

Why the Prophet's Message Is Not Apprehended

by T. Austin-Sparks

The principle of the Cross is essential for knowing the Lord, which is the most important thing in the mind of God for us, and is the basis of all usefulness to the Lord.

Scripture: Isaiah 53:1, Jeremiah 9:23-24, Matthew 19:22, Luke 18:24, John 21:18, Acts 13:27, 2 Corinthians 3:14-18, Galatians 5:11, Ephesians 1:19-21, 1 Peter 1:10-12

Topics: "The Offense of the Cross", "Knowledge of the Lord"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes that the message of the prophets was not apprehended by the people because they were unwilling to accept the concept of a suffering Messiah, which is central to the Gospel. He explains that the offense of the Cross leads to a personal and national rejection of the true nature of Christ, resulting in a lack of spiritual understanding. Sparks highlights that true knowledge of the Lord comes through the application of the Cross in our lives, which requires self-emptying and a willingness to let go of worldly desires. He urges believers to seek a deeper relationship with God, which is foundational for effective service in His Kingdom. Ultimately, the Cross is presented as essential for spiritual growth and understanding, leading to a more profound knowledge of the Lord.

Transcript

Reading: Acts 13:27, 15; II Corinthians 3:14-18; Isaiah 53:1.

The prophets were read, as Paul points out here, every Sabbath. It was the fixed custom to read the law and the prophets every Sabbath, and it may be pointed out that it was not just at one particular time in the day that this was done, but all through the Sabbath day the law and the prophets were being read in the synagogues. And yet it says that although the very rulers themselves, as well as the dwellers in Jerusalem who attended the temple, heard that reading of the prophets so continuously, they never heard the voices of the prophets. And because they failed to hear that inner something, which was more than just the audible reading of what the prophets had said, they lost everything that was intended for them, as this thirteenth chapter of Acts shows. The Apostles left them and turned to the Gentiles, who had an ear ready to hear.

That is a matter of no small consequence and seriousness. It is evident that it behoves us to seek to hear the voices of the prophets, really to know what the prophets were saying. Let us again look at the

statement: "...because they knew him not, nor the voices of the prophets." Why did they not know? Why did they not hear? There is one basic answer to that enquiry which is going to occupy us just now, and which brings us down to foundations, really to the root of things.

THE OFFENCE OF THE CROSS

(a) A Suffering Messiah

The answer to that enquiry is this - because they were not willing to accept the Cross. That is what went to the root of the whole matter. Firstly, they were not willing to admit of a suffering Messiah. They had their own minds well made up, both as to what kind of Messiah their Messiah would be, and as to what He would do, and as to the results of His advent; and anything that ran counter to that fixed mentality was not only not accepted - it was an offence. They could not admit into the realm of their contemplation that their coming Messiah would be a suffering Messiah. Yet the prophets were always speaking about the suffering Messiah. Isaiah, at that point in his prophecies which we know as chapter 53, presents the classic on the suffering Messiah, and yet he opens by saying: "Who hath believed our message?"

I think we need not stay to gather further evidence that that was their attitude. Right the way through it was just that. Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, was dealing with that very thing. Towards the end of the letter he spoke about the offence of the Cross, and he set that over against the Judaizers, who were dogging his steps everywhere and seeking to prejudice his ministry, and at whose hands he was suffering. He 'bore branded on his body the marks of the Lord Jesus' (Galatians 6:17). Why? Because of his message of the Cross. He said, 'If I were willing to drop that, I could escape all this suffering; it is the offence of the Cross which is the cause of all the trouble' (Galatians 5:11). And all the way through we see the Jews' unwillingness to admit of a suffering Messiah.

(b) The Way of Self-Emptying

But then it went further than that. It became not only a national issue but a personal one. They would not accept the principle of the Cross in themselves. You find that representative individuals of the nation, who came to the Lord Jesus from time to time, were presented with the offence of the Cross - and off they went again, not prepared to accept it. Nicodemus was very interested in the kingdom which the Messiah was going to set up, which he was expecting and anticipating, but it became a personal matter of the Cross. Before the Lord was through with Nicodemus, He had brought into his full view the serpent lifted up in the wilderness. That was an offence.

