

Recovery of Lost Testimony

by T. Austin-Sparks

The recovery of God's testimony is the key to this section of Isaiah, and is emphasized through the themes of abundant grace, God's sure word, the House of Prayer, and the importance of meekness, love, suffering with Christ, and brokenness and weakness.

Scripture: Isaiah 55:1

Topics: "Recovery of Testimony", "The Cross and Ministry"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the recovery of God's testimony as a central theme in Isaiah, particularly from chapter 54 onward, highlighting the importance of Zion and the nations. He discusses the abundant grace offered to God's people and the assurance of His word that will not return void, leading to joy and peace. Sparks also stresses the significance of the House of Prayer and the need for humility and brokenness among believers to restore the testimony of the Church. He draws parallels with the New Testament, particularly in Paul's letters to the Corinthians, where the testimony is affected by internal conditions and the necessity of love, suffering, and brokenness for effective ministry. Ultimately, the sermon calls for a renewed commitment to God's honor and the implications of the Cross in recovering the Church's testimony.

Transcript

As we move into the next and succeeding chapters of Isaiah--being now, as I have said, on the positive, the resurrection side, the constructive side of the Cross--we find that one thing comes very much into view: namely, the recovery of God's testimony in the City and in the nations. That is the key to this section of Isaiah from chapter 54 onward. You will notice that Zion is much in view here. If you run through and circle the words 'Zion' and 'Jerusalem', you will see that that is the centre, the focal point of the testimony; but again, the nations are very much in view also. This will come out more fully as we proceed.

We come, then, first, to chapter 55, and we notice two things that mark this chapter.

Abundant Grace, and God's Sure Word

In verses 1-9, we see the freeness and the abundance of grace released to the people of God on this resurrection ground--free and abundant grace. "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price...." How much of the New Testament could be crowded into that!

Then, from verse 10 to verse 13, we have God's sure word: "My word... shall not return unto Me void". Nowadays, we usually claim that promise from the Lord when we are going to give a message, that His word shall not return to Him void. Of course, the principle is of general application; we are not wrong at any time in taking hold of that, provided that it really is the word of the Lord that we have to deliver. But I want to point out that that is not the particular meaning of the statement here. You will notice the sequence in verses 11 and 12: "So shall My word be that goeth forth out of My mouth: it shall not return unto Me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it. FOR..." (you must not stop there)-- "FOR ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace: the mountains and the hills...", and so on. The immediate meaning of the promise of the sure and effectual word is: This people had been promised by God deliverance; they had been assured that the Lord was going to bring them back from captivity. (Compare Is. 35:10; 48:20; 52:12). He had given His word that they should go out with joy and in peace, in these conditions. That was the word, and that word was not going to fail.

The House of Prayer, and the Need for Meekness

When you come to chapter 56, you find that everything centres in the House of Prayer for all peoples. "Even them will I bring to My holy mountain, and make them joyful in My house of prayer: their burnt offerings and their sacrifices shall be accepted upon My altar: for Mine house shall be called an house of prayer for all peoples" (verse 7). This is still related to the recovery of the Lord's testimony, and it is to be found in His House--'My house of prayer'.

In chapter 57, we find some further warnings to the Lord's people against any recurrence of that which had destroyed the testimony before. It seems always necessary for the Lord to say, and to say again: Be careful of the coming back of those old things which wrecked your testimony in the past; the things which (to use Jeremiah's phrase from the potter's house) 'marred' the vessel of testimony. (See Jer. 18:4.) So He gives here admonition concerning such ever present perils. Then, in verse 15, the ground of the Lord's presence and committal is mentioned. "For thus saith the high and lofty One That inhabiteth eternity, Whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones." These are the conditions of the Lord's presence, those in which His testimony will be reconstituted.

