

# The Ark of the Testimony

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*The testimony of Jesus is the comprehensive truth about who and what Jesus is, and it brings Christians into conflict with the world and its systems.*

**Scripture:** Numbers 10:35, Psalm 68:1, Matthew 21:45, John 1:3, Colossians 1:16, Revelation 1:2-20

**Topics:** "Testimony Of Jesus", "Persecution of Christians"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the significance of 'The Ark of the Testimony' as a representation of Jesus Christ's greatness and glory, linking it to the testimony of Jesus found in Revelation. He explains that the ark, which contained the covenant, symbolizes the comprehensive nature of Jesus' testimony, which has historically faced opposition and persecution. The sermon highlights that the testimony of Jesus is not only about His identity as the Son of God but also encompasses His role as the destined Lord of creation and the pattern for all creation. Sparks warns that the conflict surrounding this testimony continues today, as Christians face challenges in a world increasingly hostile to the acknowledgment of Jesus as Lord. Ultimately, he calls for a deeper understanding of baptism as a commitment to the testimony of Jesus, which signifies both glory and conflict.

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## Transcript

"Who bare witness of the word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Revelation 1:2).

"I John, your brother and partaker with you in the tribulation and kingdom and patience which are in Jesus, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (Revelation 1:9).

"And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgement was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus, and for the word of God, and such as worshipped not the beast" (Revelation 20:4).

In our consideration of the greatness and glory of Jesus Christ we are seeing how God used the ark in the tabernacle of old to set forth that greatness and glory of His Son. Among the number of names by which that ark was called is "The Ark of the Testimony". The 'testimony' there referred specifically to the tables of the covenant within the ark, but it came to have a much larger meaning than that. The testimony related to the ark itself as well as to all that which was in it, so it was a very comprehensive thing. We saw that when we looked at the many names by which the ark was called.

There is a link between the ark of the testimony in the tabernacle and this phrase which repeatedly occurs in the Book of the Revelation, and which we have just read three times: "The testimony of Jesus". That was what the ark of the Old Testament represented. It was in very truth the testimony of Jesus.

Now it will be noted, as we follow the history of the ark, that its progress was always connected with conflict. As it went forward through the wilderness and into the Promised Land it was always an object of conflict. There is a great word by both Moses and David, the Psalmist, about this. It says that when the priests took up the ark the word went out: "Arise, O Lord, and let thine enemies be scattered" (Numbers 10:35; Psalm 68:1). The testimony was always an object of opposition, and the very presence of the ark of the testimony caused opposition. Then, when you come to this Book of the Revelation, you will notice that every time the testimony is mentioned it is connected with persecution. John says: "I... was in the isle that is called Patmos... for the testimony of Jesus." He was in exile because of the testimony of Jesus. He was in the isle of Patmos under one of the great Roman persecutions of Christians. Then, in chapter 20, he says: "I saw the souls of them that had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus".

So it will be noted that the testimony of Jesus is connected with persecutions and martyrdoms, but we shall understand that phrase 'the testimony of Jesus' better if we know the cause of the persecution.

There is no doubt whatever that the cause of all the persecution of the Christians was emperor-worship, and here, in this Book of the Revelation, we are in the presence of the persecutions which arose over emperor-worship. The Roman emperors were worshipped as deities. They posed as gods, and did the work of the devil. One of the titles of the Roman Caesars was 'our lord god', so that right over that vast Roman empire, over all the world, Caesar reigned as god. Only Jews and Christians were persecuted by the Romans, and the reason for that was that they would not acknowledge any other god than Jehovah. The Jews would worship no other god than Jehovah, and the Christians would acknowledge no other god than the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Roman world said of Caesar: 'Our lord god'. The Christian world said of Jesus: 'Our Lord God'. That explains the phrase 'the testimony of Jesus', for the testimony of Jesus brought the Christians into immediate and direct conflict with the whole Roman conception of who was God.

So the 'testimony of Jesus' is the testimony concerning the truth as to who and what Jesus is. History is repeating itself. If you are saying: 'Of course, that was long centuries ago. That belongs to the time of the Roman Empire and the Christian persecutions, many hundreds of years ago', I would remind you that that same thing, in principle, is spreading like a great wave over the world today. The systems and ideologies may not take the name of God, but they are taking the place of God. They are in opposition to all that is His right, and in a very great part of the world you dare not speak of Him. It is forbidden, with great persecutions, to worship God. Even the great world of Islam may recognize Jesus as a good man and a prophet, but you mention Jesus as God and see what you meet! We have reason to believe that this anti-God movement is far more widespread than we know. Even the Western nations are undermined with it, and those in the movement are only waiting for the day when they can spring up and put God out of this Western world.

We are all, in some way or another, in some measure or another, involved in the testimony of Jesus. If the outward persecutions and martyrdoms are not yet our experience, every truly devoted Christian knows that it is becoming more and more difficult spiritually to be true to the Lord. We are all involved in the conflict of the testimony of Jesus in one way or another. There is an antagonism to Jesus Christ in the very atmosphere. If you are not conscious of that, there is something wrong with your spiritual life. The more

utterly consecrated to Jesus Christ you are, the more conflict will there be in your life.

The ark of old times is a wonderful foreshadowing of this conflict. It is the ark of testimony, and it is the testimony of Jesus. Of course, if you are not prepared to testify to the Lord Jesus, you may have an easy time. Many Christians are afraid to testify because they know it will bring opposition. It will bring opposition in business, or in the home, or in social life. There is a mighty opposition in the very spiritual realm, and because of that opposition, many Christians keep their mouths closed. Do you think that makes them neutral Christians? It may look like that, but, really, they are defeated Christians already.

