

In His Letter to the Ephesians

by T. Austin-Sparks

The letter to the Ephesians is a letter of superlatives that presents the gospel of unsearchable riches for a superlative calling and conflict.

Topics: "The Gospel", "The Church"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the profound nature of the Gospel as presented in Ephesians, highlighting its superlative qualities in time, space, power, and content. He explains that the letter reveals the Church as a superlative entity, transcending earthly divisions and embodying a divine calling that surpasses all understanding. Sparks asserts that the Gospel is not merely a simple message but encompasses the unsearchable riches of Christ, which empower believers to rise to their high calling amidst spiritual conflict. He encourages the congregation to embrace the fullness of the Gospel, recognizing that the demands placed upon them are met with God's abundant resources. Ultimately, the message is one of hope and encouragement, urging believers to live out their superlative calling with confidence in God's provision.

Transcript

"...the word of the truth, the gospel of your salvation..." (Eph. 1:13).

"...the Gentiles are fellow-heirs, and fellow-members of the body, and fellow-partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel, whereof I was made a minister..." (3:6,7).

"...having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace..." (6:15).

"...praying... on my behalf, that utterance may be given unto me in opening my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains..." (6:19,20).

When we come to consider 'the Gospel according to Paul' in the letter to the Ephesians, we find that we have the word 'gospel' in the noun form four times. We have it also, on one or two other occasions, in verb form, as in chapter 2:17 -

"...and he came and preached peace to you that were far off..."

You notice the margin says "preached good tidings of peace". Now that is just an English way of juggling with a Greek word. The Greek word is the verb of which 'the gospel' is the noun; and, as I have tried to point out before, what it really says - it cannot be translated literally into English - is: "came and

'good-tidinged' or 'goodnewsed' peace". That is impossible in English, but it is just the verb of the noun 'gospel'. It occurs again in chapter 3, verse 8 "...to preach unto the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ..." - that is, "to good-news unto the Gentiles", "to proclaim unto the Gentiles the good tidings of...". It is the verb again for 'gospel'. I think that gives us ground for saying that this letter is about the gospel.

Many people have the idea that when you reach the letter to the Ephesians you have left the gospel behind, you are further on than the gospel, you must really now have got a long way beyond the gospel. I do not think we can get further than this letter, so far as Divine revelation is concerned: as we shall see, it takes us a very long way indeed in Divine things; but it is still the gospel. The gospel is something very vast, very comprehensive, very far-reaching indeed.

A Letter of Superlatives

This leads us to note that the letter to the Ephesians is the letter of superlatives. An expressive adjective has come into vogue of recent years, by which people try to convey the idea that a thing is very great, or of the highest quality. They say it is 'super'. Now here, in this letter, everything is - may I use the word? - 'super'! The whole letter is written in terms of what is superlative; and I must take it for granted that you can recall something of what is here. Superlatives relate to almost everything in this letter.

There is the superlative of time. Time is altogether transcended: we are taken into the realm of timelessness. By this letter we are taken back into eternity past, before the foundation of the world, and on into eternity to come, unto the ages of the ages. It is the superlative of time - transcending time.

There is the superlative of space. One phrase runs through this letter - "in the heavenlies". When you come into the heavenlies, you are just amazed at the immensity of the expanse. In the natural realm that is true, is it not, even of the very limited 'earthly heavens', as represented by the earth's atmosphere. If you travel a good deal by air, you pass through the airports and see the planes coming and going, coming and going, every few minutes, all day long and all night long and day after day - and yet when you get up into the air you rarely meet another machine. It is quite an event to pass another plane in the air, so vast are the heavens in their expanse. And this letter is written in the realm of the superlatives of space, in the spiritual heavenlies, altogether above the limitations of earth.

Again, it is written in terms of the superlative of power. There is one clause here, so familiar to us, which touches that: "the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe" (Eph. 1:19). There is much about that power, superlative power, and its operation, in this letter.

Further, this letter is the letter of the superlative in content. How to approach and explain that is exceedingly difficult. You see, some of us have been speaking, giving talks, giving addresses, about this letter to the Ephesians - and it is only a little letter so far as actual chapters or words are concerned - for over forty years, and we have not got near it yet. I defy you to exhaust the content of this letter. It does not matter how long you go on with it - you will always feel, 'I have not begun to approach that yet'. I know what some of you think about me over this letter. I am almost afraid to mention the very name 'Ephesians'! Even as I have once again meditated over this letter at the present time, I have been saying to myself: 'I would like to start now to give a long, long series of messages on the letter to the Ephesians, and I should not touch much of the old ground!' It is like that. But when you look into it and consider it, you find that you are in the realm of superlatives so far as contents are concerned, and it begins with "hath blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ" (1:3). Can you get above or outside that? You cannot!

