

The Crisis of Our Times

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of spiritual discernment in understanding the times in which we live, and the need for inward revelation of Jesus Christ to navigate the current crisis in Christianity.

Scripture: 1 Chronicles 12:32, Hebrews 1:1

Topics: "Spiritual Discernment", "Understanding the Times"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks addresses the current crisis in Christianity, emphasizing the need for spiritual discernment and understanding of the times in which we live. He draws from Scripture, particularly the men of Issachar who understood the times and knew what Israel ought to do, highlighting the importance of recognizing God's movements and the changes in divine economy. Sparks stresses that true knowledge comes from experience with God rather than mere information, and that the coming of Christ represents a significant divide in history, necessitating a shift in our understanding and practice of faith. He calls for believers to embrace this spiritual crisis and to seek a deeper revelation of Christ within themselves, moving beyond historical and theological knowledge to a transformative spiritual experience. The sermon concludes with a prayer for divine understanding and guidance in navigating these tumultuous times.

Transcript

We remember, O Lord, that it is written: "He spake, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast." By the Word of the Lord were the heavens, the earth, created. Our prayer, Lord, is that Thou would speak acts. That Thy Word may be Thine act. Not just words, Lord, but words of power--Divine fiat, by the Word something done. Make it like that, even now. In the Name of the Lord Jesus, Amen.

The matter that the Lord has laid on my heart for these first morning sessions is that of what has come to us, and what we have come to, by the coming of the Lord Jesus. For this present hour, I just want to lay down two fragments of Scripture upon which we shall move at present. The first is found in the Old Testament in the First Book of the Chronicles, chapter twelve at verse 32: "And of the children of Issachar, which were men that had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do." The second is in the New Testament in the Letter to the Hebrews, chapter one at verses one and two: "God, having of old time spoken unto the fathers in the prophets by divers portions and in divers manners, hath at the end of these days spoken unto us in His Son." Knowledge of the times... at the end of these times... hath spoken in His Son... spoken "in Son":--Sonwise. You will notice that these scriptures and their context are set in a

time of crisis and change, very big crises, very significant change. In the Letter to the Hebrews, the reference to the end of certain times and the introduction of other times represents a tremendous crisis, what Dr. Campbell Morgan called "The Crisis of the Christ." That is what is before us now: the crisis of the Christ, which is, the crisis of the dispensations.

Then the Hebrew Letter brings us to the crisis of our own time. It brings us not only to the great general movement from one regime to another, but also to the specific application of that movement to our own time. And as in the setting of the passage in Chronicles, so in this Letter to the Hebrews, the important thing is not just to know of a change of times, of regime, of Divine economy, but it is to have understanding of what the change is. I think we shall see that it is of immense consequence not only to know that there are different dispensations, different economies in the Divine sovereignty, but it is vitally important for the Lord's people to know the nature of the times in which they live. I would venture to suggest to you, as far as God is concerned, that perhaps the most important thing, just now, is for the people of God to know the nature of the time in which they live, seeing that there is such a tremendous amount of confusion, and complications are immense and far-reaching just now in Christianity. Many, many people do not know where they are. Many do not know what is right, and what is not right; what is the truth, and what is not the truth, etc. And, I repeat, the supremely important thing is to have knowledge,--"understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do" now--to know what we as Christians ought to do now because of the peculiar and particular nature of what God is doing now. I think you will agree with me that is very vital.

In the Scriptures, throughout the Bible, we do have many crises, many movements through a crisis from one state, position, order, to another. I am not going to mention them, but you know that the Bible is marked throughout by reaching a point from which everything takes a new complexion, a point that represents a new phase of the movement in the going of God. The Bible is full of that sort of thing. God moving, moving by stages, and every stage marked by some crisis. When we use the word crisis, we mean we are brought face to face with something of tremendous significance which is going to govern the whole future and make all the difference in the future.