Chapters 58 and 59 are full of more warnings, more admonitions, more instructions, by way of clearing the skies of the clouds that would obscure the testimony. Notice chapter 58, verse 8: "Then shall thy light break forth as the morning...." It is the shining out of this testimony that is governing everything with the Lord. These warnings and admonitions are given in order to bring about the removal of the clouds that are lingering about the sky and trying to obscure the clear shining.

A Clear Shining Testimony Recovered

We are thus led into chapter 60. All that has gone before has prepared the way, always with this in view: "Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee." Here, then, we come to this matter of the recovered testimony; the shining light of the Church in the midst of dark conditions, in a very dark world. "For... darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the peoples: but the Lord shall arise upon thee, and His glory shall be seen upon thee." That is the thing that is uppermost in this last section of Isaiah's prophecies. When the testimony is restored (verse 1), the nations are affected by it: "Lift up, thine eyes round about, and see: they all gather themselves together, they come to thee; thy sons shall come from far, and thy daughters shall be carried in the arms. Then thou shalt see and be lightened,

and thine heart shall tremble and be enlarged; because the abundance of the sea shall be turned unto thee, the wealth of the nations shall come unto thee" (verses 4-5).

When the testimony is clear, when the shining is undimmed; when God has in His House, in His people, conditions answering to all that the Cross means, then you have this effect all around: the nations are affected, the peoples are touched; something happens, and a wealth, an enrichment, a fulness comes back to the Church itself. If the Lord has things according to His mind: in other words, if He really has His testimony in fulness, undimmed, without cloud, without shadow, in the midst of His people, in the vessel of His House: then the nations feel the effect, the impact, of it, and the Church itself is greatly enriched. "Surely the isles shall wait for Me, and the ships of Tarshish first, to bring thy sons from far, their silver and their gold with them, for the name of the Lord thy God, and for the Holy One of Israel, because He hath glorified thee" (verse 9).

The New Testament Counterpart

Now this, we know, is Old Testament prophecy. We recognize that the prophet was saying more than he knew--that his utterances contained and combined two interwoven elements. On the one side, as far as Israel was concerned, there was history in the making; but on the other side, all the way through this, there was (as in chapter 53) a pointing on to the Messiah--to the Lord Himself; to the Cross, and to all that was to follow the Cross in resurrection. There was the temporal and the passing, but there was also the spiritual and the eternal, which the Holy Spirit always saw and had in view in history.

Thus, in every connection, as we have seen, we are so to speak 'handed on', by these prophecies, to the New Testament. And the New Testament counterpart of what we have been seeing in Isaiah about the recovered testimony is found particularly in one of Paul's letters, namely, in his Second Letter to the Corinthians.

Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians

The great issue of both the letters to the Corinthians was that of the testimony of the Church in the city of Corinth and in the world. When we read these letters, of course we become very much taken up with all the details: in the First Letter, with the miserable details; the many things that are being dealt with. It is, for the greater part, not a happy or pleasant letter to read: perhaps you have given it up many times before you have got to the end, not understanding very much, and not liking a good deal more. But we need to stand back from it, and ask: What is it all about, after all? Let us not upset ourselves about all the details, for the moment; they all go to make up some one particular issue. What is the issue?

Well, as I have said, the issue of the letters to the Corinthians is the Lord's testimony in the Church, in the city and in the nations. Let us be clear about that. In the First Letter, there is, as you know, very much said about the world, and how the church in Corinth was failing to overpower the world, because the world had already overpowered it from the inside. The testimony was destroyed from within, and therefore there was no real impact upon the world. The natural, the carnal man had found his way into the church, and the church had therefore lost its testimony. It will always be like that. If anything of the natural man and the carnal man makes inroads, in any locality, into the church, that will be the end of the testimony in that church, and in that locality, and, so far as that company is concerned, in relation to the world. When the natural man comes in the testimony goes out.

