

'Who Shall Ascend?'

by T. Austin-Sparks

T. Austin-Sparks explores the themes of ascension, divine purpose, and the ultimate victory of believers through their relationship with Christ as the Lamb on Mount Zion.

Scripture: Job 42:6, Psalm 22:6, Psalm 24:3, Ephesians 1:20, Philippians 3:13, Hebrews 13:20, 1 Peter 5:4, Revelation 14:1

Topics: "The Cross", "Sanctification"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks delves into the profound question posed in Psalms 24:3 about who can ascend to the hill of the Lord and stand in His holy place, providing an answer from Revelation 14:1-5 where the Lamb stands on mount Zion with a select group of 144,000. The sermon emphasizes the journey from the Cross to the glory, portraying the Lamb's victory and the company's complete oneness with Him. It highlights the end goal of God to have a company fully united with His Son, reflecting His nature and character, and serving a significant vocation in the ages to come.

Transcript

"Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place?" (Ps. 24:3).

"And I saw, and behold, the Lamb standing on the mount Zion, and with him a hundred and forty and four thousand, having his name, and the name of his Father, written on their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven, as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of a great thunder: and the voice which I heard was as the voice of harpers harping with their harps: and they sing as it were a new song before the throne, and before the four living creatures and the elders: and no man could learn the song save the hundred and forty and four thousand, even they that had been purchased out of the earth. These are they that were not defiled with women; for they are virgins. These are they that follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth. These were purchased from among men, to be the firstfruits unto God and unto the Lamb. And in their mouth was found no lie: they are without blemish" (Rev. 14:1-5).

The Question Answered

You will, I think, recognize that these two passages constitute question and answer. "Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? Who shall stand in his holy place?" The answer -- "I saw the Lamb standing on the mount Zion, and with him a hundred and forty and four thousand." The beginning and the end; the anticipation, the realization; the question, the answer.

In the Psalms, as you know, we have a context which very closely corresponds to what is in the fourteenth chapter of the Revelation. Psalm 22 portrays the Good Shepherd giving His life for the sheep: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" -- words which, as we know, were later wrung from the Saviour's lips as He hung upon the tree (Mark 15:34). The answer to that Why? is in Revelation 14. Then in Psalm 23 we see Him as the Great Shepherd in resurrection, and again there is the answering voice from the New Testament -- "The God of peace brought again from the dead the great shepherd of the sheep with the blood of an eternal covenant" (Heb. 13:20). In Psalm 24 He is the Chief Shepherd; and again the answering voice -- "When the chief shepherd shall be manifested, ye shall receive the crown of glory" (1 Peter 5:4). There is the whole story, the story of the Cross, the story of the sheep and the Shepherd. Although the metaphor does change in Rev. 14 and it is the Lamb Who is referred to and not the Shepherd, nevertheless the flock idea is preserved and He is found in that identification with the rest -- the Lamb, and with Him a hundred and forty-four thousand. So you see that in this first meditation we are really stepping right over to the end, and it is the end that we are going to contemplate now in a few simple statements.

A Company in Oneness With the Son on Mount Zion

What is the end? Well, so far as God's determination is concerned, it is that there shall be at least a company which has been brought into the utmost oneness with His Son. "THESE are they that follow the Lamb WHITHERSOEVER he goeth," and in their nature and character and fellowship, oneness is complete. I think that, superficially, is what is represented by the Lamb on mount Zion. It is not the whole story, it does not cover the whole ground of redemption. As you notice in the context, there will be others brought out of the great vintage. But these are a "firstfruits unto God," and they seem to me to say quite definitely that God will have a company which answers to His Son in fullness. That is the end, and everything else will be bound up with that and will hang upon that. All creation is now fixed upon this company. It is the heart of things.

Why? For what purpose? That is not the object of our present consideration, but how much is bound up with that! It is a focal point, it is the heart of things, it is that which brings God His first complete satisfaction in His people. The very phrase "firstfruits UNTO GOD" is significant. It is not my interest or concern to speak about firstfruits at this time, but what this represents for the heart of God does concern us pre-eminently, and the picture in itself is very forceful.

You know quite well that in every realm of cultivation where the husbandman has laboured and had long patience, day by day as the time draws near he moves about eagerly looking for the first signs of an answer to his labours, his toils, his longings, his waitings, his anxieties. The day comes when he has enough to assure him that it has not been in vain. He gathers it as a token of what is yet to be. He finds his heart satisfaction in the first place in that first gathering, the firstfruits. I think that is just what this means, that God gets His first satisfaction in that which is here brought before us. All that that means requires more time than we can give to it at the moment. But that is the one great hour towards which everything is moving, and a great hour it will indeed be.

