

A Voice Which May Be Missed

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of hearing the voice of the prophets and having spiritual vision in order to fulfill the vocation of the Church and bring about an impact from heaven.

Scripture: Deuteronomy 28:13, Proverbs 29:18, Acts 13:27, Romans 12:11

Topics: "Spiritual Vision", "Prophetic Ministry"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the importance of truly hearing and understanding the messages of the prophets, as seen in Acts 13:27, where the people of Jerusalem and their rulers failed to recognize the significance of what they heard, leading to their condemnation of Christ. He warns of the disastrous consequences of missing the voice behind the words of the prophets, highlighting the need for spiritual vision to grasp God's purposes and avoid self-destruction. The sermon underscores the critical role of vision in unifying God's people, providing purpose to life, and enabling growth and ascendancy, as demonstrated by the prophets in the Old and New Testaments.

Transcript

"For they that dwell in Jerusalem, and their rulers, because they knew him not, nor the voices of the prophets which are read every sabbath, fulfilled them by condemning Him" (Acts 13:27).

The above statement as a whole carries a significance which embraces a very great deal of history, but its direct and immediate implication is that if the people referred to - the dwellers in Jerusalem and their rulers - had been in the good of the most familiar things, they would have behaved very differently from the way in which they did behave. Every week, Sabbath by Sabbath, extending over a very great number of years, they heard things read; but eventually, because of their failure to recognise what they were hearing, they acted in a way entirely opposed to those very things, though under the sovereignty of God fulfilling them in so doing.

Surely that is a word of warning. It represents a very terrible possibility - to hear repeatedly the same things, and not to recognise their significance; to behave in a way quite contrary to our own interests, making for our own undoing, when it might have been otherwise.

The point is this - that there is a voice in the prophets which may be missed, a meaning which may not be apprehended, and the results may be disastrous for the people concerned. "The voices of the prophets": that suggests that there is something beyond the mere things that the prophet says. There is a 'voice'. We

may hear a sound, we may hear the words, and yet not hear the voice; that is something extra to the thing said. That is the statement here, that week by week, month after month, and year after year, men read the prophets audibly, and the people who heard the reading did not hear the voices. It is the voice of the prophets that we need to hear.

As you go through this thirteenth chapter of the Acts you are able to recognise that this little fragment is in a very crucial context. This chapter, to begin with, marks a development. There in Antioch were certain men, including Saul, and the Holy Ghost said: "Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them." That was a new development, a moving out, something far-reaching, very momentous; but you are not through the chapter before you come upon another crisis, which became inevitable when in a certain place a great crowd came together, and the Jews, refusing to be obedient to the Word, stirred up a revolt. The Apostles made this pronouncement: "It was necessary that the word of God should first be spoken to you. Seeing ye thrust it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles" (vs. 46); and they quoted a prophet (Isaiah 49:6) for their authority: "I have set thee for a light of the Gentiles." These were epochs in the history of the Church; and the Jews, as a whole, were turned from, and the Gentiles in a very deliberate way were recognised and brought in, because of this very thing - that the Jews had heard these prophets Sabbath by Sabbath but had not heard their voices.

Big things hang upon hearing the voice. Failure to hear may lead to irreparable loss. Very big things concerning Israel have come into the centuries since the time of Acts 13. It is not my intention to launch out on matters of prophecy concerning the Jews, but my point is this. On the one hand, it was no small thing to fail to hear the voices of the prophets. On the other hand, you notice that the Gentiles rejoiced. It says here, "As the Gentiles heard this, they were glad, and glorified the word of God." Well, on both sides, it is a great thing to fail to hear what could be heard if there were an ear for hearing and it is a great thing to hear and give heed. I think that is a sufficiently serious foundation and background to engage our attention.

OLD TESTAMENT PROPHETS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Let us now look more closely at this matter of "the voices of the prophets". A fact of very great significance is this, that the prophets have such a large place in the New Testament. I wonder if you have taken account of how large that place is. You will not need to be reminded of how largely the Gospels call upon the major prophets, as they are called. "That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet..." - how often that statement alone occurs in the Gospels. It came in from the birth of the Lord Jesus, and in that connection alone on several occasions the major prophets are quoted. But when you move from the Gospels into the Acts and the Epistles, you move largely into what are called the minor prophets - not minor because they were of less account than the others, but because the record of their writings is smaller. It is tremendously impressive and significant that these minor prophets should be drawn upon so extensively in the New Testament; they are quoted over fifty times.

