

Prophetic Service

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon calls for a return to God's thoughts and a commitment to His rights, emphasizing the cost of true discipleship amidst spiritual conflict.

Scripture: 1 Kings 18:17

Topics: "Prophetic Ministry", "Spiritual Warfare"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the prophetic service of Elijah, who confronts the idolatry of Israel and calls the people back to the thoughts of God. He highlights the spiritual battle between God's thoughts and the deceptive thoughts of the flesh and the devil, warning against the infiltration of pagan practices into Christianity. Sparks urges believers to recognize their calling and the cost of standing for God's truth, even when faced with opposition and misunderstanding. He draws parallels between Elijah's ministry and the current state of the church, calling for a return to the unity and purity of God's intentions. Ultimately, he encourages believers to fully commit to God's purpose, trusting in His power to bring about His will.

Transcript

Reading: 1 Kings 18:17-21.

"And it came to pass, when Ahab saw Elijah, that Ahab said unto him, "Art thou he that troubleth Israel?" And he answered, "I have not troubled Israel; but thou, and thy father's house, in that ye have forsaken the commandments of the Lord, and thou hast followed Baalim. Now therefore send, and gather to me all Israel unto mount Carmel, and the prophets of Baal four hundred and fifty, and the prophets of the groves four hundred, which eat at Jezebel's table." So Ahab sent unto all the children of Israel, and gathered the prophets together unto mount Carmel. And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, "How long halt ye between two opinions? if the Lord be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him." And the people answered him not a word."

In the previous chapters, we have seen the trouble to which the Lord goes to produce things the way He wants them to be. God needs such a testimony. His plan from eternity is connected to it. This plan cannot be achieved until God's people have entered into His thought, until they stand experientially in everything that God has given them in Christ. That is, God wants to be ruling in the life of His people. His people should be the living realization of His thoughts. Only in this way does God have what He wishes to have. But if this were to happen, then firstly, everything has to be given to us by God; that which is in God has to have full and undivided importance in our life, so that that which came from God can return to Him.

If only we could grasp the thoughts of God better! There is such a lack of spiritual receptivity. This is because there is a lack of spiritual life; we can only understand the thoughts of God to the degree we walk in them. Where there is a lack of walking in the Spirit, there is also a lack of understanding of God's thoughts.

How can we forget that we stand in a battle? Satan has tried from the start to bring other thoughts than the thoughts of God into this world, namely his own. As a result of their disobedience, humans beings became subject to this other spirit; man lost his ability to grasp God's thoughts; the thoughts of the flesh took possession of him. Therefore we see from the beginning two directions of thoughts in battle with each other: the thoughts of God and the thoughts of the flesh. In regard to the latter we could also say: the thoughts of the devil. This is not just the case in undisputed sinners, but the thoughts of religious flesh are also thoughts against God. We have to admit that in Christianity today something pagan co-exists, yes, that in the midst of service for God, and the salvation of souls, methods are used that have nothing in common with the thoughts of God, that are not from His Spirit. What do we mean by this?

We think here of the vast area of psychology. Modern psychology in its spiritual content is completely heathen. It goes back to men who knew only of the difference between soul and body, who were not conscious of the human spirit. This pagan psychology has been taken over by the theology of our time, so that today evangelization is widely practiced on a pagan basis. When I studied theology, we were told that a sermon was successful and had achieved its goal, when the following three points had been considered:

1. To win the intellect of man through facts or evidence.
2. To take into account the feelings of man.
3. To persuade the will of man.

When that was achieved, we would have won the intellect, the emotions and the will of man. But that is nothing else than what we call in psychology the 'soul'. Mental activity, emotional life and the will is exactly that which the New Testament calls the natural man, who as a 'soulish' man is incapable of accepting what comes from the Spirit of God.

Nearly all so-called revivals have happened on this basis. They were mighty movements for the shaking of emotions: mighty persuasions and argumentations were used to influence the understanding and will. What was the result? The natural man has been manoeuvred into Christianity and been made a Christian. We cannot, however, recognize the thoughts of God in this and it has nothing to do with being born again.

According to the Word of God, man is body, soul and spirit. Christ says, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6). It may be that 'rebirths' have occurred in the revivals mentioned above. But there is a difference between, let us say, a psychological rebirth and a rebirth in the Spirit. The one might temporarily carry all the characteristic features of a real rebirth. And yet all of that does not necessarily have anything to do with the Spirit, and in innumerable cases it has had nothing to do with the Spirit. It is a work of man. The disastrous fruit of these often well-meant efforts are devastating. We see how successful the devil was to confuse things; how he has managed to smuggle a whole heathen system into Christianity, a system that has nothing in common with the thoughts of God.