Testimony Destroyed by Carnal Elements

In the First Letter, then, the whole question was one not merely of local conditions, but of the local conditions destroying the testimony of the Church in the city. And therefore all those conditions had to be dealt with, had to be exposed, uncovered, and brought to the Cross of Christ. Of course, what we have in 1 Corinthians is Satan's second great strategy toward paralyzing the Church's testimony. His first strategy, his first line with the Church, was open persecution, to try to destroy, to obliterate the Church's testimony in the city of Jerusalem and in the nation. As we know, it failed! But now Satan comes back along a second line of strategy: that is, he insinuates, into the very ranks of the church, men according to his own mind--carnal elements--the natural man, the carnal man. They serve the Devil's purpose so well; they effect the very thing he is after. When he finds he cannot succeed by open persecution, he comes round, as it were, to the back entrance, and introduces carnal and natural elements in by that door--and that has done it! The testimony goes out; it is destroyed.

But in between these two letters to the Corinthians, something happened. In chapter 7 of the Second Letter we read: "Now I rejoice, not that ye were made sorry, but that ye were made sorry unto repentance; for ye were made sorry after a godly sort, that ye might suffer loss by us in nothing. For godly sorrow worketh repentance unto salvation, a repentance which bringeth no regret" (7:9-10). The Apostle has a good deal to say about what had evidently taken place after his first letter. There was repentance, there was judging of themselves and of the conditions; there was, as he said, 'a clearing of themselves' (v. 11). There was a real distress and exercise about their condition, and this had taken place between the two letters. We may say that they had brought the situation to the Cross, and that had changed everything. And now that things had been dealt with on the inside, the whole matter of the testimony to the world, in the city, could be reconsidered, and a counter attack could be made by the church upon the enemy.

So that is what is in this Second Letter--the recovery of the testimony in the locality and out to the world. It all brings out into very clear relief the constituents of effective testimony--or, to use Isaiah's figure, the shining forth of the light. Let us look at some of the things that Paul says about this.

The Value of Triumphant Love

"For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote unto you with many tears; not that ye should be made sorry, but that ye might know the love which I have more abundantly unto you" (2 Cor. 2:4).

The first thing that we see is the value of triumphant love. That is a constituent of effective testimony, of clear shining. This clearly had its two sides in the Apostle. If ever a man might have found his love exhausted, the Apostle might well have been that man, as far as these Corinthians were concerned; for he did say: "If I love you more abundantly, am I loved the less?" (12:15). Surely that is enough to put any man off--to find that all his outpouring and outgoing and giving in love only means that love is being withdrawn; that less and less love comes back. What a situation he had to meet! yet his love triumphed. But it seems to have had an effect in them too: something of what he had written in his First Letter, chapter 13, seems to have come about. Yes, the triumph of 1 Corinthians 13 can be traced in this Second Letter to some very real degree--the love that "suffereth long, and is kind", and so on--the quality of triumphant love.

That, we might very well say, is the first and primary factor in effective testimony. The Lord Jesus said that: "By this shall all men know... if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35). This is the testimony; this is how it will be known--if we have love one for another. It matters very much whether the world is affected by what it sees. We cannot close the doors on ourselves, and say: 'Oh, well, the world in any case is inimical, it is always hostile, it is always unsympathetic; why take any account of it? Let us shut ourselves

in and get on with our job.' You cannot do that; you cannot ignore the world. We are here to affect the world--that is one of the chief reasons why the Lord leaves us here. We are not just to live here, cloistered and closed in, indifferent to the world, coldly detached from it.

Moreover, the world is going to find out, sooner or later, what is happening inside the church--what is happening in your local assembly! Make no mistake about it. The world will know the condition of the church: you cannot close doors and windows on that, and keep it in! All around will know; it will become known. And I repeat--it is a most important thing that the world should be affected, not by what it hears us say, but by what it sees in us. And the only thing it can really see, that will affect it, will be the mutual love which we have one for another. "By this shall all men know... if ye have love one to another." One of the most effective ways of testimony is--not preaching, but--loving! If that is there it will do far more than our preaching. But it will at least give a great backing to our preaching. All our preaching must be supported by this one thing--a strong triumphant love in the midst of the Lord's people.