PROPHETS MEN OF VISION

From that general significance, two factors emerge. One as to the prophets themselves: why do they have so large a place in the New Testament? Well, the answer to that will be largely another question. What do prophets signify? They are the 'seers' (I Samuel 9:9); they are the men who see and, in seeing, act as eyes for the people of God. They are the men of vision; and their large place in the New Testament surely therefore indicates how tremendously important spiritual vision is for the people of God throughout this

dispensation. Of course, the other thing is the vision itself, but I am not concerned just now to speak about what the vision was and is - that, with other aspects, may come later. At the moment, I feel the Lord is concerned with this factor - the tremendous importance of spiritual vision if the people of God are to fulfil their vocation. It resolves itself into a matter solely of vision unto vocation, and the vocation will not be fulfilled without vision.

VISION IMPARTS PURPOSE TO LIFE

So for a moment let us dwell upon the place of vision - and you will not think that I am talking about 'visionariness'. No, it is something specific, it is the vision, it is something clearly defined. The prophets knew what they were talking about - not merely abstract ideas, but something very definite. Vision is something quite specific, something with which the Lord is concerned and which has become a mighty, dominating thing in the life of those who have it; clear, distinct, precise, specific; taking hold of and mastering and dominating them, so that the whole purpose of existence itself is gathered into it. Such people are at the place where they know why they have an existence, they know the purpose for which they are alive and are able to say what it is, and their horizon is bounded by that thing; they, with their whole life in all its aspects, are gathered into that, poised to that. It is an object which governs everything for them. It is not just living on this earth and doing many things and getting through somehow; but everything that has a place in life is linked with this definite, distinct, all-governing objective. It is such a vision which gives meaning to life.

It is not necessary for me to take you through Israel's history as governed by that very truth. You know quite well that, when Israel was in a right position, that is how things were - focused, definite, with everybody centred in one object. And, before we go further, let us say again that all these prophets - men who were the eyes of God for a people, and signifying to that people God's thought and purpose concerning them, their Divine vocation, God's interpretation of their very existence - these prophets who embodied that are all brought into the New Testament dispensation and into the Church, with this clear implication, that that is how the Church is to be if it is to get through. The Church is to be a seeing thing, dominated by a specific object and vision, knowing why it exists, having no doubt about it, and poised in utter abandonment thereto, bringing all other things in life into line with that. Our attitude has to be that, while in this world we necessarily have to do this and that, to earn our living and do our daily work, yet there is something governing all else: there is a Divine vision. These things have to bend to that one Divine end.

That is the first implication of the fact that the prophets have such a large place in this dispensation. We cannot now stay to follow that out in detail from the Word, but it would be very helpful to go through the New Testament, and see how the bringing in of the prophets is made to apply to the varied aspects of the Church's life. It is very impressive.

VISION A UNIFYING FACTOR

The prophets are governing this dispensation in this way. This vision, the vision, was the very cohesiveness and strength of Israel. When the vision was clearly before them, when their eyes were opened and they were seeing, when they were in line with God's purpose, when they were governed by that end to which God had called them, they were one people, made one by the vision. They had a single eye. That little phrase, "If... thine eye be single..." (Matthew 6:22), has a great deal more in it than we have recognised. A single eye - it unifies the whole life and conduct; it will unify all your behaviour. If you are a

man or a woman of one idea, everything will be brought into that. Of course, that is not always a very happy thing, though in this case it is. People who are obsessed and, as we say, 'have a bee in their bonnet', with nothing else to talk about but one thing, are often very trying people. But there is a right way, a Divine way, in which the people of God should be people of a single eye, a single idea; and that singleness of eye brings all the faculties into coordination.

During the rare periods when Israel was like that, they were a marvelously unified people. On the other hand, you can see how, when the vision faded and failed, they disintegrated, became people of all kinds of divided and schismatic interests and activities, quarrelling amongst themselves. How true is the word: "Where there is no vision, the people perish (go to pieces)" (Proverbs 29:18). And so it was with Israel. See them in the days of Eli, when there was no open vision. What a disintegrated, disunited people they were! That happened many times. The vision was a solidifying, cohesive power, making a people solidly one, and in that oneness was their strength, and they were irresistible. See them over Jordan in their assault upon Jericho! See them moving triumphantly on! While they were governed by one object, none could stand before them. Their strength was in their unity, and their unity was in their vision. The enemy knows what he is doing in destroying or confusing vision: he is dividing the people of God.