Then, of course, we have to bring that right into our own midst, to challenge our own hearts with it and ask whether that great hour and all that it means may not be implicit in our own being led to contemplate this matter at this time. May not our meditation, in the intention of God, be related to the realization of that something which is fully to God's satisfaction? I think we would desire it to be so. Our hearts would respond and say, Yes, may it be so, and I feel that we are not presumptuous in saying it is so, in so far as

we, a mere fragment of the whole though we be, are concerned with that great vision. The Lamb standing on mount Zion with the hundred and forty-four thousand has meaning for us, which we must consider and heed.

The End in Glory Already Secured in the Lord Jesus

If that is so, then there are certain things which you and I must believe. Everyone who belongs to the Lord and stands in the light of His full purpose of redemption must believe, firstly, that the end in glory and victory is secured unto us in the Lord Jesus now. That end requires nothing to be done so far as the security is concerned; it is accomplished and finished. Surely the thing which ought to stir the deepest note of worship and praise in our hearts is just this, that the end is secure. It is secured in glory.

To put that in another way is to say that a glorious end is secured for the people of God. From God's standpoint there needs to be nothing done to make the end more glorious than has already been done. That of course is the simple fundamental basis of our faith in the Lord Jesus, but nevertheless the ground of continual challenge and conflict. So far as God's work is concerned, the Lamb does stand now on mount Zion with the hundred and forty-four thousand; it is secured. Oh, that the Lord would get that more definitely, abidingly settled in the hearts of His people! It is the only ground of real rest, assurance, steadiness of life and of joy. "If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?" (Ps. 11:3); and if that foundation in any way be shaken, then everything topples and falls. In this matter we need be no "futurists"; we must be experimentalists. The Lamb does stand, for all divine intents and purposes, upon mount Zion with that secured company. The end in glory and the victory IS secured in Christ.

The End Will Justify the Way

But another thing which we must believe -- which if necessary we must battle to believe -- is that the end will fully justify the way, and God will be fully vindicated in the way by which He has led us. That is more difficult. It touches us at so many points. It is not easy to believe that the experiences of this life, the ways by which the Lord leads us, all that which from time to time makes our very foundations rock -- the suffering, the affliction, the disappointment, the sorrow, the perplexity, the bewilderment, yes, and everything else which comes into these lives which have been given to God -- it is not easy to believe that the day is coming when we shall say positively and definitely, "God made no mistake, He knew what He was doing, and He did the right thing!" In face of all you are passing through, the whole state of your life just now, it is difficult perhaps to believe that all that is right, precisely right. The end is going to justify the way, to vindicate God's dealing with us. At the end we shall say positively: "God made no mistakes!" In little ways in our lives, when we have passed through trying ordeals, deep and dark experiences, and have come out at the other end into the meaning of it, we have been able to say, "I would not have been without it for anything; I am glad I had the experience." And yet while we were going through it, the very last thing we would have said would have been that. The afterwards strangely transforms the whole thing. In the issue we say, "After all, it was not so wrong as I thought it was: it was right!"

This company called the hundred and forty-four thousand (do not be too literal about that, we shall have something to say about that presently), has been purchased from among men. They went through it as no others ever went through it, they met the first force of the scorching sun to ripen them, they pioneered this way and they knew what tasting the sufferings of the Lamb means. I cannot but believe that when this company stands on mount Zion with the Lamb, the one thing they will say will be, "He knew what He was doing with us. It was right. Now we would not be without the experience for anything, this justifies all.

Although sometimes we were tempted to question God as to whether He was handling us the right way, whether He was being quite fair with us, we can see now, in the light of the issue, that it was not only right, but it was the only thing! Nothing else would have done."

We have to seek grace from God to get there as far as we can now, and believe that God is no mere spectator of our sufferings and trials and adversities, looking on, coldly watching, but that He has the whole thing in hand. "He knoweth the way that I take": but He is not just a spectator. According to Job, who knew something about it, that is the verdict: "He performeth that which is appointed for me: and many such things are with him" (Job 23:10,14).

Now go back over the first chapters of the book of Job and see the thing that is appointed for him, and which God knows. "Ye... have seen the end of the Lord, how that the Lord is full of pity, and merciful" (James 5:11). That word covers the case of Job.

We are dealing with very difficult things. It is easy to say and to hear words like these, but we have to strengthen ourselves and one another in the Lord for all that it means to reach that glorious consummation. One of the ways in which we can do that is simply to say to one another: "We believe God so thoroughly that we affirm that even in the most difficult situations He will be justified in the end. We shall say to Him: 'Thou wast right, I would not have been without the experience for anything'." Some of you perhaps cannot imagine yourselves saying that, but we are all going to say that in the end, if only we will not break faith with God. The end will justify the way and vindicate God.

