the basis of the cross, and he continues his work on the basis of the cross, and he'll finish his work on the basis of the cross.

The living God means that the cross of the Lord Jesus is not something in history of long ago. The cross of the Lord Jesus is something here and now as the ground of judgment, of testing, of finding out. It's a mighty thing.

That is the first connection of reality. I suppose while that sounds rather heavy and hard, you and I would rather it was like that. We don't want to be in a religion that doesn't work.

We don't want to be in a Christianity that is merely formal and empty, carrying on something, going to meetings and all the rest. We want reality. We want reality.

We want things to work. We want the living God. If so, then that reality will first of all be manifested in terms of the cross.

The cross is the first instrument of divine reality. It's there that we first of all meet the living God. The second connection of reality is in resurrection.

The living God makes himself known to us in terms of resurrection. Resurrection is the controlling reality of the living God and of his purpose. The whole purpose of God, listen to this, the whole purpose of God is going to be worked out, fulfilled and realized on the basis of resurrection.

Again, while the cross of the Lord Jesus is not only an historic act, long ago and far away, something was enacted there in a certain place at a certain time in this world, but is continuously living. The same is true of the resurrection. The resurrection is not something that just happened and that was the beginning and the end of it.

There, in that garden, in that country, at that time, no resurrection is the ground on which God proceeds to the realization and fulfillment of all his purpose. This resurrection has got to become more and more progressively the experience of his people. And he, I repeat, works on that basis.

How do you know the living God? How shall we know the reality of things? In this way, that we again and again are brought to the place where, now but for the God who raiseth the dead, all is finished. That's the end. Here is another occasion for the God of resurrection to come in and save the situation or it's all lost.

That's reality. That's keeping things real, isn't it? That's bringing the resurrection right up to date. And if we could read it, we can to some large extent, that is the history of everything that is truly of God.

That is the history of the true church. The history of true spiritual life. It's just one succession of resurrections.

That's a way of putting it. Perhaps more correctly it should be said, a succession of experiences of the resurrection. Reality.

Well, it's terrible reality. There is something about it that in a way, in a sense, is terrible. When you come to where Paul came, say we despaired of life.

We were pressed beyond our measure. That's something terrible. But it doesn't stop there.

That we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raiseth the dead. We have this ministry, says the Apostle Paul. Seeing we have this ministry.

Not ministry. Not ministry of truth about the resurrection that took place so many centuries ago. But the power of that resurrection right up to date.

The resurrection in a sense being repeated in our experience. Not once nor twice. That is the ministry.

Born out of that experience. You see, resurrection is the seal of the living God. The living God.

He puts his seal upon things by resurrection. He put his seal upon his own son. And attested him, son, by the resurrection.

He puts his seal upon everything that is related to his son in the same way. His seal is resurrection. Resurrection marks the beginning of everything that is of God.

God begins there. God begins there. In the material creation, God began with a resurrection.

Out of darkness. Out of death. Out of chaos.

Resurrection from the dead. Again and again you have it illustrated for you. And when you come into the New Testament it is just that.

Everything takes its rise, its beginning in this dispensation from the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. God begins everything with resurrection. Every new phase.

Every new phase, and this should instruct us and encourage us. Every new phase finds us at the place where now it must be resurrection. And if it requires resurrection, then we may take it that there is a new phase.

Imminent. There is some new phase of things from God in view. We should trust in God who raised up the dead.

He begins. He proceeds on the basis of resurrection. This is a constant, a continuous, and a repeated thing in the onward movement of God.

But it is not just that God repeats the thing. Every fresh expression of resurrection sees some increase and some advance upon what was before. We could say that the death seems to be deeper.

And that is true, then the resurrection must be the greater. I am trying to define for you, dear friends, a true spiritual experience and the true character of that which God wants to have. It is this that is the testimony to the living God.

What is true about the beginning of God always in resurrection and His continuance and progressiveness will be true, as we know from the Scripture, in the consummation of everything. The last thing which sets the crown upon all the work of God will be the resurrection, the final resurrection, spiritual and physical. End of the creation again, raised as from this death of mighty and glorious emergence.

The point is that all this is the way in which God shows that He is the living God. It is very real to know the living God. It is very real.

And then, in the third and final connection, reality is found in the truly spiritual church, in the cross, in resurrection, in the truly spiritual church. I am not now speaking of something that is called the church, but that which is the church of the living God. The church of the living God.

It is here in what is meant by that word, that name, that designation, definition, the church. Church which is His body. It is in that, if it is the true church, that the living God is resident and is to be found.

It is there. If the Lord has here in this world, anywhere, a true representation of the church, the thing that will mark that is the presence of the Lord. That sounds very simple.

Perhaps it doesn't sound to be very wonderful to you. But you know, after all, that is the thing which decides and settles everything, doesn't it, as to the church. If it is true that the church is the church of the living God, the place of His residence, then wherever that is represented, the thing which must be more dominant and real than anything else is, the Lord is there.