VISION A DEFENSIVE POWER

What a defensive power is vision like that! What little chance the enemy has when we are a people set upon one thing! If we have all sorts of divided and personal interests, the enemy can make awful havoc. He does not get a chance when everybody is centred upon one Divine object. He has to divide us somehow, distract us, disintegrate us, before he can accomplish his work of hindering God's end. All those features of self-pity, self-interest, which are ever seeking to get in and spoil, will never get in while vision is clear and we are focused upon it as one people. It is tremendously defensive. The Apostle spoke about being "in diligence not slothful; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord" (Romans 12:11). Moffatt translates "fervent in spirit" as "maintaining the spiritual glow". Being centred upon an object wholeheartedly is a wonderfully protective thing. Such a condition in a people closes the breaches and resists the encroachments and impingements of all kinds of things which would distract and paralyse.

VISION MAKES FOR DEFINITENESS AND GROWTH

Vision was like a flame with the prophets. You have to recognise that about them, at any rate - that these men were flames of fire. There was nothing neutral about them; they were aggressive, never passive. Vision has that effect. If you have really seen what the Lord is after, you cannot be half-hearted. You cannot be passive if you see. Find the person who has seen, and you find a positive life. Find the person who does not see, is not sure, is not clear, and you have a neutral, a negative, one that does not count. These prophets were men like flames of fire because they saw. And when Israel was in the good of the Divine calling, Israel was like that - positive, aggressive. When the vision faded, they came to a standstill, turned in upon themselves, went round and round in circles, ceased to get anywhere.

This aggressiveness, this positiveness, which is the fruit of having seen, provides the Lord with the ground that He needs for a right kind of training and discipline. It does not mean that we shall never make mistakes. You will see in the New Testament - and I hope you will not charge me with heresy - that even a man as crucified as Paul could make mistakes. Peter, a man so used and so chastened, could make mistakes. Yes, apostles could make mistakes. And prophets could make mistakes. "What doest thou here, Elijah?" (I Kings 19:9). 'You have no business to be here' - that is what it means. Yes, prophets and

apostles could make mistakes, and they did; but there is this about it - because they had seen, and were utterly abandoned to that which they had seen of the Lord's mind, the Lord was abundantly able to come in on their mistakes and sovereignly overrule them and teach His servants something more of Himself and His ways.

Now, you never find that with people who are indefinite. The indefinite people, those who are not meaning business, who are not abandoned, never do learn anything of the Lord. It is the people who commit themselves, who let go and go right out in the direction of whatever measure of light the Lord has given them, who, on the one hand, find their mistakes - the mistakes of their very zeal - taken hold of by Divine sovereignty and overruled; and, on the other hand, are taught by the Lord through their very mistakes what His thoughts are, how He does things, and how He does not do them. If we are going to wait in indefiniteness and uncertainty and do nothing until we know it all, we shall learn nothing.

Have you not noticed that it is the men and women whose hearts are aflame for God, who have seen something truly from the Lord and have been mightily gripped by what they have seen, who are the people that are learning? The Lord is teaching them; He does not allow their blunders and their mistakes to engulf them in destruction. He sovereignly overrules, and in the long run they are able to say, 'Well, I made some awful blunders, but the Lord marvelously took hold of them and turned them to good account.' To be like this, with vision which gathers up our whole being and masters us, provides the Lord with the ground for looking after us even when we make mistakes - because His interests are at stake, His interests and not our own are the concern of our heart. The prophets and the apostles learned to know the Lord in wonderful ways by their very mistakes, for they were the mistakes, not of their own stubborn self-will, but of a real passion for God and for what He had shown them as to His purpose.

VISION GIVES ASCENDENCY TO GOD'S PEOPLE

And then note that the very ascendancy of Israel was based upon vision. They were called of God to be an ascendent people, above all the peoples of the earth, set in the midst of the nations as a spiritually governmental vessel. The Lord did promise that no nation should be able to take headship over them. His thought for them was that they should be "the head, and not the tail" (Deut. 28:13). But that was not going to happen willy-nilly, irrespective of their condition and position. It was when they had the vision before them clearly, corporately, as an entire people - dominated, mastered, unified by the vision - it was then that they were head and not tail, it was then that they were in the ascendent.

And that brings in these prophets again. (We think now of the later prophets of Israel.) Why the prophets? Because Israel had lost their position. Assyria, Babylon and the rest were taking ascendancy over them because they had lost their vision. It is in the minor prophets, as they are called, that you have so much about this very matter. "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" (Hosea 4:6). That is a note to which all the prophets are tuned. Why this state of things? Why is Israel now the underdog of the nations? The answer is - lost vision. The prophet comes to try to get them back to the place of the vision. The prophet has the vision, he is the eyes of the people: he is calling them back to that for which God chose them, to show them anew why He took them from among the nations.