From the Divine side, these crises are onward movements: they are God moving on. From the human side, they are God moving back because things have deviated on the human side. Things have gone off the direct line of God and other things have come in which God never intended in His original pattern; and since there has been deviation, a crisis arises which has this twofold meaning: God is going on, but in order to go on He must bring back. He must take His people back to the point from which they departed. That is exactly where we are. God is going on, He is not giving up, He is not defeated, He is not having to revise His program: He is going on. But from the standpoint or side of His people, He is having to pull them back and say: "Look here, you have gone off the line, you have moved away from My intention, you have deviated, you must come back to the point from which you departed and pick things up again with Me. I am going on; if you want to go on, you must come back and rejoin Me at the point where you deviated."

I think it is perfectly clear that the two aspects of any crisis are always those; and the crisis therefore, very often, is one of leaving an entire regime (what I have called economy, order, development) leaving it in its entirety, leaving it behind and moving with God in a new entirety, moving with God on new ground to what is wholly and originally, exactly, according to His Mind. These are things involved in these crises. This is the method of God. I believe that the Lord wants to show us this week something of the present crisis in Christianity, and if that seems too objective, then let us simply say the Lord wants to show us the present crisis in your life and in mine in relation to His original thought and His full thought.

True Spiritual Discernment: A Knowing by Experience

Now we have to insert here that men never really learn anything theoretically. You are not going to learn anything by volumes of words being poured out upon you from this desk this week. Then, you may ask, "Why come here, why do you men talk to us?" No, you are not really going to learn anything by all this: I say, really learn. Man never really learns anything except by experience. Take that in, underscore it. God knows that, and that is why God is so practical. That is why God will take years and years, centuries, three or four thousand years, governed by this thing that men do not learn by what they are told: they only learn by experience. That is, they have got to have a history with God, under the hand of God, before they will learn anything.

Do you think you know something? How do you know it? How have you come to know it? By attending conferences?--No, there can be a terrible tragedy along that line. I know definitely of people who have had the fullest teaching for many years,--20, 30, 40 years-- people could hardly have more teaching than they have had, and at the end they have jettisoned the whole thing, washed their hands of it. They knew it all. They said, "We know it all. We know all that. You cannot tell us anymore than we know." So you may come here year after year and think you know. Well, how do you know? God knows that we really know nothing only by history, by experience. This sounds very elementary and simple, but we have got to get down to this: we are coming to this point of spiritual understanding of the times, our times, and knowing "what Israel ought to do."

Now I ought to put an hour in, just here, on two Greek words in the New Testament. I took the trouble to go through the New Testament with these two Greek words; and I got a surprise, after a good many years of studying the New Testament, to find that I had sheets of paper full of references on these two words, both of which are translated into English as the word "know." Yet, these two Greek words are two entirely different words in two entirely different realms. One Greek word means "knowing by information." You know it, because you have been told. You have heard it, you have read it, and so you know that way. The other Greek word for "know" is an entirely different word which means, "you have a personal experience of that thing," and you know it because it has done something in you and become a part of you. It is your history, it is your experience. It is your life--it is you.

The New Testament can be divided by those two Greek words. For example, "Know":--"This is life eternal, that they may know Thee," not by information but the word here is "experience."--Have an experience of Thee.--This is life, this is something very definite. I must not go on with that but just indicate it and point it out because our New Testament is built around these two words which are two very different kinds of knowledge. And here we are with Issachar who "had understanding of... what Israel ought to do."

Now we have said that the Bible is marked by time marks and that we are brought with our New Testament to a new time mark or crisis. And everything for you, for me, for all the Lord's people, is really going to depend upon whether we have this spiritual discernment, this understanding, this spiritual knowledge, this kind of knowledge of the second category of which I have referred--of what God is really doing now, what He is working at now; not in general, but in particular.

Oh, if only this week could bring us all to that kind of discernment, then this will be more than a Bible conference of words and teaching. It will have tremendous issues, which make for a crisis. And let me say at once, I hope you are here for a crisis; and I hope that you are prepared to be turned upside down and inside out, prepared to leave a whole regime if God says, "That is finished with," and to really embrace His

present economy and commit yourselves to it. I hope that is the position in which you are, because you will be found out on that as we go on with this important matter of recognizing and understanding, especially and inclusively, of what happened, what really happened, when the Son of God, Jesus Christ, entered history, when He came into this world. I am convinced, dear friends, that very, very few Christians today understand what really happened when Jesus Christ came into this world, and that is what we are going to spend hours upon, trusting the Lord to give us the opening of our understanding.

