

# Abel and the Law of Life

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*The law of life demands a course in the spirit, and not in the flesh or in our own soul, in order to experience true worship and union with God.*

**Scripture:** Genesis 4:3, John 3:12, John 4:23, John 7:44, Acts 7:52, Romans 8:2

**Topics:** "Spiritual Life", "Walking In Faith"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks delves into the conflict between the soul and the spirit, emphasizing the importance of walking in the spirit rather than in the flesh or soul. He draws parallels between Cain and Abel, highlighting the difference between a life governed by self-will and a life surrendered to God. The sermon explores the necessity of enlightenment to discern the conflict within oneself, where the soul draws everything to itself, leading to death, while the spirit is always directed towards God, resulting in true life. T. Austin-Sparks urges believers to seek a life in God, not in self, to avoid being deceived by the false natural life.

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## Transcript

Reading: Gen. 4:3-6, 8-10; I John 3:12; John 7:44; Acts 7:52; John 4:23; Romans 8:2.

In our previous meditation we were drawn to take account of the sevenfold working of the law of life. We spoke of the Lord Jesus as the prism of life, in and through whom life is broken up into its components, in whom we are able to see the working of life. Yet, as we contemplate, the figure changes, and that of a seven-branched candlestick or lampstand looms into view, and we see that it has one central root and stem, and out from it, as part of it, on either side go the six branches. In our previous meditation, which was upon the law of the Spirit of life as brought out first of all in Adam, we have the central root and stem which includes all the others, out from which all grow or radiate, to which all come back; for the beginning of things is very comprehensive, and what we shall see as we go on is that each of these remaining aspects of the law of life is but an outgrowth or outworking of what we have comprehensively and inclusively in Adam. I say that because of the unity of the whole, the oneness of all the parts. This oneness is a very remarkable and a very wonderful thing. How all of a piece this matter of life is! You never really get into anything that is fragmentary, detached or unrelated. You can never deal with any one aspect as though it were something in itself. One thing leads to another and that other leads you back again, so that all the time you are dealing with the same thing and yet growing. That may not be quite clear to your comprehension now, but you will see what we mean as we go on.

What Cain and Abel Represent

We come to the second of these outworkings of the law of life in Christ, brought to us in the second of the seven personal representations of the Old Testament, or of the book of Genesis, and we have now before us Cain and Abel. Here we see the law or principle of life manifesting itself in a contrast and a conflict. Where there is life - and you understand that I am not speaking of ordinary human life, I am speaking of Divine life, spiritual life, that unique and peculiar life which Christ is and which is Christ where that life is, this antagonism will inevitably come to light. It always is the case, and you can neither avoid the clash nor suppress it without doing despite to the life. Immediately the life of God is found anywhere, an antagonism manifests itself, conflict begins.

Here, then, we find that life; and we are speaking now in the realm of types. Life was found along Abel's line and death was found along Cain's line, and we have to investigate the difference. What was the difference? Let us look at Cain very carefully.

We can be superficial about Cain and come to conclusions which, while they may be quite right and true, are inadequate. Let us be quite fair, quite precise about Cain. Cain did not ignore God, nor was he one who was outwardly opposed to God. Cain recognized God; he acknowledged Him to be the object of worship. Cain brought to God, as an act of worship, the best that he knew and the best that he had. I say the best that he knew, not the best that he could have known. In this realm, what Cain brought was good and was costly. Until we recognize that, and put it like that, we are not on the way to understanding the difference between death and life. It is of no use our painting what we would call the way of death all in black or dark colors and thinking of the way of death as necessarily being that which is marked by the most atrocious outrages against God. We must not suppose that, to be in the way of death, it is necessary to be openly and positively antagonistic to God, or to ignore God, or to refuse some practical acknowledgment of God. It is not necessary that these things should obtain in order to be in the way of death. The way of death is something deeper than that, something very much deeper than that, and we shall see that this is so as we go on.

You see, Cain brought the fruit of his natural life, and that is all there is to it. When you have said that, if you understand it, you have got near the heart of the thing.

In Abel's case, his attitude was that we must die to live. We have nothing that is acceptable to bring to God, only a life to be repudiated. Abel recognized sin and saw that the sinful soul must be poured out unto death, not offered to God, neither it nor its works or fruits. You see, on the Cain side, the soul seeks to be accepted on the ground of what it deems to be its own good. On the Abel side, the soul seeks to die to itself.