Another man, who has become known to us as the rich young ruler, went away very sorrowful because of the offence of the Cross. It was no use for the Lord, at that time, before the Cross had actually taken place, to speak in precise terms about it to other than His disciples, but He applied the principle, which is the same thing. He applied the principle to this young man. 'If, as you say, you are interested in the Kingdom and in eternal life, this is the way: the way of emptying - utter self emptying.' "He went away sorrowful: for he was one that had great possessions" (Matthew 19:22). The Lord said, "How hardly (with what difficulty) shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God!" (Luke 18:24). The offence of the Cross finds them out.

Now here, with the Jews as a whole, they were making the kingdom of God an earthly thing on the principles of this world - and do not let us blame them without blaming ourselves. This is our battle right up to date. It is a matter that finds us all out at heart. Oh, you may not be expecting that through your

preaching of Christ a temporal kingdom will be set up and you will get a literal crown to wear and a throne to sit upon - that may not be your outlook or mentality; but are we not, almost every day of our lives, in trouble because the Lord hides from us everything that He is doing and starves our souls of their ambition to see things, to have things? Is that not the basis of a great deal of our trouble? We want to see, we want to have, we want the proofs and the evidences. We do really, after all, want a kingdom that can be appraised by our senses of sight and hearing and feeling - a palpable kingdom, the answer in tangible form to all our efforts and labours; and the opposite of that is a tremendous strain upon faith, and sometimes even brings us to a serious crisis.

Why does not the Lord do this and that, which we think He ought to do? It is simply this soul-craving to have proof and demonstration; and this is why, if there is anything built up in Christian work which is obvious, big, impressive, where there is a great thing being organized and a great movement on foot and all is in the realm of something that can be seen, crowds of Christians flock after it; or if there are manifestations, things that seem to be clear proofs, the crowds will be found there. The enemy can carry away multitudes by imitation works of the Holy Ghost in the realm of demonstrations and proofs. We are so impressionable, we must possess; and that is exactly the same principle as that which governed the rulers. They were not prepared for the principle of the Cross to be applied in this way - an utter self-emptying, being brought to an end of everything but the Lord Himself.

THE PROPHETS' THEME - KNOWING THE LORD

Now you see that does bring us to the matter of the voices of the prophets. What was the one thing the prophets were always talking about? It was about knowing the Lord. The thing that was lacking amongst the Lord's people in the days of the prophets was the knowledge of the Lord. There were plenty of people who were prepared to have the Lord for what He could do for them, but as for the Lord Himself... ah, that was another matter.

What is the Lord after with you and with me? Is He first of all wanting us to do things? The idea of what is of God today is chiefly associated with the things which are being done for Him, the work we are engaged in, and so on - that is, with what is objective and outward. But the Lord is not first of all concerned about how much we do. He is far more concerned that, whether we do little or much, every bit of it should come out of a knowledge of Himself. Any amount can be done for the Lord in Christian work and activities, just as you do other work, but it may not proceed from your own deep knowledge of God. The Lord is concerned above all else that we should know Him. "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him that glorieth glory in this, that he hath understanding, and knoweth me" (Jeremiah 9:23,24, A.R.V.).

May that not explain the very principle of the Cross that is being applied to us? The Lord does not satisfy and gratify; along many lines He seems again and again to be saying 'No' to quite a lot that we crave for; and, being denied, we often come to the point where we would almost give up everything and allow the biggest questions as to our relationship with the Lord. And yet what He is after all the time, by His denials and withholdings or delays, is to deepen our knowledge of Himself. What matters with the Lord before anything and everything else is not that we should be in any given place doing a lot of Christian work (do not let that stop you serving the Lord!), but that we should be there as one who knows the Lord. Our opportunities for serving Him will spring out of our knowledge of Him; He will see to that. The Lord the Spirit is arranging His own work. He knows where need exists, and when He sees someone who can meet that need He can make contact.

KNOWLEDGE OF THE LORD BASIC TO ALL USEFULNESS

That is the principle in the New Testament. We see it in the life of the Lord Jesus Himself. That meeting between Christ and the woman of Samaria was not just a casual happening, a pretty story. No, you have principles. The Holy Ghost wrote those narratives, and involved principles in every incident. Here is One who has water to give that the world knows not of, and here is a thirsty woman. God sees to it that the one in need is brought into touch with the One who has the supply. That is a law. If you have not got the supply, it is very largely empty work that is done for the Lord.