The Lord is there. Whatever you may say about the people and about this or that, the Lord is there. You find the Lord there.

You meet the Lord there. That does determine whether it is the church of the living God or not. Not in the first place, again, the teaching or the practice, but the presence of the Lord, the place where He is resident.

It is the place where He presides. Not just as a guest, but as the host. Not as a member, but as the head.

The Lord Himself in charge. The Lord over all things. That is, according to the word, the true church of the living God, where the Lord is in charge.

It is a statement. Wait a moment. We will try to explain it.

It is the place of the Lord's jealousy. According to the word, the Lord is jealous for His house. He is jealous for the place where His name is.

He is jealous for His dwelling place. He is jealous with a great jealousy and a great wrath when He has anything that is the church of the living God. There we meet the jealousy.

Now, dear friends, that last statement contains a very great deal that you and I must ever try to keep in mind. I am speaking about reality. Reality working in two ways.

Now, as to the church, the house of God. If this does correspond and answer to this title, the church of the living God, then to be in that and a part of that on the one side carries with it many great and peculiar blessings, advantages, things which are for us. We shall find peculiar values in that house of God.

Peculiar values of fellowship, of relatedness, of the Lord coming to us on that ground, on that ground of His church. It will be a house of bread, it will be a house of wealth, spiritual riches, it will be a house of encompassing comforts. Many values and many advantages if it is the church of the living God.

We may fall far short of the ideal and of this truth that this is a thing that we have always had before us and it should be like this. And on the other side, this involves us in responsibility and things work here, things work here. We could say much as to history in our own experience as a people over the past thirty more years.

As we have seen the principles of the house of God sadly and seriously violated with the most terrible consequences. Yes, it has happened, not once nor twice. The knowledge of the truth of the house of God almost deliberately violated with tragic results in life.

It is a big and terrible story on that side. But on the other side, what blessing, what enrichment, what good? The point is that the house of God is not a place, is not an idea, a truth, a thing. The house of God is a terrible and yet glorious reality, a glorious reality.

Would we have it otherwise? Now again, we challenge this. Do we want just to go to the meetings and go home and keep on doing that sort of thing year after year and carrying on something almost like a performance or do we want this thing to work? Do we want it to be gloriously and yet if necessary terribly real? Terribly real. Do we want that it shall be the living God with whom we have to do? If so, it is like that.

We have got to come into line with the mind of God about his house and if we do we come into the great values and blessings of the church, of the living God. If we violate the principles of the house of God, we need something. You see, Paul put his finger upon that of Corinth.

For this cause many of you are sick and some even die. We are. He was real.

It was real. It is the church of the living. There are responsibilities resting upon us in the house of God which is the church of the living God.

There are great blessings to be realized and to be enjoyed in the church of the living God. Well, it is reality, you see. Reality in everything.

Livingness. Something that works. And dear friends, we should be continually in prayer that we should be saved from something that is just empty form.

Just carrying on a tradition. Just settling down into something that is accepted and established. That we should be kept continually on the line of reality in every way.

That should be the prayer amongst us continually. I say, Lord, whatever it means, make it real. Whatever it costs, keep it real.

Don't let us become a formal people. A people just set in a way that keep things living. Keep things real.

Keep things working all the time. It needs be against what is wrong, what is false, what is evil. The uncovering of all things.

That being hidden. Simply hold the Lord up that he cannot go on with us if it must be uncovered. Let's have it all out in the light.

Lord, be faithful. Be true. Be right.

Now if you read again the early chapters of the book of the Revelation, you'll see that all that I have been saying is found there. And I am he that liveth. I am he that liveth.

I was dead. Behold, I am alive forevermore. Have the keys, the symbols of authority.

Now to the churches. It's the living God who is bringing everything to judgment. To bless where he can bless as things correspond to his mind.

To judge with terrible judgment where things are otherwise. It's just like that. But he is there making his mighty appeal to the churches to get into line with himself as the one that lives.

You see, it is livingness that governs everything. The livingness of the Lord. Oh, you churches, you cannot just go on as though the Lord were far away and out of touch and out of relationship.

It's all just a system of things. No, he's the living God right here on the spot presenting himself. And everything has got to be very real in the presence of the living God.

Well, I hope that in striking the serious note, because it is a serious matter and it is a matter which brings us into the realm of very great reality. I hope that that serious side is well offset by reminding you that if things do measure up to the meaning of this very title of the Lord, the living God in the midst. If things come into line with that place of very great blessing, very great enrichment, the living God for us is no small thing.

To have his jealousy for us is no small thing. To have him in the midst of us is no small thing. So, we have this ministry, the ministry of revealing, manifesting the reality of the living God.

Look again at that letter, that whole letter from which those words, this ministry are taken. You see how everything is living, isn't it? It's all so real, so real. May the Lord make it like that.

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