

# The Distance of Difference

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*The sermon emphasizes the profound difference between Christ and Christians, urging a journey of spiritual transformation and surrender to God.*

**Scripture:** Deuteronomy 1:2, Deuteronomy 8:2, Job 22:24-25, John 15:16, 1 Corinthians 1:17, Galatians 2:11, Philipians 3:12, Hebrews 3:19

**Topics:** "Dying To Self", "Spiritual Transformation"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the significant spiritual journey from Horeb to Kadesh-barnea, illustrating how the eleven-day journey turned into forty years due to the 'distance of difference' between God and His people. He explains that this distance is not merely geographical but reflects the profound gap between the spirituality of Christ and the fleshly nature of humanity. The sermon highlights the necessity of dying to self and the importance of understanding that true Christianity requires a transformation of the mind and spirit, rather than just a transfer of our natural abilities to serve God. Sparks urges believers to recognize that spiritual progress is contingent upon yielding to God's work in our lives, ultimately leading to a deeper relationship with Christ. He concludes by calling for a heart that is open to the Spirit's transformative work, bridging the gap between ourselves and Christ.

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## Transcript

"It is eleven days' journey from Horeb by way of mount Seir unto Kadesh-barnea" (Deut. 1:2).

"Thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God hath led thee these forty years in the wilderness" (Deut. 8:2).

This is not a new thought. We are familiar with both the fact and the reason of the extension of what could have been in eleven days to forty years, but that meaning and significance has been pressing in on me somewhat more of late, and I feel that so far as I am concerned any word for this moment arises out of this. It is what we might term the distance, not of space or geography, but the distance of difference. If the Lord had been only interested in getting a people to the point where they gave Him some simple gesture of trust in His salvation from the world, its master and its tyranny, its bondage and its conditions, to become His people by desire, then there is no reason at all why He should not have transported them by the short route, the direct course, and have landed them in eleven days in the place which He had already chosen for them. The Lord could do that sort of thing if it were all objective or outward. If today He presented to us the values of the blood of His chosen Lamb and called for that simple gesture of faith in

that blood which appropriates its efficacy, and we in our hearts thereby signified that we desired to be the Lord's people; if that were all, then we could enter tomorrow into everything that He had designed for us, everything in His purpose, we could go straight in.

But few, very few, there have been who have gone that way. It has not, in the vast majority of cases, worked out like that. There is a necessity which sets up a barrier of impossibility. While the Lord would have it so, and has provided for it to be so, the actual position is such that it cannot be. The eleven days are extended to forty years, and then -- and then a death! No, it is not the distance even of years of time or of measurement in the natural sense. It is the distance of difference and it is the measurement of the difference between Christ and ourselves, and that is a lesson which it takes most of us a very long time to learn -- the greatness of the expanse, the long, long way which lies between ourselves as Christians and Christ, between the "spirituality" (?) of the flesh and the spirituality of the Spirit, between being Christians after the flesh and Christians after the Spirit. That lesson is a long one, a deep one, a painful one. Indeed, it is a lifelong lesson. It takes a whole generation to learn it, and when at last it is learnt, the wholehearted acceptance of a necessity is made, and that necessity is to die.

I mean this, that in this way you and I come more and more to the place where we feel it is necessary to die, that the only thing for it is to die. You know what I mean by that, not physically just to abandon everything, but that we die out, what we are in ourselves, the self-life; there is nothing for it but to die. The longing to die in that sense grows.

Transplanting this truth from the Old Testament to the New, you can see it coming up in more than one connection. It came up with the disciples while they were with the Lord, when He was here in the flesh. They were His, they belonged to Him: He said, "Ye did not choose me, but I chose you" (John 15:16); they were His. But there is a tremendous distance between them and Him, a distance which it was impossible to bridge. Mentally there was the distance of this great expanse between Him and them and between them and Him. His whole thought, mind, ideas, judgments, His entire mentality was different from theirs and they could not follow Him. Disciples, yes, in an outward way, but in a wilderness. They could not follow Him in mind. He had to intimate some things and at once their mentality revolted. Never! -- was their reaction. This shall never be! "Thou shalt never wash my feet" (John 13:8). The mentality of Christian disciples in relation to the Lord is: Never! -- only another way of saying: Impossible, it cannot be. We cannot see it, we cannot conceive of such a thing, it is altogether foreign to our idea of things! The distance of difference in mind.