Three Cycles (Phases) in Relation to Christ

You see, the coming of Jesus Christ into this world, into history, split history down the middle. The one side said, "Finished," and the other side said, "Beginning." Great, immense divide was represented by the entering into history of Jesus Christ, and we have got to understand that divide.

There have been, of course, three cycles in relation to Christ. Firstly, there has been the historical. When I first came to the Lord and became interested in the things of Christ, it was the time when everything was being made of the historical Jesus. The Jesus of Palestine, the Jesus of Bethlehem, of Nazareth, of Capernaum, Jesus of Jerusalem, Jesus of the mount outside Jerusalem called Calvary, Jesus of Gethsemane, the Jesus of the three and a half years, or the thirty years,--the Jesus of history. Everyone was interested in that: that is what engaged us. There is nothing wrong, of course, with that; it is quite good. That was a phase, and it may be a phase still with some, but then there came a change, and we passed into what we might call the theological or doctrinal Christ. Much was learned about the Person of Christ, the virgin birth, the Deity, Godhead, and all of what is called the fundamentals of the faith of Jesus Christ--the theological and doctrinal Christ. And, my word, what a phase it has been. What a tremendous battleground the Person of Jesus Christ has been.

There is nothing wrong with this second phase. There is nothing wrong with being occupied with the Person, the Deity, the Eternal Sonship, that is all right, but you have to go on because this will not get you through. Your theology is not going to get you through when you move into a realm of such terrific spiritual conflict that your very faith will be struck at its roots. You may be shaken of all that you "know" in that way. It will not stand. The Lord's people are not going to get through the final crisis on theology, on Christian doctrine, even though it may be fundamental. They cannot get through on that alone.

Now, there are your two phases. They may run concurrently, or they may be more or less defined as periods. However, there is another one, a third one, which is the ultimate, which is the supreme. It is that phase that we are going to be occupied with this week. It is the spiritual phase. So, you can have the historical and you can have the theological without the spiritual; and though you may have all that, and not have the spiritual, you are not going to survive. You have not touched the real heart and core of the great divide, the great change that has taken place with the coming of Jesus Christ. It is the spiritual life of Christ that matters, not the historical. It is the spiritual understanding of Christ and not the theological that matters. But if you do not understand that as yet, stay with me, for we will be getting nearer to that as we go along.

The Spiritual Revelation of Jesus Christ, Inwardly

Now these three phases are clearly recognized, and we have come to the last, the spiritual revelation of Jesus Christ inwardly by the Holy Spirit--Supreme, Absolutely Essential, Indispensable. As I said, God, when He moves (and He is moving now on this line if you can but discern it) is moving onward, but He is moving backward. And if you can get hold of that last thing that I have just said, you will see how true it is

that God is moving back in order to move on.

What is the New Testament based upon? The historical life of Jesus? No. The theological life of Jesus? No. That is all there. That is what is foundational; however, the real root of Christianity, this new dispensation, crisis, and movement, the real root of Christianity is gathered into the words of the Apostle Paul, who so very much represents in himself, in his own experience, in his history with God, the nature of this whole dispensation; and in the simple but profound words, it is all gathered up: "It pleased God,--it pleased God,... to reveal His Son in me." This is something more than the Damascus Road objective experience. That was just the turning point in the great crisis. That was the impact upon him of a meaning which was to begin then and unfold through all the rest of his life. "It pleased God,... to reveal His Son in me." That is it. Not to me, in me.

What Paul later wrote was quoted here last night: "That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge (our second category word, but with a prefix: in the full knowledge) of Him." A spirit of wisdom and revelation in the full knowledge of Him, of Christ. That is inward: right deep down at the very source and center of our being, God has made us to see, and to see the significance of His Son, Jesus Christ.-- Out of that, Christianity comes, true Christianity, and anything less than that is dangerous Christianity. Dangerous for the individual concerned and dangerous for the Church. This is what I mean by the spiritual crisis, the spiritual aspect, above and beyond and more than the historical and the theological or the doctrinal. The spiritual: the revelation of Jesus Christ within.

