

Revelation in Relation to Sonship

by T. Austin-Sparks

Sonship is a personal and direct knowledge of the Lord Jesus that makes us stable, assured, and trustworthy in our spiritual lives, but also leads to loneliness as we move beyond traditional ground.

Scripture: Isaiah 33:17, Luke 3:21, 2 Corinthians 4:6, Galatians 1:1-23

Topics: "Sonship", "Revelation Of Christ"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks preaches on the significance of sonship as exemplified by Paul in his letter to the Galatians. Paul emphasizes that his apostleship and the Gospel he preaches are not from men but through a revelation of Jesus Christ, highlighting the personal and direct nature of sonship. The sermon delves into the need for a revelation of Christ in the heart, emphasizing that true sonship involves a personal, independent, and ongoing relationship with the Lord, distinct from second-hand knowledge or traditional Christianity.

Transcript

"Paul, an apostle (not from men, neither through man, but through Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised him from the dead)... I make known to you, brethren, as touching the gospel, which was preached by me, that it is not after man. For neither did I receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but through revelation of Jesus Christ... it was the good pleasure of God... to reveal his Son in me... I conferred not with flesh and blood: neither went I up to Jerusalem to them that were apostles before me: but I went away into Arabia; and again I returned unto Damascus... they only heard say, He that once persecuted us now preacheth the faith of which he once made havoc" (Gal. 1:1,11-12,15-17,23-24).

I want to seek, as the Lord enables us, to get still closer to this matter of sonship, and I think there is no doubt that Paul, as he comes before us in this letter to the Galatians, himself stands as an example of what sonship is. There is no doubt that much of the nature of sonship is resident in these statements of his about himself - "not from men, neither through a man, but through Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised him from the dead", and other passages which are similar.

"An Apostle, not after Men"

The question arises - and it is a very simple way I think, of getting to understand what is indicated - the question arises, How might Paul have been an apostle other than by this method, other than in this way - "an apostle not from men, neither through a man: the Gospel which I preach not after man, neither did I

receive it from a man, nor was I taught it". What did he mean? Well, there were two ways in which Paul could have become an apostle and a preacher of the Gospel. There were the apostles at Jerusalem with whom he went up later, and if he had been an interested inquirer, he might have gone perhaps to one of their meetings, or might have called upon them for an interview, and they, Peter, James and John, and others, might have told him all that they knew about Jesus, and have given him a good deal of what they had heard him say through the three years, and also of the many and mighty miracles which He wrought; and then about His death; and then with tremendous earnestness, passion, zeal and fire and enthusiasm, of His resurrection. Thus they might have given Saul all those facts, and given them in such a way, with such fire and such earnestness as to be tremendously persuasive. The young man might have fallen to that because the thing seemed to be indisputable, so real, so wonderful to them. He might say, There is no doubt that these men have seen something, and they know something, and what they say is true! Then, as a result of it all, he might have said, Well, what can I do but accept what they say, believe that they are speaking the truth, and myself just become a follower of Jesus Christ and, accepting these facts and believing them, go out and declare them to other people? He might have become an apostle in that way. That is what he meant when he said, "of men", "through a man". It might have been like that. It could have been like that, and it has been like that in multitudes of cases; not just the acceptance of the argument, but the contagion of someone else's belief, becoming enthused by the others.

It is not a question of whether they were right, or whether what they said was the truth. That is not the point at all. Nor is it in question whether their experience was a true one. There is no doubt at all regarding the truth and reality of their experience. Yet other people may have an experience, and be in a perfectly true and right position; it may be the most living and real thing with them; and their zeal and their passion and their conviction, and all that they know, the truth which they possess, may be given to you, may be passed on to you, and you may accept it quite honestly and sincerely, and in a sense you may believe it, and in that way go on with the Lord Jesus and become a Christian and a servant of Christ: and it is just between that and something else which, after all, is altogether different, that this whole matter of sonship arises.

The Need for a Revelation of Christ in the Heart

Paul says, "It pleased God... to reveal his Son in me". It pleased God likewise to reveal His Son in Peter, and in James and in John. Yes, but that is not good enough for me, and, while I may not question or doubt their experience or their knowledge, or the facts which they state, sonship in my case demands that God shall reveal his Son in me, and that I do not get it even from those who are reputed to be something, pillars in the Church, Peter, James or John. "It pleased God... to reveal his Son in me." I received it not from men, be they the twelve Apostles; neither through a man, be he Peter, but through revelation of Jesus Christ.

