

The Crisis as to the Earthly and the Heavenly

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the need for Christians to embrace their identity as pioneers of the heavenly way, contrasting it with earthly standards and experiences.

Scripture: Genesis 12:1, Numbers 13:1-3, Numbers 14:10, Psalm 139:23-24, John 8:56, Acts 2:23-24, Romans 1:4, Galatians 3:16, Hebrews 6:19-20, Hebrews 11:16

Topics: "Heavenly Calling", "Pioneering Faith"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the ongoing conflict between the earthly and the heavenly, illustrating how the Old Testament figures, particularly Joshua and Caleb, serve as pioneers of the heavenly way. He highlights the need for believers to recognize their heavenly calling and to separate themselves from earthly standards, as true access to God requires a different basis than what the world offers. Sparks points out that the Church has largely become earthly in its approach, losing sight of its heavenly vision and purpose. He calls for a return to the pioneering spirit that seeks to fulfill God's heavenly purposes, despite the challenges and costs involved. Ultimately, he encourages believers to embrace their identity as pioneers, linking their faith to the greater heavenly reality embodied in Christ.

Transcript

Reading: Numbers 13:1-3, 17-23, 27-33; 14:1-3.

We have been considering the fact and nature of the heavenly way. The Bible begins with the creation of the heavens and the government of the heavens. It ends with the emergence from heaven of that which has been formed by heaven, according to heavenly principles: the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, fulfilling this word which we have read in Hebrews 11:16 - "God hath prepared for them a city".

THE CLASH BETWEEN THE EARTHLY AND THE HEAVENLY

We remind ourselves here that a characteristic of the Old Testament at every stage is the clash and contrast of two worlds, of two orders: the heavenly and the earthly. All the way through the Old Testament we have this element - of heaven challenging this world, and apprehending, in this world, that which it will take out and constitute according to its own, heavenly, order and nature. It does not require a very profound knowledge of the Old Testament to confirm that. Your minds run quickly over its story and you recognise that you are in the presence of a clash all the time, a conflict. It is this conflict between heaven

and earth. Heaven is not satisfied with this world - very much to the contrary. Heaven is against what is here in this world; but heaven is seeking to take what it can out of this world to reconstitute according to its own standards: and so, while you find the opposition of heaven, the challenge of heaven, you at the same time find heaven, right from the beginning, as it were laying hold of people - a line of individuals and a nation - in order to detach them from the world, even while here in it, and by a deep process to make them a completely different type and kind of people from everyone else; apprehending them, in other words, for heavenly purposes.

The Old Testament men were pioneers of the heavenly way. We have already seen a little of what that involves, but it is upon that particular point that we want to focus all our emphasis just now. It is not only that there is a heavenly way which is different - we know that, we know it in our hearts if we have been born from above, we are learning as we go on how different the heavenly way is from every other way - but the focal point at this time is this: that there is such a thing as pioneering that heavenly way, being called into a relationship with heaven in order to cleave a way, to take possession, to make it possible for God's full meaning to be understood, interpreted; a ministry to others who shall follow on. We said earlier that there is a sense in which everyone born from above is a pioneer, because for every such one the way is a new way, which they and they alone can follow: no one can do it for them; it is a new way for everyone. Our present occupation is with the vocational aspect of this.

There is no doubt about it that the majority of the Lord's children know little, very little, about the heavenly way. Organized Christianity has become very largely an earthly thing, with earthly standards and conceptions and resources: therefore it has become spiritually very limited. In comparison with the heavens, this world is a very, very small thing. I mean that spiritually as well as illustratively. The kingdom of the heavens is a vast thing, far greater than any conception of man. God's thoughts are as the heavens are high above the earth in range, outbounding all earthly conceptions, and not until we get well away from this earth do we realise on the one hand how miserably small we are and on the other hand in what a very much greater realm it is possible to move than that in which we do move - I mean spiritually. The great, great need of this time is that the people of God, the Church of God, should come into its true heavenly position, with its heavenly vision and vocation.

Now there is a great deal in that statement, but it all means that someone, some people, have got to pioneer the way for the Church back again to the realm where it once was at the beginning, the realm which it has lost in succumbing to that persistent tendency earthward. I say, a pioneering instrument is needed, and the way is a costly way.

Now let me repeat, the Old Testament men were pioneers of the heavenly way. That is what is explicitly stated by the writer in this letter to the Hebrews, particularly in the passage which we have read. Heaven has its own standard and basis, and earth cannot provide that. One of the great key-words of the Old Testament is 'sanctify', and sanctify means to separate, make holy, consecrate, set apart, and in the main that is a spiritual and inward thing, dividing between heaven and earth. God has divided those two things, put them apart, and there is to be this putting apart in a spiritual way, inwardly, also. So you find that these men of the Old Testament were men who were set apart in this sense: something was done right at the very centre of their being which separated them from this world and committed them to a course which was altogether different from and contrary to the course of this world; and if, under pressure, under strain, by deception inadvertently, consciously or unconsciously, they touched this earth, they were at once in confusion - they knew at once in their inner being that they were out of the way, and the only thing was somehow to get back. You see that again and again. Heaven witnessed against their position; they were

in trouble. Not until they got back could they go on. They were being ruled by another standard, but oh, how different was that standard, and how difficult to understand!