In heart, they could not follow Him. Their desires were so different, so far removed. In will it was just the same. Their whole being was far removed, and although a crisis came and a tremendous change took place with the Cross and the resurrection and the coming of the Spirit, the whole thing was not done then. Years afterwards, Paul has to withstand Peter to the face (Gal. 2:11). You can see there is room yet for approximation, even in the innermost apostles; they are still on the journey, they have not yet arrived, and with their latest breath they will say, "Not that I have already obtained, or am already made perfect; but I press on" (Phil. 3:12).

Again the truth is seen in companies of the Lord's people. We think of the Corinthian company, not necessarily only of those resident at Corinth, but all whom they represent, a Corinthian kind. They were the Lord's, blessed with many blessings, having the Spirit, but oh, what a gap between them and Christ! So much so, that Paul himself in visiting them resolutely determined to keep utterly to Christ and Him crucified, because of the distance, accounting that to be the only thing that could meet the situation.

And is it not this very thing which arises again in connection with the churches as we find them at the beginning of the Revelation? Here is the Lord Himself presented to them, first of all in that very full way with those symbolic features, and then to each of the churches in a particular way, and both in the general and the particular it is a challenge. It is intended to be a challenge, a challenge to this distance which lies between them and Himself, this difference, the distance which has come about because of difference, the difference which has made a distance.

### The Difference Between the Lord and Ourselves as Christians

Well, what does all this amount to, to what does it bring us? I think it brings us to everything. We cannot touch anything but what we find this applies to it. But the one thing which perhaps will help us most now will be this lesson that you and I have to learn, which the Lord is trying to teach us and which we are bound to learn if we are going on with the Lord, and which we shall not escape, namely, the utter difference between the Lord Jesus and ourselves even as Christians. Perhaps we have thought that having reposed faith in the Lord Jesus, in His redemptive work, His atoning blood, and having declared ourselves for Him, that simply opens the way for us to go right on straight away in full acceptance in every sense, and that the next thing to do is to turn outwards and begin to do everything and anything that we can think of, that our minds and our wills and our hearts, our emotions and our enthusiasms can possibly do for Him, and we begin to do it.

Now I do not want you to misunderstand what has just been said. Acceptance in Christ is complete, is utter. In Christ we are accepted from the beginning. But there is another sense in which there is a vast amount that is not Christ which is not accepted, never is accepted, and the lesson of our lives is that of learning what is not accepted by God even though we are in Christ, and it is a terrible, grave mistake for us to think that, because we have become Christians and now belong to the Lord, that anything we may do, anything we can think of, anything that rises as a generous impulse for the Lord within us, and any plan that we can put into operation and any zeal that we can exercise for the Lord, is acceptable. That is a grave mistake.

To be Christians after the Spirit is altogether a different thing from being Christians after the flesh. It is this Christianity after the flesh which has brought into being a vast system of things on this earth today which is not really serving the Lord, which is not really of vital consequence in this world, which is but an outward formal thing, which not only occupies the ground but is a menace to the genuine, the true; for so many say of it, If that is Christianity, I have no room for it! So the true is rejected and refused because of the false thing which is "Christian".

No, that which is after the Spirit is very different even from Christianity after the flesh. This latter can carry us a long way. We can have the very fullness of Christian teaching and truth in words, we can go right on to the fullest presentation of Christian doctrine and truth, getting right into what might be called the deeper things of the Word of God, and it may all amount to nothing more than our own natural interest in spiritual things. It is possible for us, for instance, to take up such a matter as the Scriptural difference between soul and spirit and to have a grasp of that as truth, as doctrine, and be able to analyse and present the analysis of that difference, and for it still to remain our natural mental interest, a fascinating subject, something of interest, and for the thing to be without the unction of the Spirit to precipitate a crisis, to effect something of God. That is only by way of illustration. We can preach the gospel in the flesh and make it of none effect, said Paul, because it is preached in the wisdom of words, in the wisdom of men. (1 Cor. 1:17). The very thing preached is nullified because of the source from which it comes, a natural interest, a natural drawing

to that kind of thing, mystical Christianity; it does not get anywhere, it goes round and round in the wilderness. That which is of the Spirit creates a crisis, that which is of the Spirit takes a direct course, a direct route. That which is of the Spirit is a straight way.

Dear friends, what is the Lord doing with us? That is what we want to know. What is He doing with you and me, and with those who are really in His hands? -- Is He not doing with us that which He has done with all who have come completely under His hands, that is, leading in a way and realm where human understanding and ability are completely confounded and exhausted, where it is totally impossible to cope mentally with His ways, or to explain Him? We cannot see, we cannot understand; neither is it in us to do, to achieve. We are learning that all our resources are of no avail, and that everything depends upon the Lord Himself; HIS wisdom, HIS strength, HIS grace.