Again, it is in the realm of the super-mundane. The earth here becomes a very small thing, and all that goes on in it. All its history and all that is here becomes very small indeed. The earth is completely transcended.

It is super-racial, as we shall see in a moment. It is not just dealing with one race or two races. It is all one race here.

It is super-natural. Look again, and you find that everything here is on a plane that is altogether above the natural. You cannot naturally grasp it, comprehend it, explain it. It is Divine revelation. It is by "the Spirit of wisdom and revelation". That is super-natural. The knowledge that is here is super-naturally obtained.

And what more shall I say about the 'super'? The list could very easily be extended. Have I said enough? Can I go on pointing out in what a realm this is, what a range? You see, you have some very great words here. I give you three of them.

"Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, was this grace given, to preach unto the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ" (3:8).

This letter is written in terms of the unsearchable, the untraceable.

"...and to know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge, that ye may be filled unto all the fulness of God" (3:19).

"The knowledge-surpassing love of Christ". Here we have the incomprehensible.

"Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us..." (3:20).

Here it is the transcendental. These are big words, but you need big words throughout for this letter, and I am seeking to make an impression upon you.

The Greatest Crisis is Religious History

Now, let us come more to the inward side of this. This letter, in its content, represents perhaps the greatest crisis in religious history. That is saying a great deal. There have been many crises in religious history, and very big ones, but this letter represents the greatest of them all. Before the Lord Jesus was raised from the dead and went to Heaven, and the Holy Spirit came on the day of Pentecost, there were only two classes of people on the earth. The whole of the human race was divided into two classes of people, the Gentiles and the Jews. When the Holy Spirit came, a third class came into being which, from God's standpoint, is neither Gentile nor Jew: it is the Church of God. They are taken out of nations of Gentiles and taken out from among the Jews, but, so far as God is concerned, they are neither Jew nor Gentile, or as Paul puts it, "neither Jew nor Greek" (Gal. 3:28). 'Greek' was a representative word comprehending the Gentiles. When the Lord Jesus comes again, as He is coming, and takes the Church away, the two others will remain here. There will be a reversion in the earth to what was before. The whole world will be divided again into Gentiles and Jews.

So this that came into being on the day of Pentecost, this third and spiritually quite separate class of people called the Church, represents the greatest of all crises in human history for this reason, and in this way - that that Church is not something just of earthly history. The Apostle makes it perfectly clear, right at

the beginning of this Ephesian letter, that this Church had its existence in the foreknowledge of God before the world was. This Church is a super-temporal thing, transcending all time and transcending the earth. This Church, the Apostle makes clear, will be there in the ages of the ages, still super-temporal, super-earthly, when Jews and Gentiles go on. Yes, there will be saved nations in the earth: but this other goes on in a relationship which is altogether outside of this world and outside of time; and it is concerning this particular class, this people, this Church, that all these things are said in this letter. It is this Church which takes the character of all these superlatives. This is itself something superlative, this is the supreme thing in the economy of God, this is the supreme thing in all God's sovereign activities from eternity to eternity. We live in the dispensation of something absolutely transcendent - God taking out of the nations, both Jew and Gentile, this people called the Church, which is "the body of Christ".

A Superlative Vessel and a Superlative Calling

Now this superlative vessel or instrument or people has a superlative or transcendent calling. The Jews had an earthly calling to serve an earthly purpose, a vocation of time on this earth. Many believe very strongly that they are yet to serve such a purpose. There are others, and amongst them outstanding Bible teachers, who believe that the day of the Jew is finished as in the economy of God, and that everything has been transferred to the Church now because of the Jew's failure. I am not going to argue that; that does not come into our consideration at all. The fact remains that the Jews were raised up to serve an earthly and temporal purpose in the economy of God. But this Church, eternally saved - eternally chosen, as the Apostle says, in Christ Jesus before the world was - this has a superlative calling to serve the purposes of God in Heaven. It is something timeless, superlative in calling, in vocation. It is a tremendous thing that is here.

We have often put it in this way, and indeed it is what the letter to the Ephesians teaches - we have to touch on this in another way presently - that this world, as to its conduct, is influenced by a whole spiritual hierarchy. Even men who have not a great deal of spiritual discernment, men whom we would hardly think of as Christian men, in the essential sense of being born-again children of God, have recognised this and admit it: that behind the behaviour of this world there is some sinister force, some evil power, some wicked intelligence. They may hesitate to name it, to call it Satan, the Devil, and so on, but the Bible just calls it that. Behind the course of this world's history, as we know it - behind the wars, the rivalries, the hatred, the bitterness, the cruelty, all the clash and clamour of interests, and everything else - there is an evil intelligence, a power at work, a whole system that is seeking to ruin the glory of God in His creation. And that whole system is here said to be in what is called "the heavenlies", that is, something above the earth; in the very air, if you like, in the very atmosphere. Sometimes you can sense it: sometimes you can almost 'cut the atmosphere with a knife', as we say; sometimes you know there is something in the very air that is wicked, evil. You cannot just put it down to people; there is something behind the people, something about. It is very real - sometimes it seems almost tangible, you can almost smell it - something evil and wicked. It is that which is governing this world system and order.