#### Christ Jesus and the Jews

Now, we carry that over immediately to Christ Jesus and the Jews. You notice that we read of the Jews in John's Gospel in the exact terms used about Cain - a terrible thing. But the point that we and all the Lord's people need to grasp is this, that we are not necessarily dealing with what we call the ungodly, as standing in the place of Cain, and the godly, in the truest sense, as standing in the place of Abel. We are in a much narrower compass of things than that. There is an Israel after the flesh and there is an Israel after the Spirit.

So we turn to Christ and the Jews in His day. The Jews worshipped and they murdered, a terrible combination. Their worship, which in its realm was very devout, and costly in a way, was nevertheless but an outward thing. It is not necessary for me to call to your remembrance various passages which passed

through the Lord's lips about that. "Ye make clean the outside of the platter": "They make broad their phylacteries": "You make long prayers": they delighted "to be seen of men to fast"; and so on. It was outward. Their worship was their own glory and works. As they worshipped they drew attention to themselves, and made their very worship an occasion of self-glorification. It was all a matter of forms, into which they threw themselves maybe very heartily, but by which none the less they sought to gain benefits for themselves. Even worship was toward themselves all the time, not really toward God, but for their own favor and good. It had nothing to do with the heart of God. God's satisfaction was not the one and only consideration.

Now, look at the Lord Jesus, who stands always in opposition to the Jews, and they to Him. The opposition is found, not in the outward at all, but deeper down. He worshipped; but He worshipped by a life wholly yielded to God. But more, He worshipped by a life governed by the very nature of God. By that I mean that God's nature was the thing which characterized His worship. God is holy, God is righteous, God is altogether without mixture; He is pure. God is light. In Him there is no darkness at all, no suspicion or suggestion of darkness, cloudiness, or lack of transparency. It was what God was, what God is, that governed the worship of the Lord Jesus. That is to say, He saw that it was not possible to worship God in truth, unless you recognized what God was, what God is, and forever abandoned anything and everything that was not like God. You could not come on to God's ground to worship God and bring there something unlike God, something contrary to God. You must worship God in truth. There is so much that is false, so much that is a lie, so much that is a contradiction, so much that is untrue and unreal and make-believe about human nature, and you must part with it all if you are going to be a true worshipper, and recognize that here you cannot play with God, cannot deceive God, cannot have fellowship with God while there is anything like that about you. You are governed entirely by the consideration of what God is. To do otherwise is like coming into the presence of an extremely sensitive person and just saying or doing those things which create agony to that sensitive person. If you are a musician, a musical person - I do not mean if you played music! - if you were a musical person, if you had a high, keen sense of music, and anyone came into your presence and strummed and struck constant discords, you know what agony it would be. You would go hot and cold. If you knew a certain person to be keenly, acutely strung to true music, and you were not in any special way musical, it would be the last thing that you would do, if you had good sense, to attempt to play in the presence of such a one. I remember a man who played the violin fairly well and he went to hear someone who played the violin very well. He came to me after and said, I am going to put my foot through my violin: I will never play again. If that man heard me play, it would drive him mad! You see what I am getting at. The point is that this is how the Lord Jesus was attuned to God, and the thing which weighed with him was the nature of God. What does God require of a worshipper? Does He want certain forms? His worship was by a life laid down as a testimony against sin. Remember that! The death of the Lord Jesus has various aspects, but this is a very vital one. It was a laying down of His life as a testimony against sin.

It would be impossible for there to be any fellowship with God while there was sin: and there was sin. What are you going to do with regard to it? You cannot clean up sin. It must die. But, seeing that sin is not some abstract thing, but that man is become sin, then to deal with human nature, from which you cannot pluck out or eradicate something called sin, you have to bring in another human nature in which there is no sin. What is to happen to us then? Not to have sin plucked out, but to die and to have Christ come in our place. "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I, but Christ." Well, His worship was by a life laid down as a testimony against sin.

You see the working of that in Abel. Of course, Abel did not lay down his life. That is where the type falls short, but the principle is the same. The death of Abel was a testimony against sin - "The voice of thy brother's blood crieth..."

