

The Belovedness of Christ

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of understanding the 'belovedness' of Christ and its significance in the priestly ministry, which is precious to the Lord.

Scripture: Exodus 32:1

Topics: "Belovedness of Christ", "Priesthood of Believers"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the 'belovedness' of Christ in relation to His priestly ministry, illustrating how God's people are called to be a priestly nation, precious to Him. He draws parallels between the Levites and Jesus, highlighting that both are marked by a covenant of life and peace, and that their ministry is characterized by an open Heaven. Sparks encourages believers to understand their own belovedness in Christ, which empowers them to serve with assurance and peace, despite trials and adversities. He warns against the enemy's attempts to cloud this assurance, stressing that knowing we are beloved by God is essential for effective ministry. Ultimately, he calls for a deeper understanding of what is truly precious to God, urging believers to seek that which aligns with His heart.

Transcript

Reading: Exodus 32:1-6, 15-29; Malachi 2:4-6; 3:1-3; Numbers 4:1-3; Luke 3:23.

The matter of the priestly service or ministry of the people of God, the service of God in terms of priestliness, is one which has been on my heart for a considerable time now. We will introduce the subject with a very simple consideration of what I am going to call the 'belovedness' of Christ, in this particular connection - His priestly ministry.

In the passages which we have just read, to which a great many more could be added, two things are quite clear. One, that the Lord's people are called to be a priestly people - that is their vocation; two, that in that function they are peculiarly precious to the Lord. You cannot read the many passages in the Scriptures about the Levites without being impressed by that one thing, that they are very precious to the Lord. The last reference to them in the Old Testament, which we have read, indicates that. There is a tone of very real endearment in the words of the Lord about Levi at that point. At the end of the story of the Old Testament, after all that has taken place through the years, the Lord looks right back to that day of which we read in Exodus 32, and speaks of how precious and valuable the Levites became to Him, so much so that He entered into a covenant with them, a covenant of life and peace. "My covenant was with him of life and peace".

THE PRIESTLY MINISTRY OF CHRIST AND THE FATHER'S LOVE

And you will notice the connection between the statement in Numbers 4:3, that the active Levites started their ministry at the age of thirty, and the statement that Jesus was likewise thirty years of age when He began His public ministry; indicating not only in itself, but by other features which we shall notice, that His ministry was essentially a Levitical, that is, a priestly, ministry. We all believe that, and we know how much is made of that, especially in the letter to the Hebrews. But notice that that statement in Luke - 'Jesus...when he began... was about thirty years of age' - follows immediately upon His baptism and the opening of the Heavens, and the Father's voice and attestation: "Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased." There is something about the Lord Jesus, just at this point when He takes up His priestly ministry, which draws out the love of the Father for Him in these affectionate expressions. It is true that He was the Son, and therefore He was beloved of God as His Son, but I believe there was a particular connection between His beginning of a priestly ministry, and this expression of the Father's love and appreciation for the preciousness of this upon which He was entering. That is the point of our concentration just now - the 'belovedness' of the Lord Jesus, and so of the Levites, as entering into the meaning of Christ's ministry in terms of priesthood, precious to the Lord.

I suggest to you, dear friends, that the thing that you and I need, and perhaps more than anything else desire, to be assured about, is: What is there, peculiarly precious to the Lord, into which we may be brought, in which we may be found, which may be entrusted to us! What we really are seeking for all the time is: What is it that the Lord wants more than anything else? What is it that is more precious to the Lord than anything else! Can there be something in the life of God's people corresponding to this 'belovedness' of Christ! It is very important to know that. There are many things that may be of value, but they may be of comparative value. What we want to know, what we must know, is: What is that which the Lord really looks upon as most precious to Himself, which will serve Him to the greatest value! The Lord Jesus received the assurance that the Father's love, appreciation and valuation were focused upon Him, just at the point when He stepped out into His public ministry. It is a great thing to start any work or move out into any service on a basis like that, is it not! Just think of what strength there would be if we had absolute assurance that that to which we were committed was something of tremendous value to God!

As we go on in our Christian lives and in our manifold work for the Lord, we find that time is a great sifter. Trial, testing, adversity and suffering, and all the things which come to bear upon us, very often make us raise seriously the question of values. 'Is it worth it! Is it justified! Does this really matter! Is this of such importance!' From time to time we are forced to ask, 'Now, what does it all amount to, after all!', and it is then a great delivering and confirming thing to have the answer: 'This is precious - of very real value - even of supreme importance to the Lord'. It was the starting-point of the Lord Jesus in His life-work - His belovedness to the Father, not only in His Person and Sonship, but in the thing to which He was committing Himself.