The Lamb Standing on Mount Zion

The terms of this passage in Revelation 14 are themselves significant and indicate things. "I saw... the Lamb..." That at once signifies suffering and sacrifice. "And with him a hundred and forty and four thousand... purchased." These are not only redeemed ones; these have been brought into a very close fellowship with what that very title, the Lamb, means -- suffering, sacrifice. It is going to be that to bring about such a oneness as is here indicated.

"Standing on the mount Zion." This is a place which occupies a very great prominence throughout the Word of God, and it always signifies the highest point and peak of attainment. It is the realization of all aspirations. "Whither the tribes go up" (Ps. 122:4) There are many references to mount Zion, and it is a very, very conspicuous thing in the Scriptures. It always suggests some object of highest ambition, strongest aspiration, and, to be there, the gratification of the deepest desire of the life. You know how in Israel's life mount Zion stood as the one object of constant thought and desire. We may say more about that, but here is a place of attainment of the highest possible realization and accomplishment. The Lamb has achieved it, He has secured it. He stands there like a mighty Victor over all that which sought to impede His upward movement; from the very depths of hell, up, up, ever up through successive realms until He attained the highest place in glory and stands upon mount Zion triumphant in the full accomplishment of victory. It is a symbolic way of saying what Paul puts in direct spiritual language: "He raised him from the dead, and made him to sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule, and authority, and power, and dominion, and every name that is named" (Eph. 1:20-21). "Far above all!" "...the Lamb standing on the mount Zion": a tremendous achievement, a tremendous victory! He is there! It has cost a lot to get there, to achieve that eminence, but He is there. "And with him...". It is a picture of the full realization of the greatest possibilities of human destiny in the divine counsels.

Mount ZION! Well, Zion itself again adds to the implication. Zion means stronghold, fortress. It was literally the mount Zion in Jerusalem that was the point of the greatest challenge ever issued to the people of God. That fortress of the Jebusites held out for centuries. Even Joshua never subdued it. It retained its strength and resistance through the whole four hundred years of the Judges and went right on in a long, long history of impregnability, till David came to the throne. Then when David was at last made king, the first challenge to his men was about Jebus, this stronghold of the Jebusites, who were so sure of their position and who lived so much upon their history that they said, "We can put the lame and the blind to defend this, that is all it requires!" But they had now to meet a new factor, which is another subject. David was king, and that changed the situation, and it was not long before Joab assailed and stormed that stronghold and it became the city of David, the great king, and the glorious story, the other side of the story of Zion, commenced. Zion was the very heart of all glory and a stronghold indeed.

Interpret that in spiritual language and meaning. See what it means for the LAMB to stand upon mount Zion. What a victory, what a strength, what a position, what an achievement, what a standing! How impregnable is that position: to come to finality where there is not a foe left that can raise a finger to challenge the position, so great is the accomplishment of the Lamb! And so glorious will be the position to which He will bring us on mount Zion.

The Company With the Lamb

(a) Selected

"And with him a hundred and forty and four thousand." We have said we must not be too literal about that. That will be a very great company literally out of all, but it is only a significant number; that is, it implies certain things. Firstly, it implies selectiveness, there is no doubt about it; but not selectiveness upon merit, and not selectiveness upon foreordination. But it means that God has seen here a people who have gone further with Him, who have answered more fully to His heart than many, and He has made them what is here called a firstfruits unto Himself, He has gathered them into this accomplishment of Christ; and the real value of that is found in the vocation which they will fulfil. That is not for our present consideration, we shall come to it probably some other time. But this company is to fulfil a tremendous vocation in the ages to come. It is the way in which they are going to serve the Lord that makes for their value to the Lord. And they are chosen. I do not like the word "selected," for I know all that circles round that word and has been crystallized into a doctrine. But leave all that and just take the fact itself. They are a selected company; they do stand in the thought of God as a company peculiarly precious to Him, because of how they satisfy Him and can serve Him.

(b) Representative

They are -- and here is our safeguard -- not only selected but representative. It would be a poor thing if all the harvest were only the firstfruits. I do not think any husbandman would be very satisfied if his whole harvest were just what he got in firstfruits. The rest follows. Here it is representative, and that great divine thought of representation is found throughout the Word of God. The Lord is always seeking to get something which will lead the way and serve those who will follow and, by their relatedness to all others, be a ministry of greater fullness to them.

That is the thought -- to be a ministry of greater fullness. That is a principle working out in us, perhaps, every day. Why does the Lord take us through these exceedingly hot fires of trial? The answer is, that others may benefit. It is to pioneer the way for others. Of course it raises the question: What are you going

to be content with? Are you really set upon following the Lamb whithersoever He goeth? You see, none of these words or phrases used here is to be taken merely literally.