That is very simple and elementary, but it sets forth the difference; and that is what Paul is drawing attention to. He does not, in so many words, say, Now, this is what sonship is, it is a revelation of God's Son in the heart of a person. He does not put it quite precisely like that, but that is what this letter stands for, and that is what the New Testament makes perfectly clear as being the real nature of sonship. It is that this whole matter of the Lord Jesus has become a personal and, in a right and proper sense, an independent thing in our own hearts. Our testimony must be, not, I was brought up in a Christian home, and sent to Sunday School and taken to church, and instructed in these things of the Lord, and given a sound Bible teaching; not that - that may all be receiving it through or of men, or a man. There has to be something more than that. We have to be able to say, "God that said, Light shall shine out of darkness,

hath shined into our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6).

"In our hearts" - that is where sonship begins, and it is that which is sonship from beginning to end; an initial thing where we leap clear of everything that is second-hand and the thing becomes first-hand, and where it grows and grows and never stops growing as a first-hand thing. That is sonship. If you understand and can grasp what that means, then you know what sonship is.

You see, about every fresh case of revelation there is a sense in which everything is quite new, as though the thing revealed had never been before, and no one else in all God's universe had ever heard or seen it. When you really come to have that experience, that knowledge by revelation of the Lord Jesus may be very imperfect, it may be only one thing about Him, but it is the revelation of the Lord Jesus in some particular way, at some particular point, some particular significance; and when you come in this way of revelation into possession of that it is to you as though it is something that has just come out of heaven newborn, and no one else in all the world has ever had it before. That is the effect of it. You want to tell it to other people, and old stagers who have known it for years and years have become your pupils. You begin to teach them something they know about as though they knew nothing of it at all. That is the effect of it. Of course, they do not let on; they do not smile benignly, and say, Poor creature! Inwardly they may smile, but it is a smile of gratification. They know that is how it ought to be with you. But they know quite well exactly what has happened. It is just like that. Some of us know that, when we did, by the grace of God and the operation of the Holy Spirit, leap clear of all that we had known in that other way, that traditional way, into the knowledge of the same thing in a living way by revelation, then we began to talk about it, and it did not matter to us at all that there had been people saying the same thing for years, or that it could be found in a good many books. To us it was as though they knew nothing about it at all. We were the only ones who knew anything about it! That is quite pardonable. If it really is of the first-hand order, there is something which is quite new and quite fresh, as though it had just come for the first time out of heaven. That is sonship.

Oh, if we lived there right up to date all the time, how different things would be. I mean, how much of our knowledge is, after all, what we have got through men, or of a man. And Paul is saying, Now, I could have got it all from the elders and apostles at Jerusalem and become a good Christian and an apostle, a servant of Jesus Christ like that. But no - "Paul an apostle (not from men, neither through a man, but through Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised him from the dead)."

Revelation Makes for Stability

Now we want to see how this connects with the whole object of the letter to the Galatians. These Galatians had, as the apostle said, started well, and for a little while they had run well, and then they had stopped because the traditionalists, the Judaizers, had come in and bewitched them, and their going on had been arrested; they had proved unstable. "I marvel", says the Apostle, "that you are so quickly removing from him that called you in the grace of Christ unto another gospel" (1:6). I marvel! "O foolish Galatians, who did bewitch you... having begun in the Spirit, are ye now perfected in the flesh?" (3:1,3). They had proved to be fickle, unstable, unreliable: and such features are not the features of sonship. They are just the opposite; they are the contradiction of sonship.

Now what is implied, if it is not directly stated, by the Holy Spirit through the Apostle is this, that when it is after this kind - "God revealed his Son in me" - when it is first-hand, immediate, direct, personal, the

revelation of God's Son in us, it makes for stability, it makes for assurance, it rules out all fickleness. Immediately you get on to second-hand ground, you get on to dangerous ground, so far as your stability is concerned. Presently a storm will arise, the rains will come, the winds will blow and beat upon that house, and it will fall: and great will be the fall of it, because it was built upon the sand. You remember what our Lord said: "He that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand". It implies something that is not rooted in experience, not rooted in ourselves, something we have heard and that is as far as it got. We have got it second-hand. The Galatians met the adverse winds and rains of the Judaizing assaults and crashed. Paul then, says, by implication, Stability, assurance, trustworthiness in the spiritual life, demand that we shall have this first-hand knowledge by revelation of the Lord; and if it is a demand, it is a possibility, it is meant for us; and it is just that freshness of things by first-hand knowledge and revelation which brings the element of wonderful freshness and life into every case concerned.