It is very important to know, and it is not wrong to say, that we can be brought into that belovedness. The Levites, representing God's thought for all His people, came into that in a very real way. The Lord let it be known right through the centuries that they represented something very valuable, very precious to Himself. "My covenant was with him of life and peace".

AN OPEN HEAVEN

Then you notice that when the Lord Jesus began at the Levitical age of thirty, the one thing that marked that beginning was the opened Heaven. The Heavens were opened. Now look back again at Exodus 32, and you see that that is exactly what is there. Moses, receiving the law and the testimony on Sinai in communion with the Lord, came down from the mount. The Lord had already told him what was happening down below, but Joshua did not know. Joshua was always a man of war, and any noise to him sounded like war, and when he heard the sound from the camp he interpreted it as war. His spirit rose to the occasion for fighting, but Moses said, 'No, that is not war - I know what that is', and he came down and saw, and took it all in.

Moses stood in the gate, and Israel became divided into two parties. On the one side, Heaven was closed. No doubt about it, Heaven was closed to them that day. It was doom, judgment, darkness, exclusion; they were set aside, cast out. Heaven was no longer open. On the other side of Moses were the Levites, and the open Heaven was with them. On the basis of their action, their decision, the open Heaven was their inheritance that day, and from that time onward theirs was the ministry of the open Heaven. Levitical ministry is the ministry of an open Heaven, and the opened Heaven is the sign and seal of the preciousness of that to the Lord. To be living, walking, working, in the good of a Heaven opened, is the mark of preciousness to the Lord. No judgment, no exclusion, no doom, no darkness, no wrath, but an open Heaven - the inheritance of the Levite, and the inheritance of the Lord Jesus, the greatest of the Levites.

Do you grasp the significance and importance of that! We are talking about service. Forget for the moment the terms in which we couch the message - 'levitical' and 'priestly' sound very ecclesiastical, very formal - and just think about the service which is precious to the Lord. That kind of service means the service which corresponds to the Lord Jesus, that pre-eminently marks the Lord Jesus. It has the seal of God upon it, that this is something supremely precious to the Lord; and the seal is that you have an open Heaven. That is, the way between you and God is wide open: there is no shadow, no cloud, no interruption: the course is clear between God and yourself, and yourself and God. If it is not like that, the service will be hard going, always under a sense of Divine reservation, that the Lord is not really with you as you feel He ought to be.

THE MARKS OF THE MINISTRY

An open Heaven, and "My covenant... with him of life and peace". What is the mark of this kind of ministry? What is the mark of a people standing in such a position, such a relationship with the Lord under an open Heaven?

(1) Life

Well, it is always with this twofold characteristic. First of all, life is being ministered all the time. Look at the whole history of the work of the Levites. We shall perhaps say more about that later. Their whole ministry was one of maintaining life, keeping open the way of life, ministering life. But for them, death would have set in: they were the bulwarks against death. They were the channel of life from Heaven to the people of God, and I suggest again that the real test of the service that is precious to the Lord is not 'size', not many things that men think to be the marks of success, but whether there is a ministration of life: is life being ministered, is life being poured out! is the one thing of which you are conscious in that ministry the presence of life? It is not just a matter of our understanding the terms and the phrases and the language and the teaching, but our recognition of life.

And what do we want apart from that, and what do we want more than that? Is it not that that the people of God need, after all! Oh, for life! It is life we want, we must have life - give us life! We cannot live without life! And the Levites were the ministers of life. Christ, the great Levite, was the Minister of life; and real service to the Lord is that we minister life - not that people come necessarily into a great range of truth, a vast amount of knowledge and information that is purely intellectual or mental, but that they have life ministered to them. That is the seal of the real service of God.

But when you come to think about it, that, after all, is the whole matter. It is summed up in that, and - because of the preciousness of this kind of service into which you and I are called - in the 'belovedness' of Christ. Oh, what a wonderful thing! That is something that we cannot talk about; we can only feel and sense. If it might be that the Lord should be able to look toward us with deep appreciation and say 'beloved', in recognition that there is something in our lives, in our service, in our ministry, of very, very great account to Himself; that there might be transferred to us something of the belovedness of His own Son.