The Lord alone can do that. We all have to pray to the Father of Glory to do it. But it can be done, and it can be done here. It can be done so that we go away from this place saying, "I have seen. I have seen. I can never be the same. A whole regime is left behind, an entirely new order has come in for me. I am out of something, and I am in something else, and I have seen. I have seen Jesus Christ." This is the focal point, dear friends, of the message that I have to bring to you.

The Great Divide: the Cross

Now the Bible is divided into two main divisions, what we call the Old Testament and the New Testament; but, note, it is more than a division of books--Genesis to Malachi comprising so many books, one half of the Bible: then from Matthew to Revelation, so many books, and thus the Bible is divided into two. Oh, but it is much more than a division of books. It is this great divide, this spiritual divide.

The four Gospels,--what do they really mean? When you have stood back and asked yourself that question, --what do they represent? First of all, they introduce the Person Who Himself is the crisis and Who brings in and precipitates the crisis and changes the dispensation in its entirety. The Gospels have introduced the Person Who does that and Who is that: this is the crisis of the Christ.

But you notice, of course, that all the four Gospels, while differing in details of content, all four Gospels head straight, direct, up to the Cross. Every one of them has this characteristic in common, whatever other differences there may be, they all have this in common, that they climax with the Cross. The Person of the crisis is introduced, and the crisis itself is the crisis of the Cross. The Cross is the crisis of the change that has come in with the Person. And this is what it amounts to: here is the Person, here is His earthly life and walk, work and teaching, but none of that can become of any value to you until the Cross has been planted over it all. You can have all there is about the historic Jesus and the theological Christ, but nothing will happen until all that is in those Gospels is brought right up to the Cross, and the Cross makes effective

the crisis of the Person.

The result and the issue is that between the two divisions of the Bible, between the Old Testament and the New Testament, right there is the Cross. Right there you have got to put the Cross. Between Malachi and Matthew, so far as books are concerned (and I am not speaking of the chronological order of the Bible, but about the spiritual understanding of it), so far as books are concerned, you must put the Cross right there--because on the one side of the Cross, all that goes before and leads up to Malachi, all that has been from Genesis to Malachi, on that side of the Cross, to that side the Cross says: "No more, no more. No, finished! That is done with." And then from that point on, from Matthew to Revelation, to that side the Cross says what? "Yes, all things new!"

If I were to illustrate, I would draw a big cross and I would draw a thick line right down the center from the top of the Cross to the bottom of it, not only would I draw this line on the Cross but I would begin drawing the line above the Cross right down from heaven through the Cross to the devil, a wide line--no man's land--and then on one side of the Cross I would write one word, one big comprehensive word, "NOT," as big as the Cross. Then on the other side of the Cross, the onward side, not the backward side, I would put one other word, "BUT."

"Not"--"But"

Now brethren, I have just said something that to experience can take up all your time for the rest of your life. Do you know those two words are two governing words throughout the whole of your New Testament; and if you would care to make a very close, analytical study of your New Testament in the light of this, underlining every occurrence where these two words are used together, you will have an immense, new comprehension (revelation) of the meaning of Christ and of the difference that He has made, of the great divide, and of what we are in.

The "not" and the "but" applies to everything. It is made to apply to the very beginning of Christian history in the individual. Open your Gospel by John. Where are you at once? "Which were born, not of bloods, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." Here is your big "Not"--"But" at the very beginning, and if I went on to show you how this applies to everything in the New Testament [and we are going to come to it later on in some particulars] you would see the Cross, with its great divide and center looking backward over all that has been right up to that closed door, no way through. This is God's great "NOT"--ah, but in the resurrection, and remember resurrection is in the positive always, and in the resurrection "BUT" is in the positive.

Now "neither" is only another word for "not": "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature (creation)"--"Not- But," and so you could go on. It is just wonderful how those two words open up everything and give us an insight into what has come to us and what we have come into with the coming of Jesus Christ. And here is this great division--with the Cross there between the testaments, there at the end of Malachi [which is a tragic, tragic book of the failure of everything in the past] and at the beginning of Matthew [which is a book of hope, light, life, everything fresh, new]. With this division is the great "BUT" of a new order of things: it is the end of a system and the beginning of an entirely new one. The Cross of the Lord Jesus has written these two words over the whole history covered by the Bible. The Bible is intended to comprehend human history, and human history is comprehended in these two words: "Not"--"But."