Now, you see this conflict and the conflict is perfectly clear. There is a Cain line of death, full of worship, full of acknowledgment of God, full of gifts to God, full of splendid things in its own realm, and there is Abel's line of life. This latter works out in an offering, not of things, but of self, and that upon an altar. The creature must die.

## The Sphere of the Conflict

### (a) The Warfare is Between Two Kingdoms

Now we can get very quickly to our point. This conflict operates in two realms. Firstly, it operates in the realm where there is that which is of God and that which is of Satan. We all know that. That is the simplest and most obvious realm of the operation of this antagonism. I mean, it is the realm where every born again child of God moves immediately they receive this life. We all know that immediately we become the Lord's and are filled with His joy, and then go back to our business or our sphere of life in this world, expecting that everybody is going to be very pleased and to respond to this, we find instead that, without so much as breathing a word about it, suspicious looks are cast in our direction and the atmosphere is full of something. You never have to say a word - it is there. More often than not, the moving about of a child of God in this world draws out into the very atmosphere an antagonism, a conflict, without any words being spoken. It is not imagination, it is there, and the more strong the soul-life on the other side, the quicker the discerning of that which is in us; the more shrewd is the arrival at a conclusion that there is something, and the more definite the antagonism. I mean that simple, artless people, while they do not understand you and cannot go with you, they do not give out to you what comes out from those other people of a strong soul-life. We know that realm of the outward, where the antagonism becomes manifestly between what is of Satan and what is of God. I need not follow that, it is known so well.

### (b) Man Himself the Real Battle Ground

But there is this other realm, where in an inward way conflict arises between that which is of God and that which is of self. The point is this, that the realm, the real realm, of this battle is man himself. That is where the battle really rages most fiercely. Most of us come very quickly to recognize the difference in the outward realm, where the conflict is between us and those who are not for God, and we accept it. But when this thing gets inside, it is far more difficult to deal with. When it arises within us, it is very difficult to accept it, because we do not understand it. We find the conflict within ourselves and that conflict has been precipitated by the very presence of life in us. It is the outworking of the law of life in Christ Jesus. It may be comforting in one respect to know it is that. So often, when the thing becomes acute, the tempter gives his own interpretation to it and would have us believe that everything is wrong and that there is nothing of God there at all; whereas the fact is, it is because there is that which is of God that the conflict has arisen within, and we ourselves have become the battlefield. "The flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: for these are contrary the one to the other" (Gal. 5:17). But what is it, what are the two things that are in conflict? Now a very elementary and superficial answer would be, of course, that it is the flesh and the Spirit, the old man and the new man. That is quite true, but it is not an adequate answer. It really does not get right to the heart of this thing, and I do want that you should see the core of this matter. It is most important. For want of discernment in this matter, many of the Lord's people are rendered

helpless, impotent, bewildered. You see, beloved, the real battle is between soul and spirit.

Now, you cannot simply say soul is flesh, soul is old Adam. That is not true in the full sense. You have to be careful. If you say that, then you are going to embark upon a line of killing the soul and you must not do that. The soul itself is not a wrong thing. It is not wrong to have a soul. The Lord tells us that the soul has to be won. "In your patience ye shall win your souls" (Luke 21:19). "We are not of them that shrink back unto perdition; but of them that have faith unto the saving of the soul" (Heb. 10:39). And yet the conflict is here between soul and spirit. From this you may recognize the nature of the Fall, as being a violation of spirit by soul. In our previous meditation we noted the attack upon man's soul, that is, upon his reason, desire and will, and we saw how man's reason, desire and will were taken out of their place and made to exercise and function independently of God. Man has a spirit, and by his spirit he was put into communication with God, who is Spirit. He knew God, not through his soul: in that unfallen state, he had not to come to reasoned conclusions about the will of God; he had not to sit down and reason out what God wanted. In his unfallen state, he perceived, he sensed, he intuitively knew, and that is why conscience arose and smote him, because conscience is not a faculty of the soul, but a faculty of the spirit. Well, man disregarded the organ of communion with God when he disregarded God as the final court of appeal on all matters and, acting on the ground of his own soul, violated his spirit. Then that conflict arose in man which has gone on ever since. He is a house divided against itself, which cannot stand, and you have these two sides as in the one, soul and spirit. By nature he is essentially now a soul man. In the New Testament, unfortunately, he is called "the natural man," but everybody knows the word there is "soulical" man; man who is governed and actuated by soul, that is, by his own self-reasoning, his own self-discerning, his own self-willing. That is the type of man he is, and over against him in the New Testament you have placed the spiritual man, "he that is spiritual." Thus there arises the conflict between these two "men" as in the one, the conflict between soul and spirit, spirit and soul; what is of God, God's thought, as against our thought; God's reasoning, if we may use that word, or God's reason as over against our reasoning; God's will as over against our will; God's feelings, affections, desires, as over against our feelings, affections and desires. These two things now come in, not into the unregenerate man, but into the regenerate man. We are not talking now of the man out of Christ, we are talking of the carnal man. The carnal man is the Christian in whom there is flesh, and who is actuated by it.