There is all the difference, you see, between that Christian life which is a labouring under the burden of an imposed Christian order and system, requirement and demand, and the free life of a son in whom the joy of the Lord is the strength. I cannot help asking this question of you, Is your Christian life a burden? Are you under a strain because you belong to the Lord? Have you come into a realm - you may use phraseology and call it "the testimony" or something of the kind - into a realm which has brought you into a strain and you ever wear a look of strain on your face, and go about as though you were carrying a great burden: this testimony is something so exacting and you have to be so careful? Has your Christian life become anything like that, a strenuous burdensome thing which takes the real joy out of your life, and people feel that you are all the time trying to live up to something, to keep up a standard, to maintain something? That is all wrong, every bit of it is wrong. That is not sonship; that is slavery. That is what Galatians deals with, the great difference between the son and the slave. Sonship carries with it in the heart always the sense of wonder, of freshness of life. It does not mean you have no burdens and trials, but it does mean that your relationship to the Lord is a thing which is so real, so first-hand, and your knowledge of the Lord is so fresh, that you know that you are on the borders of a land of far distances. You know in your own heart what these words mean - "Thine eyes shall see the king in his beauty: they shall behold the land of far distances" (Isa. 33:17). I am not exaggerating and I am not straining to make this mean something. To some of us it is just like that. For us we know that we have come to the land of far distances. That can be put in other words. We are seeing so much, sensing so much, that we realise quite well we will never get through it, and never be able to give it out or even to exhaust it, though we were to go on here for many a lifetime. It is like that.

Is it like that with you, or are you living on the last crumb, hardly knowing how to make ends meet spiritually? It is the difference in sonship, you see. Sonship implies an open heaven, sonship does bring in this element of wonder. Oh, friends, it is very true; and I would not say that to you if it were not true in my own case. I know this tremendous difference. Life is cut in two for some of us. On the one side of life, there was that strain to get something, to meet the demand, working hard to get some fresh idea, buying the latest books in order to try and keep fresh in our preaching, getting new ideas. People who were the most suggestive or provocative of thought and idea were our favourite authors. Then came the dividing of life with death and resurrection, with the Cross, and the other half of life, the growing revelation of the Lord Jesus that, no matter how long you go on, you feel that you have not started, but are still right at the beginning. It is a wonderful thing to feel you have the land of far distances, and are seeing the King in His beauty. That is the inheritance of sons. Christ is the land of far distances, He is the King in His beauty; and the land is our inheritance; we are brought into the land. It is a wonderful land.

Revelation Leads to Loneliness

Yes, that is quite true, that is all true, and yet there is something else about sonship which is equally true though not perhaps so happy. This revelation of Christ in us, when it is a true, real, living revelation, not only leads to and makes for stability and assurance and confidence, wonder and freshness and life, but it leads to loneliness, and I should be false to you if I did not say so, and indicate what that means; because the majority even of Christians are still hide-bound by tradition. They are still all of that other kind: what they have received they have received through men or from a man; they have taken on an already completed, rounded-off system of truth and teaching called Christianity. They have entered into it and taken it up, and they cannot see beyond it. You do not question their sincerity, nor do you doubt their earnestness, but there is that about all they have which is so second-hand. It is something which has existed through the Christian centuries, developed by this one and that one, shaped, formed and phrased by different teachers. It has become the evangel, evangelical Christianity in all its set terms, phraseology and forms. They do not see beyond it. And when one moves out of that realm into a personal, direct knowledge of the Lord through what we often term an open heaven, - but not, mark you, through a new or different revelation of Christ that is something apart from the Scriptures - into that experience, where we can say, "It pleased God to reveal his Son in me", and with me it is so real that sometimes I wonder if anyone has such a knowledge, such an experience; when we move that way, we move into a lonely realm. The majority cannot follow, cannot go with us, and cannot understand.

It does seem to me that there was something of that about Paul, that even other apostles were not able to grasp or apprehend Paul. He seemed to be very much one by himself. Yet here too we see the wonderful grace of God. Regarding what I said to you in our previous meditation about Paul and Peter having to have it out, and Paul resisting Peter to his face, I think I ought to add a word which improves on that situation. It is quite true Paul had a very straight talk with Peter. That is putting it mildly, I think. The words are strong words - "I resisted him to his face". But I think it is a great thing that years after when Peter wrote his letter he writes of him as, "Our beloved brother Paul" (2 Pet. 3:15). It is all right. It shows the grace of God; the final offence has not been taken, fellowship has not been broken. "Our beloved brother Paul." Peter coming back after being resisted to his face. Well, we just add that word and leave it.

But, you see, it does seem that even Paul, surrounded though he was by all the other apostles, had to go a lonely way, because this revelation was to him something so personal. It does mean that: understand that; and probably some of you do understand it in your experience. It will put you very largely into a lonely position, so far as the majority of other Christians are concerned, if you are going this way.