Consider Cain and Abel. From this world's standpoint, Cain's was a very worthy procedure. Looked at from the standpoint of the religious man of this world, it is difficult to see what was wrong with Cain, or how much more right was Abel, or how absolutely right and absolutely wrong these two were. Yet how utterly right Abel was is shown by the issue. One got through to heaven. That is the fact. He got through to God and he got through to heaven, and the other one had a closed heaven and a rejecting God.

You say, What is the standard? Just the difference between heaven and earth, that is all. Heaven's basis and standard of access is altogether different from earth's - even religious earth's. The religious man may have the same God, worship the same God, bring his offering to the same God, and yet get no way to heaven, no way at all on the heavenly road. Heaven has its own basis and standards and provision, and earth can neither find nor provide that. It is different. That is the fact that we are up against when it is a case of getting to heaven. I am not talking about geographical location, but about getting through to God, finding an open way with heaven. You can only come on heaven's own provision, and that will entirely and utterly upset all your own natural calculations. You have to find something that nature cannot provide. If you, like Cain, reason this thing out according to religious reason, and come on that ground, you do not get anywhere. "By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, through which he had witness borne to him that he was righteous, God bearing witness in respect of his gifts" (Heb. 11:4). Heaven attested.

I am not dealing with all the nature and detail of these things. I am pointing out a fact - that heaven's standards and judgments are altogether different, and they are going to throw us completely into confusion when we try to come, even in a religious way, into heaven. Nicodemus may be the most perfect representation of the religious system, but he cannot get anywhere where heaven is concerned. Heaven makes its own provision for access, and you have to have heaven's provision. You may ask a thousand Why's. There is the fact.

PIONEERS ARE LEADERS

Let us now turn to our reading from the book of Numbers. It is at the point of the sending over of the spies, and the focus of the whole incident is upon two men: Joshua and Caleb. Now, mark you, all the twelve heads of fathers' houses - princes in Israel (a significant term), typically representative men - were called to be pioneers of the heavenly way. The principle of their headship and princeliness was that they were to be pioneers. That is the pioneer principle. If you are a true pioneer, you are a leader, you are a prince in character. But only two of them justified their calling; only two of them became what all the rest were supposed to be - pioneers. Very often it just works out like that. It is the minority, the very, very clear minority, that does the work. The others have the name, but they are not doing it; the others have the official position, but they are not doing it. The point is - where is it being done? Here it was Joshua and Caleb.

A LINK WITH THE PAST

Now let us spend some time in taking account of the significance of these two men, Joshua and Caleb. To begin with, we will look at them as a link with the past. The intention of God which was taken up by them harked back to His covenant with Abraham, so that with Joshua and Caleb Abraham comes very much into evidence. You are at once compelled to look back and take fresh stock of the significance of

Abraham, as taken up by these two: because, you see, the point at which Joshua and Caleb came into view was a critical point, an hour of very great crisis. The whole question now is - Is God's purpose going to be realised in this people, or is it not? That is no small issue; a real crisis has arisen. And they are the deciding factor.

There are three features of the place of Abraham as it comes in here.

A SPIRITUAL AND HEAVENLY SEED

First of all, there is the feature of a spiritual and heavenly seed. Do get that - a spiritual and a heavenly seed. We, today, are in a position of very great advantage. We have now, through the Holy Spirit, the full significance of Abraham. We have our New Testament and all that the New Testament says about Abraham. We have the full revelation through the Apostle Paul, and we are now able to see from our New Testament - we have not to go back to the Old Testament for all our knowledge - we can see now, with our New Testament in our hand, the full significance of Abraham; on this point we have much extra light.

A spiritual and heavenly seed. You see how that bears upon Joshua and Caleb, and how they take it up. But this other seed of Abraham is not spiritual and it is not heavenly. It has come down to earth. In these thirteenth and fourteenth chapters of Numbers that we have read, the reactions of this people - how gross they are, how earthly, how lacking in spiritual vision and life and aspiration! They are swayed entirely by the earthly - by the sight of the eyes, by things here, the difficulties, the people, the mountains. For them there is no way. For Joshua and Caleb the mountains were a way, not a hindrance. There was a heavenly way. But these others see nothing of that, they are earthly.

A heavenly and spiritual seed - that is the thought of God in Abraham made clear to us in the New Testament.