Now, you see, the soul is the place where the flesh resides, for flesh in its spiritual sense (not the physical sense) is an evil thing. It is self-willed, self-guided, actuated by Satan. That is flesh. It is that which lusteth against the Spirit, and you know how much the New Testament says about flesh as an evil thing. It is resident in the natural soul. The spirit reborn in new birth becomes the vessel for the indwelling of that which is of God.

Now, this conflict is set up. You say, I know it all too well, although perhaps I should never have analysed and explained it like that; but I know it! We do know it! But the trouble is that so many have not got past that. They are still in it. We have not yet come to the point but I might as well say right away that it is not God's will that this conflict should go on in perpetuity throughout our spiritual life, that we should always be in this conflict. We shall speak of that another time.

#### Divine Life Demands a Walk after the Spirit

Here we have to sum up what we have been saying in a phrase or two. The aspect of the basic matter with which we are dealing here is that the law of life demands a course in the spirit, and not in the flesh or in our own soul. It demands a heavenly union with God in our spirit, and not the soulical religious life

according to our ideas. That is the difference between Cain and Abel. Oh yes, Cain was a religious man, Cain was a worshipping man, Cain brought what, in its realm, was good, precious, costly. Cain, in his way, was devout in his acknowledgment that God is to be worshipped, but his understanding was darkened, and so is the understanding of our souls. We, by nature, do not know God's thoughts. "The natural (or soulful) man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: ... neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor 2:14). Thus Cain, with all his devoutness and all his worship and his religion and his acknowledgment of God, was still in the darkness of a darkened understanding: his judgment was all out, his ideas were all wrong, he was missing the mark and nothing got through above the altar. God had not respect unto Cain's offering. The Jews stood in that position, and, to prove it, the Jews murdered, even as Cain murdered. To prove it, challenge the worship of the soul-worshippers, of the religious people who are not spiritual, and you will find something flare up. They cannot bear to have it interfered with, challenged or touched. To a true worshipper, to one who worships in spirit and in truth, you can say or do what you will, and you will find no spirit of murder rising up, or anything akin to it. Like Abel, such a one will lay down his life, even at the hands of the worshippers, the religious. That is the difference here between the soul and the spirit.

Now, I said before that we are in a very much narrower circle than that which embraces believers and the ungodly. Beloved, life, that which gets through and goes on, that which is the seal and mark of God, of what is of God and what is acceptable to God; life is along the line of the spirit. Death, though it may have all the outward semblance, forms, worship, acknowledgment of God, religion, is none the less death. It does not get through: it does not go through. Oh, you say, surely you are speaking out in a very wide realm of things? We know what you are thinking about, of the merely religious people who go to church and say formal prayers. I am not! There is an application no doubt that can be made to them from such words, but that is not what I am thinking about. I am not dividing these things up so utterly and finally as to put them into pigeon-holes. I am saying that there are overlappings of these things in most believers, and therefore there is a limitation of life. Why is it that missionaries can come back from mission fields after twenty-five or thirty years' service, and say, The whole thing has broken down, the promises of God have become dust and ashes to me! Let us be quite frank. They are doing it. Some are known to us. Why is it? There comes a point where, because of the unreality and because things do not work, do not go through, do not reach Divine ends, so many just come to an impasse and have questions, and justifiable questions, about the reality of things. Why? Now, I am leaving out certain other things. I know all about physical and nervous breakdowns, depressions, melancholia, and all those things which come in sometimes to becloud. I am not talking about that. I am speaking about that realm where what is spiritual is not working out, where there is no seal of God that is adequate. For the much pouring out, the much giving, the much doing, no spiritual life is really to be seen as the fruit of it. The absence of life! Oh, it is possible, beloved, for us to be under the hand of God in chastening and disciplining, where we see no fruit of our labors, no results of our work, and where everything, so far as our senses are concerned, our souls, is hidden, darkened, obscured, and yet all the time for life to be working in the power of resurrection both in us and through us, and for others to be getting the benefit of it, though we neither see nor sense it. That is one thing, but that is not what I am talking about. I am talking about absence of life, where things are dead spiritually. What is the trouble? Well, the answer is in Cain and Abel. The explanation is here in the difference between soul and spirit. The soul is not a wrong thing, but for it to govern is another matter. If that which is of soul gets the upper hand, then it is self getting the upper hand, and the works are out from ourselves, the energies and activities of our own souls, and not the energies of God through our spirits.