The principle of the Cross works out along many lines, in many ways - testing, trying, emptying us, in order to bring us to the place where we know the Lord, and where our joy in the Lord and our enthusiasm and our Christian life are the result of something deeper than the mere momentum produced by doing many things, running about from meeting to meeting, giving addresses, being occupied on the crest of a wave of engagements in Christian work. The Lord does not want it to be like that. I am not saying that you will never be on the crest of a wave, that you will never have your hands full; but the Lord's way of making us useful servants is so to deal with us as to make us know Him, so that, whether occupied in Christian work in an outward way or not, we are there with a knowledge of the Lord. What is so necessary for us is an increasing measure of the preciousness of the Lord to our own hearts; that, whether we are able to do anything or not, He should still remain very precious to us. That is what He wants.

That is very simple, but it is basic to everything. You are there in some place where you cannot be always talking about the Lord, where you can do very little; but if the Lord is precious to you, that is service to Him, and in you He has available a vessel for anything more that He wants. I am sure the Lord will never bring us out and entrust us with responsibilities until He has become very precious to us in the place where we are, even though many other things that we would like are being denied to and withheld from us. It is the principle of the Cross.

Nicodemus comes with all his 'fullness'. He is a man with a great fullness - a ruler of the Jews, in high standing, in a place of influence, and much more. He represents a fullness of a religious kind. Then the Lord virtually says to him: 'You have to let it all go, and start all over again like a newborn babe. You are concerned about the Kingdom of Heaven, but you cannot bring any of that into the Kingdom.' To the rich young ruler He says, in effect, 'You cannot bring your riches in here.' You may have a lot of natural wealth - intellectual, financial, influential, positional, but that does not give you any standing in the Kingdom of Heaven at all. The wealthiest, the fullest, the biggest here in this world receives no more of the glance of the Lord in their direction than the poorest and the weakest. All are brought down here - you must be born again, you must start from zero in this matter of the Kingdom of Heaven. The Kingdom is not a matter of eating and drinking, it is a matter of spiritual measure; and you start spiritual measure by being born of the Spirit. The new life is utterly spiritual from the very first breath - something that was not before, something new.

Spiritual measure is just knowing the Lord; that is all. Our standing in the Kingdom of Heaven is simply a matter of knowing the Lord, and if we are going to gain higher place it is not going to be at all by preferences, but by the increase of our spiritual measure. People who count in heaven are spiritual people, and what counts is the degree of their spirituality; and spirituality is knowing the Lord. We may take it that the Lord applies Himself utterly to this matter of bringing us to know Him. That is the thing that really does count.

THE CROSS BASIC TO ALL KNOWLEDGE OF THE LORD

They could not hear the voices of the prophets because the prophets were talking about a suffering Messiah, and there was something inside the people which had closed the door; they were predisposed against anything like that, and so they could not hear. Even the disciples of the Lord Jesus were in that position. When He began to refer to His Cross they said, "Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall never be unto thee" (Matthew 16:22). A suffering Messiah? Oh, no! But they did come to the place where the Cross had its very deep application, where it meant an end of everything for them. The Lord precipitated that whole question, and you see them after His crucifixion - they have lost their Messianic Kingdom, they have lost everything, they are stripped and emptied. And then what happened? They began then to know, just began to know, and their knowledge grew and grew; but it was of another order entirely. So you find, in the rest of the New Testament, that, in their own history and in their instruction of others, two things go together. They are like the negative and the positive in an electrical circuit - there can be no current without both. The negative is the application of the principle of the Cross, which says No, No, No: an end: death to yourself, death to the world, death to all your own natural life. But the positive is the Holy Ghost, the Spirit of God, mightily present, but always hand in hand with the Cross. With those two acting always together, the negative and the positive - the Cross, and heavenly purpose and heavenly power and effectiveness - you find that there is movement and an ever-growing knowledge of the Lord.