Now what is here in this letter is this, that this Church, eternally conceived, foreknown, chosen, and brought into existence in its beginnings on the day of Pentecost, and growing spiritually through the centuries since - this Church is to take the place of that evil government above this earth. It is to depose it and cast it out of its domain, and itself take that place to be the influence that governs this world in the ages to come. That is the teaching here: a superlative calling, a superlative vocation, because of a superlative people in their very nature. There is something different about them from other people. That is the secret of the true Christian life - of the true ones in Christ: there is something about them that is

different. To this world, Christians are a problem and a conundrum. You cannot put them into any earthly class. You cannot just pigeon-hole a Christian. Somehow or other, they elude you all the time. You cannot make them out.

Now, in this letter Paul speaks first of all of that superlative calling, and then he says that, because of the greatness of that calling, this Church must behave itself accordingly. "I... beseech you to walk worthily of the calling wherewith ye were called" (Eph. 4:1). Conduct has to be adjusted to calling. Oh, that Christian people behaved correspondingly to their calling - to their great, eternal, heavenly vocation! But because of this calling, this destiny, this vocation, this position, that mighty evil hierarchy is set to its last ounce to destroy this vessel called the Church, and therefore there is an immense and terrible conflict going on in the air over this thing, and Christians meet it. The more you seek to live according to your calling, the more you realise how difficult it is, and what there is set against you. It is fierce and bitter spiritual conflict.

Superlative Resources

Now, mark you, this is what Paul calls the gospel - all this is the gospel! Did you ever get an idea of the gospel like that? did you ever think of the gospel in such terms? Yes, it is still the gospel, the same gospel; not another, the same. Now, because all this is true as to the gospel, surely the demands are very great. The reaction of so many, when you say things like this, is: 'Oh, I cannot rise to that - that is altogether beyond me, that is too much for me, that is overpowering, that is overwhelming! Give me the simple gospel!' But I wonder if we realise what we involve ourselves in when we talk like that. For it is just there that the true nature of the gospel comes in, in this whole letter. Yes, the calling is great, is immense; the conduct must be on a high level; the conflict is fierce and bitter. And that makes tremendous demands. If that is the gospel, then how shall we stand up to it, how shall we face it, how shall we rise to it, how shall we get through?

Well, we come back to the phrase to which I am gathering the whole of this letter. It is here: "to 'goodnews' the unsearchable riches of Christ". It is translated 'preach' in our Bibles, but it is the same word, as you know, in the verb form. "To 'good-news' the unsearchable riches of Christ". The good news is that the riches are unsearchable! Oh, this is something for us in which to rejoice, being hard pressed, hard put to it; feeling we shall never rise to it, never go through with it. The superlative riches are for a superlative vocation and for a superlative conflict and for superlative conduct.

"Unsearchable riches". Now that is a characteristic word that you find scattered through this letter. Riches! Riches! In chapter 1, verse 7, it is "the riches of his grace". That phrase is enlarged in 2:7 - "the exceeding riches of his grace". And then in 1:18 it is the inheritance - "the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints". That just means that the saints are the inheritance of Jesus Christ, and in them, in His Church, He has a tremendous wealth. Now, if He is going to have wealth in this Church, it is He who must supply the wealth, and it is "according to the riches of his grace" that He will find "the riches of his inheritance" in the Church. There is much more said about that. In 3:16 the word is used again - "the riches of his glory". Riches! Riches! Very well: if the demands are great, there is a great supply. If the need is superlative, the resources are superlative. All this sets forth and indicates the basis and the resources of the Church for its calling, for its conduct, and for its conflict.

So what is 'the gospel according to Paul' in the letter to the Ephesians? It is the gospel of the "unsearchable riches" for superlative demands, and when you have said that, you are left swimming in a mighty ocean. Go to the letter again, read it carefully through, note it. Yes, there is a high standard here,

there are big demands here, tremendous things in view here; but there are also the riches of His grace, the unsearchable riches of His grace for it all. There are the riches of His glory: it is put like this - "according to the riches of his glory". Now, if you can explore, fathom, exhaust, God's riches in glory, then you put a certain limit upon possibilities and potentialities. But if, after you have said all that you have tried to say in human language, as the Apostle did here, you find that you have not got enough superlatives at your command when you are talking about the resources that are in God by Christ Jesus, then everything is possible - according to the riches of His grace and of His glory.

That is a gospel, is it not? Surely that is good tidings, that is good news! And, dear friends, we shall get through - and we ought not just to scrape through. If it is like that, we ought to get through superlatively. The Lord bring us into the good of the superlatives of the gospel, of the good news.

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