In saying such things, do not let anyone think for a moment that, when you live on the level of the spirit, where all things are to be out from God and nothing out from yourself, there is never going to be anything doing. A lot of people think there are going to be no works, no activities at all. The only difference is in the kind of activities. You do not do less, you do other. It is different, but the end sees much greater gain than all the self-propagated activities for God. In the hidden depths everything must be toward God, not toward self. We do not know how deeply rooted in our own souls is that self. We discover something of it when we can no longer do, when God puts His hand upon us and says, Stop doing for a month or two, and puts us out of action. Then we discover how great a measure of self-gratification was in our doing, and, with its cessation, we are no longer gratified. We have lost our gratification, and we have nothing in its place, and what the Lord is seeking to do is to take away our gratification with things and doings, and for Himself to be our gratification; that, whether we do or do not do, even if there is nothing that we can do, we have the Lord and are satisfied. I am perfectly certain that is the crux of the whole matter. It is what the Lord is to us, not what our work is to us; not what anything is to us which has its seat or spring in our own souls. We have the Lord and we are satisfied. I wonder if there is one of us who has absolutely got there? No, we have still to have patience unto the winning of our souls. These souls have still to be brought over in ever fuller degrees to where God is their only gratification. Through many, many bitter tears we may come there, but when we do come there, the tears will be wiped away. You see, the tears are associated with getting somewhere. They are never there when you arrive. The little girl who said, If God is going to wipe away all tears, He will have to have a very big handkerchief, had a wrong idea as to how tears are wiped away. Tears have to do with processes and the wiping away is simply the result of arriving. They pass away. "In your patience ye shall win your souls."

#### The Necessity for Enlightenment

But the understanding must be enlightened - "having the eyes of your heart enlightened" - the understanding must be enlightened, so that instead of Cain's way, which is a way in the soul, where even in its devotion to God, even in its acknowledgment of God, the soul yet draws everything to itself, there may be a life which is in the spirit. Cain would not have admitted it was so. No soulical life would admit that it was drawing everything to itself. It is the most difficult thing for anybody to accept that, yet that is the nature of the soul. The spirit is just the opposite. The spirit is always toward God; the renewed spirit, that is. The Lord Jesus poured out His soul unto death; He committed His spirit to God.

That touches a new field of contemplation. The soul-life as such must come under, the spirit-life must come up. In so far as the soul-life governs, there is death. There may be a lot of emotion, a lot of sensation, a lot of pleasing, a lot of activity, but the end is death. Inasmuch as the spiritual life governs, the life of the spirit, there is life, and "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" is the law of life.

Now, do not bother about the technique, about the way in which this word has been expressed in its details, but ask the Lord to enable you to grasp the conclusion. As one in whom the life is, I am made aware of two things. It is an inevitable result of the life that the conflict within arises. I have, further, to know the nature of that conflict, and, when my understanding is enlightened, I see that it is the conflict between myself on the soul side and myself on the spirit side. It is a conflict between my own soul and what is of God in me. That is a house divided against itself: it cannot stand. It must sooner or later crash, and we are seeing the crash of such divided houses all around. That is not God's thought. There is a way out. We shall see later, if the Lord wills, what that is, but here we recognize the fact. Let us seek the Lord that we may walk in the Spirit, walk by the Spirit, have our life in God and not in things, and not out from ourselves; for this natural life is a false life and it deceives because it is deceived. But His life is true, and

He is true who is the life. Because He is life, He is also the light. Because He is the light, He is the life.

Let us ask the Lord to make the meaning of this clear.

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