We cannot have the knowledge of the Lord - the most important thing in the mind of God for us - except on the ground of the continuous application of the Cross, and that will go right on to the end. Do not imagine that there will come a day when you have done with the Cross, when the principle of the Cross will no longer be necessary and when you have graduated from the school where the Cross is the instrument of the Lord. Such a day never will be! More and more you will come to recognise the necessity for that Cross. If you are going on into greater fullness of knowledge - I mean spiritual knowledge of the Lord - and therefore greater fullness of usefulness to Him, you must take it as settled that that principle of the Cross is going to be applied more and more deeply as you go on.

Oh, God write that in our hearts! for surely we all know the need of the Cross; and those who have known most about it are conscious most of its need still. We have seen the terrible tragedy of people who knew the message of the Cross in fullness, and who after many years have been a positive contradiction to that very message - marked by self-assertiveness, self-importance, impatience, irritability, so that other people have been unable to live with them. Are you one of those habitually irritable people? I do not mean one of those persons who sometimes is overtaken in a fault. The Lord is patient with the upsets that come here and there along the way, but are we habitually irritable, short-tempered, difficult to live with? That is a denial of the Cross, and that has wrecked the life and work of many a missionary.

The Cross will be applied right on to the end, and, altogether apart from our faults and the things in our constitution and nature which have to be dealt with, in this coming to know the Lord for still greater usefulness we go from death to death on that side of things. We think of some known to us. We marvel at the way the Lord has been able to use them, the large place into which He has put them, what riches He has given them; but of late they have been plunged into depths of death never known before. It is evidently unto something more, something greater still. It is like that; the knowledge of the Lord requires it in an ever-growing way.

KNOWLEDGE AND USEFULNESS SAFEGUARDED BY THE CROSS

But furthermore, there is no safe place, apart from the constant application of the principle of the Cross. Safety absolutely demands it. Nothing is safe in our hands. The more the Lord blesses, the more peril there is. The greatest peril comes when the Lord begins to use us. You may say, 'That does not say very much for our sanctification.' It certainly does not say very much for 'eradication'! Well, here is Paul. Did that man know anything about the Cross? Would you say he was a crucified man? If he was not, who was? Did he know the Lord? And with all that he knew of the Cross and the Lord, did he know that he needed the Cross to be applied right on to the end? He will definitely place it on record - "... that I should not be exalted overmuch, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me." "That I should not be exalted overmuch"! (II Cor. 12:7). And mark you, he is saying that because of the great revelation that had been given him. He was caught up into heaven. It is a most perilous thing to be entrusted with Divine riches, so far as our flesh is concerned. The only safe place is where the Cross is still at work, touching all that is ourselves, touching all our independence of action.

Take all these Apostles - take Peter, a man who would act so independently, who liked to do things on his own and do what he wanted to do. We find it cropping up constantly. He is the man who acts without stopping to ask anybody. We have no hint that he ever got into fellowship with his brother disciples and said, 'I am thinking of doing so and so; I would very much like you to pray with me about it, and to tell me what you think; I have no intention of going on unless there is one mind among us.' Peter never did that sort of thing. He got an idea, and off he went. The Lord summed him up very well when He said: "When thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not" (John 21:18). That was Peter before the Cross was in-wrought in him. But see him afterwards. Why, in those early chapters of Acts, do we read "Peter and John", "Peter and John", "Peter and John"? Well, they are moving together now, there is relatedness. Is it an acknowledgment that Peter felt his need of co-operation and fellowship, that he had seen the perils and disasters into which independent action led him, even when his intentions and motives were of the best? These are just glimpses of how the Cross touches us in our impulsive, independent nature, our self-will, our self-strength. The Cross has to deal with all that to make things safe for God, and to keep us moving in the way of increasing knowledge of the Lord, which, as we have said, lies behind all our value to the Lord, all our usefulness, all our service.

THE CROSS OPENS THE WAY TO FULL KNOWLEDGE OF THE LORD

The Cross is the only way to spiritual knowledge. Important as study of the Word of God may be in its own realm, as laying a foundation for the Holy Spirit to work upon, you never come to a knowledge of the Lord simply by studying the Bible. The Holy Spirit may use what you know of the Bible to teach you much, to explain your experiences, to enable you to understand what the Lord is doing, but you never get this kind of spiritual knowledge by study and by teaching.