Now there is something here that I must say, and I hope that it may be helpful. The Cross is a very practical thing. With God, the Cross is not the doctrine, or just the doctrine, of the way of salvation, the way of redemption. The Cross is not just the theology of the atonement, and all such doctrine, and it is certainly not just the historic thing represented by the crucifix. The Cross is an immensely practical thing with God, intended to make actual this divide; and although you may know all about the message of the Cross (or believe that you do), although you may be full of the teaching of the Cross, the real test of the knowledge that you have about the Cross is where this divide has been made in you, where the Cross has resulted in the leaving behind of one entire regime and system and order.

Oh, I know you say, "The Cross has meant that I have left the world and the things of the world." Oh, that is only nonsense to talk like that. You really do not know what you have got to leave behind. Nevertheless, you will learn under the hand of God what the Cross means about the elimination, the moving away, further and further away, from the old order. We are coming to that in Hebrews. We are going into this letter to the Hebrews, and you will come to a phrase which you know: "Let us therefore go forth to Him without the camp, bearing His reproach." What does that mean to you? "without the camp."

It takes a lot of time to learn what that means, and it means going through some literally terrific, devastating experiences of our soul life. This is the work of the Cross: it is a going out on the one side, a going out of an immensity, of one entire regime, but it is "to Him." Oh, it is to Him--that is another immensity, is it not? You see, the Cross is a tremendously practical thing, forcing this gap, this divide, wider and wider as we go on so that the fact is [like it or not like it] the fact is that as we move more and more in spiritual understanding and apprehension of the meaning of Christ, we find ourselves more and more alone, so far as many Christians are concerned, and certainly so far as the traditional system of Christianity is concerned.

Now to bring this preparatory introduction to a close, let me again come back to the starting point and say that progress in the life and purpose of God depends upon spiritual discernment [that with which this letter to the Hebrews has to do in its entirety, remember what it says?--"Let us..."--that is one of the key words, key phrases, to the whole letter. "Let us therefore go forth-- let us leave, let us beware, let us go on unto perfection"]. What I am saying is that progress in the life and purpose of God, for the individual and for the Church, depends (and if you forget everything else, write this inside) depends upon spiritual discernment, this kind of spiritual knowledge and understanding as to the nature of this great change that has come in with the Lord Jesus. --Discernment--!

Knowledge [Spiritual Understanding] of the Times

Now let us go back for a moment to our Old Testament passage in 1 Chronicles 12 and scan the chapter. It is a new movement, it is a crisis, a turning point. David is out there, outside the camp. He is in the wilderness, he is in his cave; and now there are coming to him men of many of the tribes, just nuclei, just a few, a kind of remnant of Israel, coming to him outside the camp. There in this chapter are described the various characteristics of these men, men of valor, men of courage, men of strength, great strength, men of ability to make war, men who are committed with all their might, for it says: "These came with a perfect heart."

Very good, and so there are all these coming ones, who are falling away to David, characterized by these things; and then right there in the midst of this are the men of Issachar who had knowledge of the times (understanding of the times) and knew what Israel ought to do. Right at the heart of this return movement,

this new movement of God which is a recovery movement, right at the heart of it, there is put this contrasting, almost striking thing: "men that had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do." And I venture to suggest that with all the driving force of these other men, with all their muscles, all their physical force, and all that side of things, but for these men of Issachar there would have been something lacking which might have spoiled the whole movement. I believe it is put there to show that with all that is being done (with all that is right and well-meaning) the thing that must be here right at the heart of everything is spiritual understanding, spiritual discernment, spiritual knowledge,-- men who know what the significance of this time is, men who have knowledge of the times and what this means.

Oh, this is not just something happening that men are doing. No, this has a meaning--a deep, profound, Divine meaning; and these people have seen it. They have understanding as to the meaning of this present time; and because they have understanding, they know what Israel ought to do. Do you not feel that is important, very vital?! Well, what did the men of Issachar really see? What was it that they understood? What was it that they knew Israel ought to do? Pause and think. Look at the context again. Of course, it is historic in illustration but spiritual in principle, and the answer to that in this dispensation is the Letter to the Hebrews. Where do you read it in your Letter to the Hebrews? "God, having in time past (old times) proceeded in this way, adopted this method [He is finished with those times] hath at the end of such times and methods spoken in His Son, Whom He appointed Heir of all things."