(2) Peace

"And peace." Was it peace for those people who broke loose on that day? No, in the very deepest sense it was war. It was war between them and God, and between God and them. No peace with that. But the covenant of life over against their death, and of peace over against their controversy - or God's controversy with them - the covenant of life and peace was with Levi. Peace: it is a wonderful thing to be in the place where God is satisfied, and your heart is at rest. That place is in Christ.

GOD'S JEALOUSY OVER THE LEVITES

Now, because of the value of that to God, see how jealous He was over the Levites. It is a long story of Divine jealousy concerning their place and ministry. God was so jealous about the Levites, as to their rightful place, and the ministry which was entrusted to them, that some of the most terrible things in the history of Israel happened when the Levites were not given their place and their portion. This book of Malachi is just full of that. Glance through this short book, and note how many times reference is made to priesthood and Levi. You will find that the whole thing really focused upon that. And what is the trouble! Oh, everything is wrong in Israel at the end. It is a wretched, miserable story: everything is breaking down, everything is wrong, there is nothing happy at all. And why? The Levites are not in their place, the Levites are not functioning, and the Lord's people are not giving the Levites their portion and the Lord is so jealous about that, that everything else is allowed to go wrong.

But the conditions that obtained at the end had occurred repeatedly in the past. You recall the tragedy in the case of Uzzah and the ark. The Lord smote Uzzah, so that he died. Why? Because the Ark had been put upon a cart, when the Lord had prescribed that it should be carried by the Levites. The Lord is very jealous. Dear friends, it does matter, does it not, whether the Lord is jealous for us - whether the Lord is ready to stand by us, to uphold us, to be with us, to let it be known that "he that toucheth you toucheth the apple of his eye" (Zech. 2:8)! There is something in that - to have the Lord on your side, to know that God is jealous over that to which you are committed, and fiercely jealous over it, that the Lord is not going to let it be set aside, the Lord is not going to let it be overlooked. Even if, in all innocence and in all good motive and good will, as with David and his cart, the principle of the Levites is forgotten, is overlooked, the Lord does not overlook it. This is something which is pre-eminent with the Lord, God is jealous for something; and what matters is that we are in that something for which God is jealous. Oh, to have the jealousy of

God on our side in the work to which we are committed!

Now, the history of the Levites is a long and varied and mixed history. They were not always in good condition; they were not always in their right place, position and function. Sometimes they were incapable of ministering simply because they were involved in the bad state of the people of God. Sometimes they themselves were out of adjustment. It is a long and painful history. But what I want you to notice is this, that even in the last recorded phase of that history - a long history in which there are many dark chapters - even in the last phase, as we see it in Malachi, God has not given them up. The last word about them is that He will "purify the sons of Levi", after all. He has not abandoned them; He has not given them over. The Lord has made a covenant, and He is standing to it.

But it is not always a matter of the people. Here it is a matter of the ministry. There is some ministry which is of this kind, which has this importance and value in the sight of God. There is a particular kind of service to the Lord to which He is peculiarly committed, and, while those who are connected with it may change, may sometimes go wrong, the Lord is jealous for this thing, and He is not giving it up, He is not casting it aside. If that had been His way, where would the ministry of the Lord be to-day? Think of the Dark Ages, even of Christendom. Think of all those periods in this dispensation when things have been in a deplorable state, and the Lord has seemed to have little or nothing of this kind. But the Lord has never given it up, and He never will. The last chapter of the Old Testament sees the Lord coming back to it again. He is committed to it. It is a great thing to know that there is that which is of such importance to the Lord that if we come into it, we shall find God persisting in spite of failures, of weaknesses, of imperfections, of days of darkness, of seeming eclipses. God is going on with that thing.

There are things to which God has not committed Himself. There are those things which God has left, from which He has withdrawn; but there is that concerning His Son to which He has committed Himself, which He will never give up, no matter what happens. If we ask what that is - in a phrase, it is priestly ministry. We have to learn what priestly ministry is.