You must be prepared to let the Cross be so applied to your life that you are broken and emptied and fairly ground to powder - so that you are brought to the place where, if the Lord does not do something, you are finished. If you are prepared for that way, you will get to know the Lord. That is the only way. It cannot be by addresses or lectures. They have their value, but you do not know the Lord spiritually along those lines.

The full knowledge of the Lord is reserved to us who live in this dispensation, because the latter is governed by the Cross. Peter himself had something to say about this:-

"Concerning which salvation prophets sought and searched diligently; who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you: searching what time or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did point unto, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glories that should follow them. To whom it was revealed, that not unto themselves, but unto you, did they minister these things, which now have been announced unto you...; which things angels desire to look into" (I Peter 1:10-12).

There you have two orders - prophets and angels - who did not know certain things which are revealed to us. The prophets knew much, but they were searching diligently to know something they could not discover. 'What does this mean?' they must have asked themselves. 'The Spirit of God is making us say these things, but what do they mean?' They sought diligently to know that which was reserved for us. Why could they not know? Because full knowledge is based upon the Cross, and the Cross had not taken place then. And angels, too, desire to look into these things. Can it be true? We thought angels knew everything! Surely angels have far more knowledge and intelligence than we have about these things? They do not know. "Which things angels desire to look into." Why do they not know? Angels have had no need of the Cross; the Cross has no meaning for them personally. It is on the basis of the Cross that full knowledge is entered into. Does that need any further argument?

THE CROSS SECURES POSITIVE, NOT ONLY NEGATIVE, RESULTS

So then, the Holy Spirit, in order to bring us to the full knowledge of the Lord and by means of that growing knowledge to make us useful to the Lord, must constantly work by means of the Cross in principle; and my closing word is this. The work is not all negative; the Lord works on a positive basis. You may think that the Lord is always saying No, that He is always against you, that the Cross is suppressive; but no, it is a positive instrument in the hands of the Spirit of God. God is working on a positive line. The fact is that, if ever the Holy Spirit brings us into a new knowing of the meaning of the Cross, He is after something more. That is the law of the Spirit of life.

You must remember that the Lord Jesus, in His resurrection, was not left just where He was before. Before He died He was on this earth, and then He died; and Paul refers to His raising from that death in these words: "the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to that working of the strength of his might which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and made him to sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all" (Ephesians 1:19-21). The resurrection carries Him through to the "far above all," and the principle of resurrection is always that of rebound - we may go down very deep, more deeply than ever we have known before, but the Spirit of God is intending that that shall issue in our being higher than ever before. So do not be afraid when you are feeling very empty, very finished, very much at the end. Ask the Lord that if this is truly the working of His Cross it shall be successful in what He intends for you; and if it is successful, you will be on higher ground afterward than ever you were before.

THE NEED FOR A DEFINITE TRANSACTION WITH THE LORD

We have said from time to time that the Cross does involve a crisis. For some this may be an overwhelming experience, the biggest thing that has happened in your life, even bigger than your conversion. It was so for some of us as we moved from the apprehension of the substitutionary aspect of the Cross, where we saw only what Christ had done for us, to the apprehension of our union with Christ in death, burial and resurrection. Whether or not you have a big crisis which divides your life in two, you must have a point of transaction with the Lord where you recognise that the Cross is in principle an utter,

all-inclusive reality that, sooner or later, is going to run to earth the last vestige of that self-life which is the ground of Satan's power. It is best at some point to have this understanding: 'I rejoice in the fact of Thy death for me, and I am saved on the ground of that death and my faith in it. But I died in Thee - that was Thy thought about me as a son of Adam. I could not bear to have all that that means brought to me at once, but I recognise that it has to be worked out as grace enables, and that sooner or later I have to come to an utter end; and I therefore commit myself to all Thou dost mean by the Cross.'

A transaction of that kind is necessary. Do not begin to kick when the Lord begins to work it out. He takes you at your word, but He is doing it with the definite object in view of getting you to a higher and fuller knowledge of Himself. Out of that growing knowledge of Him, the growing preciousness of the Lord, all real service will issue. It is not what we do, but what we have, that is the secret of service.

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