AN EXCLUSIVE SEED

But what more light have we got on this? That it was something exclusive. Paul argues that out in his letter to the Galatians. "Now to Abraham were the promises spoken, and to his seed. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one" (Gal. 3:16). It was exclusive. We will see in a minute where that led to; but note that this, so far as Abraham was concerned, was tied up inseparably and exclusively with Sarah. It was permissible in those times for a man to have more than one wife, but God was shutting this thing up to Sarah. Abraham, under stress and pressure, tried it along another line, by another means - with Hagar; but here was one of these points of which I was speaking a little earlier: a failure, a slip, a mistake, a blunder, under trial, under pressure, under duress; getting off the heavenly line and rueing it - and history has rued it to this day. He had to get back to Sarah. God has shut this thing up, it is an exclusive matter. Not Hagar, and not others, but this one.

SUPERNATURAL IN BIRTH AND MAINTENANCE

And this seed carries all the marks of the heavenly. It is supernatural in birth; impossible along the line of nature. That is Isaac: and Abraham was shut up to that, shut up to an intervention of heaven. This cannot have an existence, let alone a history, unless heaven sees to it. God was very particular about that. Sometimes God shows how particular He is about the right thing by letting us see the awfulness of the wrong thing. God does not just let a wrong thing go; a mistake, a slip, go as such. We are plagued sometimes to the end of our lives by a wrong step. God will keep that, so that we may see - No, the right

way is an important way; it is not just an option. The heavenly is the way, and any alternative to that is not just allowed to pass as though it did not matter. We discover that it does matter; and so it was here. Heaven must do this, or it will never be done, because it is in the heavenly way. What a lot we have to learn, and are learning, about that principle! It explains a great deal that is happening in our lives. God has us in hand.

THE PRINCIPLE OF DEATH AND RESURRECTION

Yes, but not only was Isaac a heavenly product by the intervention of heaven, by a miracle, but you see God is going to press that right through to the ultimate in demanding the offering of Isaac as a sacrifice. Isaac was born by a miracle, by the intervention of heaven, but something still further had to be done: he had to die and be raised from the dead. This mighty thing of God must come in and ratify that. What Paul says in Romans 1:4, "declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection of the dead", could well be rendered 'ratified the Son of God... by resurrection'; and that is Isaac, ratified heavenly.

That has very much of our own spiritual history in it. We have not only been born again by a miracle and heaven's intervention; this has been ratified all the way along. God is demanding the maintenance of that by resurrection life, and resurrection life has no meaning unless we know something of death. God is keeping us on heavenly ground. That is the meaning of Isaac: not only putting us on heavenly ground, but keeping us on heavenly ground by constant expressions of resurrection, when only resurrection will save the situation.

After all, no matter what it was at the beginning of our Christian life - that we had a wonderful experience of conversion and can put down in a notebook when it happened and where - that may be good, but it has to be ratified continually by the expression of resurrection. We have got to be kept on that ground. And that is the pioneer way. The way of pioneering the heavenly way is knowing again and again the meaning of death and its direness, in order to know the meaning of resurrection and its greatness. It is the pioneer way. The Church has gone that way; many a revelation of God has gone that way; many a child of God has gone that way - in order to keep the heavenly way alive and stop this 'dry-rot' of earthliness which is always seeking to sap the Christian life. We know how true that is.

Abraham came to know that his real inheritance was in heaven. I always think it is a very wonderful thing, this aspect of Abraham's life and experience, under the hand of God: that no doubt when he first set out, at the command of God, he interpreted those promises in a very earthly and limited way. No doubt to begin with his expectation was that they would be fulfilled and realised in this way and in that; but the longer he lived the more he became aware that it was not this way or that, it was something more than he had thought when he started, something very much more and very much other. He went on, and he is one of those here included in this word - "These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them and greeted them from afar.... But now they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly". When God said, 'I will bring you to a country' (Gen. 12:1), Abraham in the first place thought that that was earthly; in the end he saw it was not. He came to see, to have perception: for the Lord Jesus said, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day; and he saw it, and was glad" (John 8:56). "Having seen them and greeted them from afar". And so Paul brings us back here, in his letter to the Galatians - "to thy seed, which is Christ". "He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ" (Gal. 3:16). Christ was the answer to everything of inheritance for Abraham.

But Christ, the heavenly Christ, is the very embodiment of all that is heavenly. We know not Christ after the flesh. Christ is essentially heavenly. You see the heavenly nature of this seed. You can crowd all that into Joshua and Caleb. Who will be the people that will inherit, go over and possess? Not this earthbound, earth-minded crowd. They will perish in their earth, their earth will be their prison and their tomb. They will be replaced by another generation with a different constitution - represented by Joshua and Caleb, the first of a new generation - who will possess. They are the pioneers of the heavenly way and the heavenly fulness. But how deeply they had to suffer for it. "All the congregation bade stone them with stones" (Num. 14:10). Pioneering is always a way of suffering and cost, even amongst - not the worldlings - but those who go by the name of the people of God.