This brings us back to what Israel ought to do concerning David, and why they ought to do it. We have come to David. God's chosen, sovereignly chosen, God's elect, God's appointed, God's intended ruler, God's principle of heavenly authority amongst the Lord's people-- David means all that. They knew that Israel ought to turn back to David and put David in the place for which he had been anointed of God.

Now that is simple, in language, but do not forget it represented something. You still have got Saul alive, you still have got the old regime of Saul. He is not dead yet, he has his forty years run and, my word, what a problem for Israel! God's man, God's anointed man is not in his place fully, he is on the way there; but this is God's way. Turn over to your letter to the Hebrews and there you are! What is the movement, the final movement, the full movement, which embraces all the parts, the fragments, comprehends all and makes everything final?--Fulness and finality are the words to write over the Letter to the Hebrews: it is a Christ movement with spiritual understanding of what He is, Who He Is, what He represents in the universe of God--it is the spiritual apprehension of Christ.

Oh, the words sound so full, do they not? Perhaps familiarity robs them of their strength and point; but, dear friends, everything for Christianity, for destiny, depends now upon an adequate apprehension of the meaning of Jesus Christ in God's order of things. And this is going to be devastating to a whole system, and a Christian system, so called. This is just devastating for you, for me. It will be that for us. The thing is going to disintegrate; our Christianity may disintegrate. Perhaps you do not understand what I mean. Yes, there is going to be a big "No" of God written over a whole Christian system. And men, although they are not intelligent as to this, they do sense, strongly and growingly sense, that they have got to do something to keep Christianity intact. I believe that the whole ecumenical movement is a tremendous effort to save Christianity from collapsing. The whole World Council of Churches is to put Christianity on crutches and save its reputation. Men are doing this, making a tremendous effort, because there are those who are saying Christianity has had its day, it no longer means anything. And you may say that that is infidelity, that is apostasy, but, dear friends, do not make any mistake--if you are going on with God, you are going to come into spiritual experiences in your life with God where you will be tested on every point of your Christian life as to whether this is valid, as to whether this will stand up to the situation, as to whether this

is going to get you through. Yes, on the things that you believe most strongly and think you know most fully, you are going to be tested. Do not make any mistake about it--the time may come in your life when you will be tempted to question the very deepest realities of your past conviction.

There are men and women in this world who are going through that now. I think of some of those who have spent long years in prison for the sake of Christ and I read what they wrote before, and I have to say, "I wonder if they believe that now? I wonder if they hold to that now? I wonder if that is getting them through now? That is a tremendous statement that they made about the all-sufficiency of Christ, and so on and so on, but I wonder if it is getting them through?" I believe they will come through because He is Lord, because the heart is right with Him; but, mark you, I am simply saying this-- that this great question of the real, spiritual significance of our faith, of our Christianity, is going to be put sorely to the test. It is going to be found out then whether it is Christian tradition, Christian doctrine, Christian theology, the Christian system generally accepted, or whether it is Christ!! We are going to be stripped down to Christ, stripped down to the place where we say, "All I have left (after all my learning and teaching and Christian work) all I have left is the Lord Himself." But is that going to be a fatal position?--Not at all! You know about the old woman on the ship, do you not? In a tremendous storm, she looked at the captain and said, "Captain, are we going to be sunk? Is this the end?" The captain said, "You had better pray." And she said, "Oh! Has it come to that?" Yes, we will be wrecked on Christ and then we will be found out whether we are under the "Not" or under the "But." Shall we pray...

Now, Lord, for Thee it is to interpret, explain and apply and give the understanding. Our reaction to it all is--this flesh cannot, this flesh cannot. We in ourselves cannot. We know it, but Thou art sufficient. Our hearts are open to Thee. Lord, our hearts, we trust, are truly toward Thee. Make use of this feeble ministry to give us interpretation of future experiences in Thy dealings with us, Thy strange ways. O Lord, open our eyes and give us spiritual understanding, we ask in the Name of Thy Son, Amen.

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