We see the same in reference to the church. Christianity has become a system of human interpretation of the thoughts of God. Spiritual death hovers over it. It is no living testimony for God.

God has given us a burden in our hearts concerning His thoughts. We do not speak to criticize. We speak because we have to. The force of the devil operates there where the wealth of people's souls are at his disposal. He reaches his purpose through alliances available to him in the soul of man. That is why God endeavours to such an extent to save man from himself, to save him unto God.

We have said that the ministry of the prophets consisted of leading the people back to the thoughts of God. It was a ministry amongst the people of God. It was about the rights of God in His house.

Let us return once more to Elijah, and let us note how things started. It starts with the Lord saying to Elijah: "Go, show thyself unto Ahab!" (1 Kings 18:1). Three and a half years earlier He had said: "Hide thyself!" (1 Kings 17:3). The prophet had therefore hidden himself all this time until then. But now the word was: "Go, show thyself unto Ahab!". He stands face to face with Ahab. We remind ourselves about what Ahab said on that occasion: "Is it thou, thou troubler of Israel?" (1 Kings 18:17; RSV). People that stand without reserve for the rights of God will always be considered as enemies by those who reject the thoughts of God. There is the point of view of Elijah, and the one of Ahab. Ahab, who says: "You, the troubler of Israel." Or Elijah who can reply: "It is not I that have brought Israel into trouble, but you" (1 Kings 18:18). Where did the trouble come from in reality? Did it come from the side of those that wanted things the way that God wanted them? Did it not come from the side of those that denied God His rights? Those that do not want to go the full way with the Lord, who do not have the thoughts of God at heart, they are really His enemies.

On which side do we want to stand? That is the real question. That is what it is about. We know how Elijah expressed himself in reference to his own life: "I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts" (1 Kings 19:14). Elijah has a clear picture of what God wants. He can also see through to recognize what does not correspond to God's thought. But he himself stands outside of these matters. He is not entangled with the exterior. That is why he is able to be at God's disposal. His devotion includes the willingness to pay the full price necessary for a full restoration of the testimony of God. Consequently, such witnesses will be fought as enemies. Wherever a religious system has come to reign, it will always be held against them that it is they who bring the people of God into confusion. This is what makes the ministry so difficult. This is what makes the ministry so costly.

But behind all of this was Baal. Elijah was not against Israel. It was a blinded nation. Baal stood behind it. The forces of darkness were working in the idolatry into which Israel had surrendered itself. Israel was so deceived that it thought it was doing right in its idolatry. This is the highest level of deception, not seeing that everything one does, also that which is sincerely intended, actually serves the devil. The prophet's disagreement is not in the first place with Israel. His battle is with the whole spiritual system into which Israel is entangled. 'Religious' people would not even rebel against the ministry of the prophet, if the enemy did not instigate them. So they become instruments of the devil. But the prophet is ready to encounter this. He is misunderstood, he is slandered and seen as an enemy; he is marked as the one who troubles Israel. But he has a vision. He does not serve himself. He knows that his standpoint leaves no room for personal ambition. But he has seen God. He is connected to God. And in the special standing which he has with God, the difference between the godly and the human has been revealed to him. With this vision he has become prepared to carry the cost that the service of God demands.

How important it is that we recognize our calling. It determines our ministry. What does it consist of? Has God not revealed His secret to us? Has He not made known to us in His Word what He wants? He has surely spoken to us quietly and has unveiled His thoughts to us. Can we do otherwise but recognize the

immense contrast between the thoughts of God and those of men, between that which God wanted as a testimony of heavenly things and that which men have made of it?

Let us proclaim the message of God! Let us give back the thoughts of God to His people! But let us not forget what it costs.

When the Lord shows us such things, a crisis emerges for us. Are we prepared to pay the price? Are we prepared to be called enemies, who apparently want to confuse the people of God? Are we prepared to take a place of full trusting and dependence, if only God attains His goal? We may be slandered and regarded as contemptuous, but what does it matter? As long as God is honoured.