THE CHASTENING OF THE SONS OF LEVI

There is chastening connected with it. "He will purify the sons of Levi". Yes, chastening. But let us always keep a broad line between judgment and chastening. The Devil always tries to wipe out that difference, and interpret all chastening as judgment. Judgment is for rejecters of the Lord; chastening is for the accepters of the Lord. The form of the judgment may seem to be exactly alike for unsaved and saved: you cannot see any outward difference. The unsaved may suffer physical judgment for sin. The saved too may suffer physically - yet this is not judgment, but chastening. One is destructive, the other is constructive, and God's dealings with Levites are always on the constructive principle. Remember that. There may be suffering, there may be the fire purging and purifying, but it is always constructive. God is just using these ways to secure that upon which His heart is set.

SATAN'S HATRED OF LEVITICAL MINISTRY

This has been but an introductory word, but note one thing before we close: the hatred, the Satanic hatred, of this Levitical ministry. When Jesus began He was, as we have seen, about thirty years old, that is, of Levitical age, indicating that the ministry He was beginning was priestly ministry - the open Heaven attesting that this Person and this ministry were peculiarly precious to the Lord, beloved of God. What came next! The wilderness and Satan. And what was the point of assault! The very point upon which God had focused everything - the 'belovedness'. 'My Son, My Beloved'. "If thou be the Son..." He might just as

well have said, 'If Thou be the Beloved' for that was the point of the thing. 'If you are beloved, if you are so precious to the Father...' "If thou be the Son..." Satan hates not only this Person, but this thing, Satan is not only against the Person, but he is against the ministry; and the one thing that he will always try to do, in order to cripple, destroy or nullify that ministry which is so precious to God, is, if we may put it this way, to becloud the belovedness.

Do you not realize how Satan is all the time trying to make you believe otherwise than that God loves you, that you are beloved of God! It is often the last thing that we can believe, is it not, that we are beloved of God! Satan is always busy from every angle to try to becloud our belovedness. If he cannot do it by direct assault, he does it by suggestion, by insinuation. Or he will do it by trying to cause us to slip up, make mistakes, go wrong, and then bringing upon us accusation, saying, 'You are no longer beloved of God'. His devices and his efforts are countless and unsearchable, with the one object, as with the Lord Jesus, so with those who are with the Lord Jesus as the sons of Aaron, as Levites, of somehow bringing a cloud, raising a question, over this preciousness to the Lord.

I use the word again because it is a good word and gets us a bit off our beaten track - the belovedness of Christ, transferred to His fellow-priests or His Levite sons, the beloved. Let Satan get in there and he has destroyed everything. If there should be one reading these lines who has lost the assurance that God loves him, you not only know the unspeakable misery of it, but, what is more, you know how you are put out of service - you know quite well that you would not attempt to serve the Lord. It is no use - you are paralyzed until you know and are assured that the Lord loves you. If you have lost that assurance, you have lost your testimony, you have lost your ministry, you have lost everything, and that is the chief work of the Devil. Paul says: "he hath made us accepted in the beloved" (Eph. 1:6, a.v.). That is the belovedness of Christ transferred to those who are in Him. Do not believe the Devil. "Evil company doth corrupt good manners" (I Cor. 15:33) and if you have a talk with the Devil, and listen to him, your whole conduct will be affected and coloured by that. The one object the Devil has in view is to raise a question, nay, to establish in you a question, as to God's love and your belovedness to God - that is, personally.

And then he is after something more - he is after your ministry. You see, on that day when the Lord Jesus stepped out to His ministry, the Devil stepped out too, and said, 'Not only will I raise a question, if I can, about His relationship with God and God's relationship with Him, but by raising that question I will destroy this ministry, if I can, right at its birth'. You and I are no use to God if we have a question about either His love for us or His love for that to which we are committed. If we have any doubt about that, we are finished. This sense of what I have called 'belovedness' is essential, not only to life, but as an assurance and rest in service. It gave encouragement to the Levites to go quietly, assuredly and restfully about their work, and so they did. Day after day, by day and by night, they went on quietly with their ministry. To go on quietly, persistently, assuredly, in peace, all rests upon this - the recognition that that into which I have been called by God is of infinite value to Him, and because I am called according to His purpose, I am beloved of God.

That is a simple word with which to begin, but it is basic to everything. May I just sum it up like this! The Lord is calling us to something which is not a comparative thing, but an absolute thing: which is not just something that, well, the Lord likes and will bless, but is that upon which all His heart is set, which means more than anything else to the Lord. May our hearts reach out for that in these days, and may the Lord show us what it is.

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