The Value of Suffering with Christ

The second thing in testimony is the value of suffering with Christ. There is much about this in the Second Letter to the Corinthians. For instance: "The Father of mercies and God of all comfort; Who comforteth us in all our affliction, that we may be able to comfort them that are in any affliction, through the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound unto us, even so our comfort also aboundeth through Christ" (2 Cor. 1:3-5).

First of all, suffering with Christ brings a wonderful return in our discovery of the consolations of Christ.

It is a very important thing, in a world like this, that we should have some comfort to give. Both in the Church and outside of the Church, there is a great need of a ministry of comfort. You come back to Isaiah: "Comfort ye, comfort ye My People, saith your God" (Is. 40:1). But you cannot fulfil a ministry of comfort in mere platitudes; by coming into difficult and troubled situations and just saying nice things. If people are in real trouble, in real distress, and you begin to talk to them, the first thing they have a right to say to you is: 'Well, what do you know about it? Have you ever been in my position, my condition? have you ever had any deep, deep suffering? What do you know about it?'

Perhaps, therefore, it is one of those sovereign, providential ways of God, that He allows His people to know much suffering, so that they may derive this wonderful value of the consolations of Christ, in order that they may have that with which to comfort or encourage others--the tried, the suffering, the sorrowing. And what have we to give? Well, the word is: "that we may be able to comfort... through the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God." And if there is anyone reading these lines, who is having a painful, suffering time, going through a 'dark patch', as we say, might I try to transfigure it for you, in this way. Just look at it like this. Say to yourself: 'This gives me an opportunity to make a discovery of the Lord which will be stock in trade for future service. In my distress and trouble I can find comfort and help from the Lord, which may be of tremendous value to some others in the future.'

Ministry Made Through Experience of Resurrection

For that is how ministry is made. The man or the woman who is ambitious to be 'in the ministry'--to be speaking and preaching, going about taking meetings and all that sort of thing--but who has not gone through deep places, and found the Lord there, and brought up some treasure from the depths, some 'pearl of great price': that one's ministry is not real; it is artificial, it is merely professional. The true minister

of Jesus Christ will be taken down to the depths, to discover there, right down there, and to bring up thence, these pearls, these precious things, for the sake of the Church. Did you notice that phrase in Isaiah--"the abundance of the sea shall be turned unto thee" (Is. 60:5)? Yes, but the sea can be a very deep place, a very dark place, a very terrible place: and yet there are treasures there. That is the way of testimony.

Notice what Paul writes at the beginning of his letter. "For we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning our affliction which befell us in Asia, that we were weighed down exceedingly, beyond our power, insomuch that we despaired even of life: yea, we ourselves have had the answer of death within ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God Who raiseth the dead" (2 Cor. 1:8-9). This is how ministry is made--when you have a real experience of and testimony to the power of His resurrection. When everything seemed hopeless in your own personal situation; when everything seemed hopeless in your company of believers; and the providence of God led you to make a discovery of the power of His resurrection, 'that you should not trust in yourself but in God Who raises the dead': this is a constituting of ministry. If you have gone that way, you are a true 'minister'; you need not take the name; you need not be set apart or anything. If you have a knowledge of the mighty power of His resurrection, you are a minister; you have something which is most greatly needed.

The Value of Brokenness

The third thing in effective testimony is the value of brokenness and weakness.

"But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the exceeding greatness of the power may be of God, and not from ourselves; we are pressed on every side, yet not straitened; perplexed, yet not unto despair; pursued, yet not forsaken; smitten down, yet not destroyed; always bearing about in the body the putting to death of Jesus, that the life also of Jesus may be manifested in our body. For we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake, that the life also of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So then death worketh in us, but life in you" (2 Cor. 4:7-12).