Now let us look at this testimony of Jesus more closely. It is the testimony as to who and what Jesus is. What did these Christians of the New Testament believe concerning Jesus? The first and basic thing that they believed and declared was: Jesus is the Son of God. That, of course, brought them at once into conflict with the Jews, who persecuted the Christians on that one point. You have one instance of this in a parable of the Lord Jesus. He said: 'A certain man planted a vineyard and let it out to husbandmen. At the time of the fruits he sent his servant to receive the fruit of the vineyard, and the husbandmen cast him out of the vineyard. So he sent another servant, and they treated him in the same way. After he had sent a number of servants, whom they killed, the Master of the vineyard said - "I will send my son. They will honour him." They saw the son coming and said: "This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance shall be ours.'" The Lord Jesus spoke that parable in the presence of the Jewish leaders, and whatever else you may say about their intelligence, on this occasion they saw the point, and the writer says: "They perceived that he spake of them" (Matthew 21:45). You would have thought that they had been discovered and so would go away and do nothing, but "they sought to lay hold on him". They did the very thing that the Lord had said about these wicked husbandmen. They would not have it that Jesus was the Son of God, and anyone who claimed to be that must die. That was the basis of all the persecution by the Jews.

We have seen how true that was in the case of the Romans. If anyone was said to take the place of Caesar, he must die. So the Christians were persecuted because of their testimony that Jesus was the Son of God.

However, that is only one of seven things.

The Christians believed and preached that Jesus, as the Son of God, was the destined Lord of creation. Both John and the Apostle Paul, put that into words: "In him (Jesus) were all things created... through him, and unto him" (Colossians 1:16)... "All things were made by him" (John 1:3). The wicked husbandmen of the spiritual world sought to take His inheritance from Him, but although they killed Him on the Cross, the Apostles and the Christians went through the world preaching that Jesus was the destined Lord of creation. If they had had our hymn-book, one of their favourite hymns would be:

"Jesus shall reign where'er the sun

Doth his successive journeys run..."

Yes, they would sing that most heartily!

"His kingdom stretch from shore to shore,

Till moons shall wax and wane no more."

Jesus is God's Son, appointed to be the heir of all things.

But the Christians believed something even deeper than that. They believed and taught that Jesus, as the Son of God, was the pattern of all the creation. We have often said that if we understood the spiritual principles of the material creation we should understand Jesus Christ. The sun, the moon and the stars are used as symbols of His kingdom. The sun is Jesus Christ Himself reigning high; the moon is His Church living and reflecting His light over the world in a dark night; the stars are the local churches showing His light in a dark world. And where shall I stop if I go through the whole universe? If we understood all the sciences and their spiritual laws, we should see Jesus. He is the spiritual pattern of the whole material creation. That is why the Apostle Paul used the human body as a model of the Church.

Now go out into a pagan world of unbelief and begin to preach those things! Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of the living God; Jesus of Nazareth is the destined Lord of creation; Jesus is God's eternal pattern for the creation, and eventually the whole creation will reflect Him. Well, say those things in a pagan, hostile world, and see what happens! You are not surprised that Caesar rose up against Jesus. Jesus said: "I am." Caesar said: 'The world is mine. It was made for me. I have conquered the world, and I make it according to my mind.' I said that because Caesar claimed that position he did the work of the devil, for behind the rulers of this world is Satan. Satan says: 'I am the god of this world. I am going to make this world according to my mind. I am going to take possession of the whole creation.' This is not fiction; it is spiritual reality, and this is the conflict of the testimony of Jesus. You notice that the sole object and the theme of testimony by the early Christians was: 'Jesus is Lord'. The preaching of that brought them into conflict with the lord of this world.

Now I said that there were seven things that the Christians believed. I do not think that it is necessary for me to overstep my space by dealing with all of them, but there are two things which we must mention as we close.

The Christians proclaimed that God had attested Jesus Christ on all these points by raising Him from the dead. They said: 'You killed Him, but God raised Him', and they went everywhere preaching Jesus and the resurrection. The raising of Jesus from the dead was God's seal upon all that we have said as to the testimony of Jesus.

The last thing for the present is this - and it is something that we must all take very careful notice of. All this was the meaning of Christian baptism. Baptism was baptism into Jesus Christ. It was baptism into the Name of Jesus, and that meant into all that was true of the Lord Jesus: into Him as the divine Son of God, into Him as God's destined Lord of the universe, into Him as the pattern of the creation that is yet to be, into Him as Lord. Is that what baptism means to you? Baptism has lost very much of its meaning in our time. In many realms it is just a ceremony, a part of Christian practice and teaching, but, as God sees it, it is an immense thing, and anyone who goes to this matter of baptism really seriously knows that there is a conflict related to it. The testimony of Jesus is the cause of all the trouble, the suffering and the martyrdom, but it is the testimony of the glory. The greatness and the glory of Jesus Christ is the testimony of Jesus.

I must close, but I am quite sure that you all feel that the immensity of this demands a great deal more time. I was speaking in India once, and after I had been speaking for one and a half hours, I looked at my watch. An Indian in the company shouted: 'Throw that watch away!' Well, we are going where there will be no clocks or watches, and when we are where time shall be no more we shall still be talking about the testimony of Jesus.

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