Well, the pioneer of the heavenly way will always be like this: heavenly as a seed, and constantly ratified as heavenly by the necessity for repeated interventions of heaven to extricate, to deliver, to keep going. It is true to the spiritual life. We would not have gone on more than a little way, we would have stopped, it would have been again and again the end of us, if heaven had not intervened, if it had not been that God had ratified the fact that we belong to heaven. And He is doing it.

Well, all this is so clearly seen to be fulfilled in Christ, this Heavenly Seed. His birth was by heaven's intervention, a miracle. At His baptism heaven broke in again and ratified, "This is my beloved Son". His Cross? - that does not look very much like an intervention of heaven. But wait a minute: do not forget that the New Testament never talks about the Cross of Christ on the death side alone. In the New Testament the Cross has twin sides - death, resurrection. "Ye by the hand of lawless men did crucify and slay: whom God raised up" (Acts 2:23-24). The world has done all that it can do, has exhausted itself upon Him. The powers of evil have exhausted themselves. What more can be done? Ah, now heaven comes in and spoils it all and raises Him: ratifies that He belongs to heaven and not to this world. He is not the property, the plaything, either of this world or of the evil powers that govern this world. He belongs to heaven: and heaven intervenes, and not only raises Him, but takes Him up and out and sets Him over.

His spiritual history is the spiritual history of the pioneer of the heavenly way. He is the Pioneer. "Within the veil; whither as a forerunner Jesus entered for us" (Heb. 6:19-20), says this letter to the Hebrews.

A LINK BETWEEN FAILURE AND REALISATION

One other thing with which to close this present phase as to the backward aspect of Joshua and Caleb to Abraham. They, like Abraham and all the pioneers, were a link between failure and realisation. You look at the world at the time when "the God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham" (Acts 7:2) in Ur of the Chaldees. You look at the world and you look for that which is of heaven, and where will you find it? Where is all God's thought for something heavenly? It seems that once more it has disappeared. There seems to be no testimony at all to this heavenly thought of God - a heavenly people, a heavenly testimony, something that represents and expresses heaven's thought. Where is it? "The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham", and he became the link between the failure and the realisation.

Joshua and Caleb took that up. Here is the story of the failure in the wilderness. But for them, where is the heavenliness? But for them, where is God's thought? Yet God has not given it up. It may seem to have well-nigh disappeared; it has been like that again and again. But heaven intervenes, and secures a link between the failure and heaven's triumph. That link is the pioneer. The Lord must have an instrument like that to set over against the failure and to open the heavenly way again to realisation.

You are probably wondering, 'What has this to do with me?' You are saying, 'Yes, these are all wonderful ideas: it is quite true, it is quite clear that it is true in the Bible: but how does it affect us?' Well, it just does. One does not like dwelling in a critical way upon a situation, and whatever is said in this direction always leaves room for something very precious of the Lord still in the earth. It is to speak quite broadly. We will put it this way. The great need of Christians today is to be recovered for the full heavenly thought of God. They have settled down to something less. They have become involved in something less and largely other. It has always been like that. The New Testament was written almost entirely because of it. The Lord's people are always at least in peril of doing that - at least in peril. They do gravitate spiritually toward this world and lose their heavenly testimony in one way or another. The pressure is always there to bring down, and the Lord needs lives that have seen - that have become like those of whom we were thinking in our last meditation, for whom the centre of gravity of life has been transferred from this world to heaven, within whom there is this sense - whether they can interpret it or not, whether they can put it into a system of truth, doctrine, Bible teaching, or not - there is this sense that they are in the line of some great destiny which is beyond what this world can provide, that they have been gripped by something that they can only say is the heavenly calling, which has held them. I am going to say more about that later on; but the Lord needs a people like that, who just cannot be satisfied with things as they are: it is not just a matter of the mind, of the reason at all. It is inside of them; they know that God has done something. Because God has done something, they are committed to something far greater than the poor limits of this life and this world. They have been inwardly linked on with something tremendous. I say again, they may not be able to preach it, but they know it. We shall never be useful to God beyond our vision, our true God-inwrought vision, beyond our own reach of heart. Our measure of vision will determine the measure of our usefulness. Oh, for the immeasurable measure of heaven in the heart of a people! That is the need today.

Let me close by saying again that, while that is the heavenly calling of which the Apostle speaks so much, it is the most difficult way - it is fraught with every kind of difficulty; but it is the real, it is the true, and it is the ultimate, for heaven is a nature, a power, a life, an order, which is destined to fill this world and this universe.

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