A Word of Warning - What is Meant when we Speak of Revelation

But I will step back a little, to safeguard and cover something. You have to be very careful about this matter of revelation, and I am not thinking for one moment of a revelation which is a different and a fresh revelation of the Lord Jesus from that given to the Lord's people in our own time or in other times. I am only speaking of it coming to us as revelation. Let us be very careful that we do not give the impression that we think that we are constituted by a special revelation which none of the Lord's people elsewhere have had or have. That is not the case, nor is that our idea at all. What we do seek to stand and live for is that the full revelation of the Lord Jesus shall come in our case in such a living way as to remove us altogether from merely traditional ground, and put us on to living ground. That is what it means, that the thing is living.

It is a difference, beloved, in another sense, in the sense that the Lord has done something by which it has been possible for Him to make His truth living in a fuller way than is true of that which is merely a traditional and set system, and an old order of things. That is the difference here in the letter to the Galatians. What Peter, James and John and all the others had was perfectly right, and Paul was not in any way different from them in any fundamental matter, or in the manner of his knowing, though in the measure of revelation he may have far outstripped others. But the point is, that whatever the other apostles may have had, and whatever Paul may have learnt from them, all that had to come to him likewise by revelation; he had not just to receive it second-hand. That is the difference; and it is that which makes for these things of which I have spoken, and it is that which makes for real helpfulness and power. We are not really helped by second-hand truth, second-hand revelation. It may be a very fine address, the substance of it may be perfectly true, and we may see that the person who gives it really knows it; but oh, then there is the gap! What do we need? Not just to adopt it because they see it and believe it, and because it is true in their case, but it has to be made as true in our case. And when it becomes like that, true sonship in that sense, then we are in a position to be really helpful to others; for, while we cannot give them our experience, we can help them very much to see that there is such an experience, and that it is for them.

First-hand Experience Alone Makes a Servant of God

I have just said, in very simple language, another thing which is very far reaching and compasses a great deal of ground in the Word of God. Real service does not come by being "trained". We are never made servants of God by going to Bible Institutes. They may be good things, very helpful, very useful, but they do not make a servant of God. You cannot be trained to be a servant of God in this academic sense. "It pleased God... to reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the Gentiles." It pleased God to send me to College, that I might preach Him? No, it pleased God to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him. Real service of the Lord comes out of that sonship. In the Word of God, sonship always lies behind service - The Levites and priests, sons of Aaron; service, sonship.

The Testing and Perfecting of Sonship in the Wilderness

Now, Paul says, "When it pleased God... to reveal his Son in me... immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood: neither went I up to Jerusalem to them that were apostles before me; but I went away into Arabia". It seems to me that what Arabia stands for is always very closely related with sonship. Moses had forty years of it. Well, he was truly far more a son when he came out than when he went in, in a spiritual sense.

"The heavens were opened... and a voice... said, Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased... Then was Jesus led of the Spirit into the wilderness" (Luke 3:21-22; 4:1). Sonship was being dealt with there. "If thou be the Son...." That is the basis of the wilderness. Somehow or other, in the economy of God a wilderness has a great relationship with sonship. It is a principle. "I went away into Arabia." What is Arabia? You do not get very much help from the world in Arabia, nor do you get very much help from the flesh. The flesh has nothing to thrive on in the desert; the natural life is starved in Arabia. You are alone with God: that is the point. Moses was alone with God in the desert for forty years. The Lord Jesus in the wilderness was alone with God. The Devil was there, it is true but He is now being tested and proved on this matter of His relationship with God without any help from the flesh or the world. Paul went away into Arabia. I have no doubt that during that time - some say two years - the sifting out of this position took place, the adjustment of things, the handing over of the old traditions to the new facts of experience.

Perhaps you know something of Arabia. You can live in a great city and be in Arabia. You may be here right in this meeting and be in Arabia at the same time. You are knowing something of the dry desert, the wilderness; that is, you are not finding a great deal upon which your natural life can thrive, a great deal to support you naturally in your relationship to the Lord. All that is being withdrawn, and you are coming to the place where it is the Lord, and only the Lord, and all other things are taken away. Beloved, the desert, Arabia, has proved again and again to be a school of sonship, and a very valuable school. Some of us know a little bit about Arabia. Oh, the desolation for the flesh there! "I conferred not with flesh and blood." No, it is coming, under desert conditions, to know the Lord. That is sonship, where the Lord alone is our resource, and where, if it were not for the Lord, we would die, our carcasses would fall in the wilderness; but we are proving that He can prepare a table in the wilderness. That is sonship. You will see the thing in principle and in spiritual meaning if you cannot follow or wholly grasp the way in which it is put. What the Lord is set upon is having us like that, sons in a true sense. May He have it so with us!

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