We should continue reading down to verse 18. You will notice that this section has as its real message the tremendous value of the quality of brokenness and weakness. That is a vital thing in effective testimony. We, perhaps, do not naturally put much value on brokenness and weakness; but here, very much value is put upon it. "We have this treasure in vessels of fragile clay." What the Apostle is saying, in effect, is this: 'We are broken men; we are weak vessels. The one thing about us, more than anything else, is our capacity for being broken--it seems that we have just been made to be broken.' And then he is saying that there is an infinite value attached to that.

In the First Letter to the Corinthians, the church was not broken. It was hard; it was trying to hold itself intact; it was proud; it was judging; it was cruel; it was unkind; it was anything but broken. But now, as we read this Second Letter, we find there is about the church a softness. It is soft--it is melted--it is broken! You can talk about 'ministry' now; you can talk about 'testimony' now; you could not do so before. No: until the vessel is broken, nothing can flow out; if anything is to flow out, it will only do so when the vessel is broken. The Apostle is saying that that was how it was with him personally (and of course he is, by inference, passing it on to the church in Corinth). Our weakness, our brokenness, is of the greatest importance and value, for it is only then that the real treasure can be manifested.

Do you talk about 'the testimony'? have you got a phraseology of 'testimony'? Do you talk about 'ministry'? have you got ideas about 'ministry'? My dear friend, the Holy Spirit would say, both to you and to me, that

testimony and ministry are only real when they come from broken men and women. Let us make no mistake about it. I know it is the hard way, but it is the only way. You and I have no right to minister, no right to talk about 'the testimony' or about 'the Church' or about 'the vessel' or any such things, unless we know something of this brokenness, this weakness.

You see how true this is to what we read in Isaiah. The Lord says: "Mine house shall be called an house of prayer for all peoples" (Is. 56:7); but--"Thus saith the high and lofty One That inhabiteth eternity, Whose name is Holy; 'I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit' " (Is. 57:15). You find Him at humbled Corinth, chastened Corinth. There is something new in this second letter--something that was missing from the first. You feel the unction of the Spirit, the beauty of the Lord. Yes: the Lord is here now, because they are broken. That unction of the Lord is only found with men and women who have really had a weakening, a breaking, an emptying, who have lost all "confidence in the flesh", whose own self strength has all gone. That is the way of the shining; that is the way of recovered testimony.

Love the Way of Enlargement

There is one more passage to which I would like to refer you.

"Our mouth is open unto you, O Corinthians, our heart is enlarged. Ye are not straitened in us, but ye are straitened in your own affections. Now for a recompense in like kind (I speak as unto my children), be ye also enlarged" (2 Cor. 6:11-13).

What was the cause of the lost, broken down testimony in Corinth? They were too small; they were too little. Paul said that he had to treat them like babes--they were peevish! Children can be like that, can they not? Trifles have far too much importance. Paul says: 'Be enlarged, be enlarged! Let your hearts be enlarged! Be bigger people--be too big to come down to all these mean things. Have big thoughts, have big feelings--of course without self importance or self inflation; have a large heart--a heart of love!'

What does love do? Love "rejoiceth not in unrighteousness, but rejoiceth with the truth". Love "believeth all things": it takes a large heart to do that, does it not? It is never ready to believe an unfavourable report, but always ready to believe that there may be something that can be set off against it--that there may be another explanation. Love rejoices not when one who has committed a wrong suffers for it--that is paltry. This is where David is such a rebuke to us. Just consider him: what a life Saul gave him during those years! He hunted him, he said, like a flea, like a partridge (1 Sam. 24:14, 26:20); chased and pursued him from rock to rock, from cave to cave, in the wilderness, if only he might get him and destroy him; gave him no peace day or night. He was determined, implacably determined, that David should die. And the day came when, in one of these pursuits, Saul, with his 3,000 chosen men--an army to catch a man!--arrived in a certain place at night, and lay down to sleep. And, unknown to him, David was very near, right on the spot (I don't think he would have slept if he had known!); and David came with his men, and looked on him; and David's men said: 'Now is your chance--the Lord has given him into your hands!' (1 Sam. 24: 4).