VISION NEEDED BY EVERY CHILD OF GOD

All this is but an emphasis upon the place of vision. It may not get you very far; you may wonder what it all leads to. You are saying now, 'Well, what is the vision?' That is not the point at the moment; that can come later. The point is that that is the necessity, the absolute necessity, for the Church today - for you, for me;

and let me say at once that, while it is pre-eminently a corporate thing - that is, it is something which is to be in a people, even though that people be but a remnant, a small number amongst all the people of God - while pre-eminently a corporate thing, it must also be personal. You and I individually must be in the place where we can say, 'I have seen, I know what God is after!'

If we were asked why the Church is as it is today, in so large a measure of impotence and disintegration, and what is needed to bring about an impact from heaven by means of the Church, could we say? Is it presumption to claim to be able to do that? The prophets knew; and remember that the prophets, whether they were of the Old Testament or of the New Testament, were not an isolated class of people, they were not some body apart, holding this in themselves officially. They were the very eyes of the body. They were, in the thought of God, the people of God. You know that principle; it is seen, for instance, in the matter of the High Priest. God looks upon the one High Priest as Israel, and deals with all Israel on the ground of the condition of the High Priest, whether it be good or bad. If the High Priest is bad - "And he showed me Joshua the high priest... clothed with filthy garments" (Zechariah 3:1-5) - that is Israel. God deals with Israel as one man.

The prophet is the same; and that is why the prophet was so interwoven with the very condition and life of the people. Listen to the prophet Daniel praying. Personally he was not guilty; personally he had not sinned as the nation had sinned; but he took it all on himself and spoke as though it were his responsibility, as if he were the chief of sinners. These men were brought right into it. There is such a oneness between the prophets and the people in condition, in experience, in suffering, that they can never view themselves as officials apart from all that, as if they were talking to it from the outside; they are in it, they are it.

My meaning is this, that we are not to have vision brought to us by a class called ministers, prophets and apostles. They are here only to keep us alive to what we ought to be before God, how we ought to be; constantly stirring us up and saying, 'Look here, this is what you ought to be.' It ought therefore to be, with every one of us personally, that we are in the meaning of this prophetic ministry. The Church is called to be a prophet to the nations. May I repeat my enquiry - it is a permissible question without admitting of any presumption - could you say what is needed by the Church today? Could you interpret the state of things, and explain truly by what the Lord has shown you in your own heart? I know the peril and dangers that may surround such an idea, but that is the very meaning of our existence. It will be in greater or lesser degree in every one of us, but, either more or less we have the key to the situation. God needs people of that sort. It must be individual.

VISION CALLS FOR COURAGE

But remember it will call for immense courage. Oh, the courage of these prophets! - courage as over against compromise and policy. Oh, the ruinous effects of policy, of secondary considerations! 'How will it affect our opportunities if we are so definite? Will it not lessen our opportunities of serving the Lord if we take such a position?' That is policy, and it is a ruinous thing. Many a man who has seen something, and has begun to speak about what he has seen, has found such a reaction from his own brethren and amongst those where his responsibility lay, that he has drawn back. 'It is dangerous to pursue that any further.' Policy! No, there was nothing of that about the prophets. Are we committed because we have seen?

There will be cost; we may as well face it. There is a little fragment in Hebrews 9 - "They were sawn asunder." A tradition says that that applied to the prophet Isaiah - that he was the one who was sawn asunder. Read Isaiah 53. There is nothing more sublime in all the literature of the Bible, and for that he was sawn asunder. Was he right? Well, we today stand on the ground, and in the good, of his rightness. But the devil does not like that, and so Isaiah was sawn asunder. There are tremendous values bound up with seeing, and with uncompromising abandonment to the vision, but there is very great cost also.

We will leave it there for the time being; but we must have dealings with the Lord and say, 'How much have I seen? After all I have heard of the prophets week by week, after all the conventions, the conferences, the meetings I have been attending, have I heard the voice of the prophets after all? I have heard the speakers give their messages and addresses: have I heard the voice?' The effect will be far-reaching if we have. If we have not, it is time we got to the Lord about it. This must not go on! What happened in Acts 13? Hearing they did not hear; but where there was a hearing, oh, what tremendous things happened, what tremendous values came!

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/t-austin-sparks/a-voice-which-may-be-missed/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net