I think we all realize such decisions are final and definitive. The decision that God demands of us takes everything away from us. But how abundant in contrast to this is what God gives us! We have the choice. We can decide for God with the full consciousness as to what we have decided. The alternative is to reject our calling. We can return to lower, earthly things because of all sorts of reasons. We then lose the vision, and we lose the calling. We have missed "so great a salvation" (Heb. 2:3).

Elijah's behavior is also meaningful in reference to something else. In his time Israel was divided. He could have accepted the division without complaining about it, wishing for a better time. But he does not accept the separations. He builds an altar of twelve stones, to bring to expression that according to God's thought the church is an indivisible whole. From God's point of view she is one body. Did the Lord not say to Jacob: "Thy name shall be Israel"? (Gen. 32:28). As a prince of God he was called to build the house of God. Elijah refuses to present anything to a part of Israel that may only be applied to the whole.

"And Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, unto whom the word of the Lord came, saying, "Israel shall be thy name": and with the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord: and he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two measures of seed. And he put the wood in order, and cut the bullock in pieces, and laid him on the wood, and said, "Fill four barrels with water, and pour it on the burnt sacrifice, and on the wood." And he said, "Do it the second time." And they did it the second time. And he said, "Do it the third time." And they did it the third time. And the water ran round about the altar; and he filled the trench also with water. And it came to pass at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that Elijah the prophet came near, and said, "Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that Thou art God in Israel, and that I am Thy servant, and that I have done all these things at Thy word. Hear me, O Lord, hear me, that this people may know that Thou art the Lord God, and that Thou hast turned their heart back again." Then the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces: and they said, 'The Lord, He is the God; the Lord, He is the God'" (1 Kings 18:31-39).

Do we not see the same in the Letter to the Ephesians? Paul sees the church, as far as an earthly representation is concerned, in the process of collapsing. As he looked at his life work from prison in Rome, he had to admit that it did not last. In Asia, in Galatia, in Europe, everywhere he sees failure and breakdown. When he was free he could travel to and fro; he could do his utmost to keep the spiritual state of things going. Now, sitting in prison, he watched the work come to nothing. Some assemblies turned away from him altogether. The state of the church could have caused him to say: It is all in vain. However in reading the Letter to the Ephesians, we do not find the slightest indication of such a point of view. He wrote the letter at the end of his life. Had he written the letter at the beginning, we would say: What a

wonderful ideal the church of Paul is. However, Paul wrote it when the church on earth was failing. Despite this, for Paul there is no division. Oneness is the word that governs this letter. What kept Paul from despair was this:

"Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God; and are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone; in Whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: in Whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit" (Ephesians 2:19-22).

Paul saw the heavenly reality of the church in Christ. He saw the Body of Jesus Christ in its perfection through the work of Christ. He saw that the Lord did not want to make something for the earth, but that through the Holy Spirit He was seeking to turn from the earthly into the heavenly that which had been redeemed from the earth in Him.

In spirit Paul was standing on the same ground as Elijah. Elijah did not take ten stones to show that he was acting for the ten tribes of Israel. Neither did he take nine and a half stones, leaving aside the two and a half tribes that had not crossed over the Jordan. According to the thought of God he used twelve stones for an altar. A mighty testimony for the unchangeable and glorious realization of the thought of God at the Cross of Golgotha. Elijah stands alone on the top of Carmel. But God stands with him. Like Paul he can say: "All forsook me... but the Lord stood by me" (2 Tim. 4:16,17). He is not scared of the outcome of the fight. He asks for water to be drawn four times. It has to be made as clear as possible that only God can act in the way He did in response to Elijah's prayer.

What does God want to show us by this? God waits until all hope in human help and human efforts of explanation have come to an end, to show that He is God and no one else.

What wonderful faith do we see in Elijah! What happened on top of mount Carmel is an illustration of the Word in the Letter to the Ephesians: "The exceeding greatness of His power (is directed) to us-ward who believe."

Elijah had stood up for the sake of the testimony of God. He had suffered because of the recovery of the rights of God. Let us also stand for the rights of God! Even if we are to be considered by some as enemies. The Lord can strengthen us in our testimony, and He will do it. Only let us pay the whole price. Let us not keep anything back. Let us give ourselves completely to God, so that He may have opportunity to realize His thoughts.

This will lead us into battle. What does it matter? We look at the end. After Elijah comes Elisha. The whole life of Elisha is an uninterrupted triumph of life. We also look to the future and know that it will be only life in eternity.

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