Not that the literal side of them is ruled out -- "in their mouth was found no lie," and so on -- but it is not just the literal thing; it represents a separateness unto God from every kind of worldly contamination. Lots of things are involved in this. Why should we be so utter? There are plenty of Christians who will get to heaven all right who do not go this way and do not have this experience. The answer is that God is after a representative company. The answer to all such problems is just that.

Those concerned have no reason to consider themselves more important than others. It is too costly, far too costly, ever to be on a pedestal. Those who go this way are going to be thoroughly emptied and undone in themselves, they are going to know the fellowship of His sufferings. That will take all spiritual conceit out of them. They are not the elite in their own eyes; anything but that. Their cry will often be, "I am a worm, and no man" (Ps. 22:6). It will be with them as with Job "Wherefore I abhor myself" (Job 42:6).

That is the cry of the hundred and forty-four thousand: poor specimens in their own eyes, but God has bound up with them values for others. That is where He finds so much joy and satisfaction in them, and that is where eventually they will find their gratification -- to be able to serve the Lord for others, to be in a position to do it. Now that does not belong to some mystical day when the Lamb stands upon mount Zion; that belongs to now; we are right in it. The question of that position of ascendancy and of our usefulness to someone else is bound up with every trial through which we pass now, every sorrow of this present hour.

Believe me, this is all present in a spiritual way. There will be a consummation, there will be an issue. I do not know that I expect to see a literal fulfilment of this -- it does not concern us just now -- but I know that the spiritual reality is grim and desperate and terrific in this present life. It is here now. Where do you stand? Are you down there or up here spiritually? That determines your usefulness to others. Are you under or are you above? Are you grovelling, or are you in ascendancy with the Lamb, knowing victory? That determines how far you can be used by the Lord to minister to others now. Revelation 14 is a spiritual matter. The company is representative in order to serve the Lord.

A Settled Confidence in God

Just this closing word. We must seek to believe in our hearts that the dealings of God with us are always suited by Him to the object which He has in view. That is the realm of mystery for us, but it is true. What I mean is this -- that the more understanding we have of God's ways, the more we shall realize that the ways He has taken with us were the only ways, so far as we were concerned, which would reach His end. With others He would have to adopt other ways. Our ways with the Lord are very lonely ways because they are just ours alone, apparently.

Many may have gone the same way, but when you go through things under the hand of the Lord it is to you as though no one had ever been that way before, you are alone in it. There are many ways in which the Lord deals with us which are peculiar to us, and they are the only ways by which He could reach His end in our case. You see, the Lord does not always tell us why He withholds or forbids or takes things away, why He does not give us what we ask for and want, or why He takes from us something that we would cling to.

He does not tell us why, but He does know this one thing about us, namely, **HOW VERY MUCH WE CAN BE OUR OWN ENEMIES**. We want something; the Lord withholds it. If we had it, it would do us utmost

harm. We would cling to something. The Lord takes it away. He knows that our continued possession of it would do us harm, and that our own desire in realization would make our desire our enemy. He knows all that. Some of you have had experience enough to look back and see where your heart was set upon something, and the Lord either did not let you have it or He took it away, at the time you went through the depths.

Today you thank God with all your heart that He never let you have that. You say today, "I can see what mischief that would have done, and how good the Lord was in causing me pain then." This is not fiction, this is true. We have to believe that the Lord's methods with us are suited to His object, and He knows exactly what He is doing. Oh, do ask the Lord for grace to believe that. We must, because while we have a controversy with the Lord, feeling hard toward Him, He cannot get on with what He is after.

It is only when we get through by grace and say, "Well, Lord, I do not understand at all, it all seems to me to be such a contradiction, but Thou knowest what Thou art doing, and Thou knowest this is the only way in which Thou canst reach Thine end where I am concerned, and I trust Thee about it." If only we could get there, how quickly the Lord would bring through to the place where He could supply our need in such a way as would really facilitate the realization of His purposes in our lives.

I know how difficult a thing I am saying to you, but these things are true. Remember that the Lord always holds before His people His best and never a second best. There is an alternative, there is something else, but the Lord never tells us about a second, He never refers to the less. He never says, "This is My first, but you can have this other if you like." The Lord always keeps the first in view for His people, and all that He has to say to them is about the first. His warnings are lest they should miss that.

His exhortations and urgings and appealings are concerned with the first. He does not make provision for our low standards. He gives us no assurance that, if we do not go right on to the hundred and forty-four thousand, it will not matter.

And is that not exactly what Paul was thinking of and reaching after when he wrote to the Philippians, "One thing I do" (Phil. 3:13)? "I have not two things in mind so that if I should at any time feel inclined not to be quite so out-and-out I can have my alternative." No! "One thing I do, forgetting the things which are behind, and stretching forward to the things which are before, I press on toward the goal unto the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." "Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place?" The answer is here on mount Zion, with all that it means to be there with the Lamb.

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