You know, if only we can imagine we have got Divine support for something, that is all we want. We only want someone to say, 'It is the Lord's will', and, if it is something that serves our own interests, something that we would naturally very much like, how we will go for it! It is a very strong temptation, is it not, when it appears to be supported by the Lord?

But here, David--as on another such occasion, when his companion said: 'God has delivered your enemy into your hands this day; now is your chance! Let me smite him, and I won't have to smite him twice! One blow, and I will finish the whole thing for you!' (1 Sam. 26:8)--David replied: 'No, no; God forbid that I should touch the Lord's anointed!' Ah, that is bigness; that is real greatness. He forbore, to his own hurt. He knew not how many more years of suffering he would have, but he accepted them. He could have ended all that at one blow, but he said: 'No, I must not touch the Lord's anointed. I may be in the right, and the Lord's anointed may be altogether in the wrong; nevertheless, it is not for me to touch him. I leave him with the Lord; I must not lift my hand against him. God forbid that I should touch the Lord's anointed.' I repeat: that is bigness, that is spiritual greatness! And so Paul appeals to the Corinthians: "Now for a recompense in like kind... be ye also enlarged." The Lord make us big people, in this spiritual sense.

The Constituents of Recovered Testimony

Let us now try to summarize the constituents of recovered testimony, whether that testimony be local or to the world.

It must be born, firstly, as we have seen, out of what we know of Divine comfort in suffering.

Secondly, it must be born out of what we have known of resurrection (whether individual, or collective and local), when all has seemed to be hopeless.

Thirdly, it must be born from what we have learned of Divine love through our own failure. I am sure that this was a great factor in Corinth. How deeply they recognized their failure! They went down, right down in the dust, under the sense of what a miserable failure they had been as a local company. And then, smitten with this realization of their own failure, they discovered that there was love pouring to them, through this Apostle, from the heart of God; and that discovery constituted their new testimony.

Fourthly, it must be born from the brokenness and enlargement of heart that comes through the consciousness of weakness. I suppose, if any people ought to have been conscious of their own weakness, it was those people at Corinth. There are, in fact, indications in this Second Letter that they came almost to the point of despair about themselves. I think this realization of their own fallibility and untrustworthiness just overwhelmed them, overflowed them. But through it they came to this enlargement of heart. If you and I are groaning under the consciousness of our own failure, we are not going to be petty and mean toward the failures of other people; we are going to be very much more patient, very much more understanding--altogether larger of heart. We are going to say: 'Well, I have had to walk very carefully myself, just there. But for the grace of God, there goes myself!' That is largeness of heart, true brokenness.

Fifthly, and finally, what utterness for the Lord should result from a sense of responsibility for His honour in the locality and in the world. I think that is what arises here. If that is not present, then all the other means nothing. It must have been brought home to the Corinthians that they were letting the Lord down in the locality. Their condition, the situation among them, was just bringing dishonour to Him. And that provoked a sense of responsibility: 'Oh, we cannot afford to let the Lord down! For the Lord's sake, for the sake of the Name of the Lord, we must put things right amongst ourselves, whatever it costs.' There is much in Isaiah's later chapters about the Name of the Lord in Zion, when recovered. And so, in the church at Corinth, this sense of responsibility for His Name and for His honour, in that vicinity and in that city and in the world, produced a new utterness for the Lord.

We come back to our question: "To whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?" Well, to those, such as we have seen, who accept the implications of the Cross. This is all the outcome, the outworking of the Cross. This all comes out of Isaiah 53. Recovered testimony of this kind can only be as the result of the Cross. The Cross is the basis of everything in all testimony.

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