Well, if it is your experience so far and at this time, understand that it is quite right, it is not all a mistake. True, it is very painful, it is testing. It is testing up to that point where your feet have to touch the very brink before you prove God. You have to come to an utter end of one way and to a beginning which is a beginning even to the point of lifting your feet to take a step to prove God, for God to come in. You say that is very utter. Yes, but it is this utterness of the difference between the Lord and ourselves that we have to learn, and that is going to set us over against the colossus of false doctrine, of the iniquitous lie which is being built upon this earth up to heaven, the lie of humanism.

That is the greatest lie that has been brought into this universe, that it is in man to be his own saviour, that it is in man to rise to perfection, it is in man to be God. It is all in man, the roots are in himself. That is Satan's colossus of iniquitous untruth, and God is working out the contradiction of that in a company, in His church. It is being wrought, worked out, in the unseen, and, while it is so difficult to accept it in the day of suffering, weakness and darkness and inability to understand, if we knew the truth, the probability is that it is just this: God is doing with Satan in and through the church what He did with Satan in and through Job, answering his challenge and his lie. Here is a broken, shattered, helpless little vessel of saints, bewildered, stripped, thrown back upon their God, unable to do or to understand, clinging to Him and seeking to prove Him, and through that the greatest iniquity in this universe is being assailed by God and answered.

The lie! There never was a time when that lie has reached greater proportion than it has today. Of course, it represents the greatest enigma that confronts us, when what is going on shouts at the top of its voice what kind of creature man is after all, yet at the same time men are pinning their faith to humanism as never before. But in you and in me, poor broken ones, God has His answer, and it does mean something to the Lord that we have been emptied out to the last drop, thrown back upon Him, where He is our wisdom, He is our strength, He is our life, He is our very breath. That means something to Him.

#### The Otherness of Christ

To return to the central issue of this whole matter, namely, the great lesson of the vast expanse, the desert expanse, which lies between Christians in themselves and Christ. Karl Barth has coined for us a phrase which has gained a great deal of strength and place, and it is a very useful one -- "the altogether other-ness of Christ". Oh, that goes much further than we realize, certainly much further than most people are prepared to believe. Even yet in evangelical Christianity there is a clinging to the idea that we transfer every thing to Christ and to Christianity when we are born again. We transfer all our faculties and our powers over to the interests of Christ and then, instead of using them for ourselves and for the world, we

use them for Christ. That is the meaning of consecration, of surrender, as the terms are used so largely today in evangelical Christianity -- the consecration of ourselves, our gifts, our faculties, our everything, to the Lord and to His service. But that falls short of something, and that is the meaning of the forty years in the wilderness. If that were all, then the eleven days would be enough. But no, it is not. It is not the transference and the consecration of everything that we are to the Lord to be used straight away as it is over on His side, for His interests instead of in the world. Christ is other yet, Christ is still different yet from consecrated natural life, oh, so other! Something has to happen, our entire mentality has to be changed, transformed. The mind has to be renewed, we have to have an altogether different kind of outlook, even about the things of God. It is a constitutional matter, not merely a directional one.

You have heard this many times and I want to emphasize it, I must emphasize it, because this is the meaning of the Lord's dealings with us, namely, to get a new mentality, a new conception, another, not our old one transferred, but another, and the distance, I said, is not the distance of time or geography necessarily, it is the distance of difference, and we make faster or slower progress spiritually according to how we learn this lesson. It need not be forty years, the Lord has not fixed it at forty years; He never did. It need not be.

### The Secret of Spiritual Progress

What is the secret of it? What is the secret of spiritual progress? It is the letting go of our own will and mind to the fact, to the truth, that after all, though Christians at our best, wanting to be a hundred percent for the Lord, it is not in us either to be or do. Our will can never do it, our reason can never accomplish it, our impulses and desires can never get us there. We have to come to a brokenness and yieldedness where nature is laid low in the dust and all our treasure is with the stones of the brook and the Almighty becomes our treasure (Job 22:24-25); the Lord alone our wisdom, our strength and vision, our desire. Until you and I have learned the lesson of that utter brokenness and yieldedness and letting go to the Lord, spiritual progress is delayed.

You look at all that came into the forty years in the wilderness, and you will see it was but the working out of that principle. The Lord was working to keep them close to His Christ, to make His Christ the basis of everything, but they wanted it in themselves, for themselves, and so that generation never attained. The strong word so often repeated in the New Testament about that episode is that they could not, they could not enter in -- "So we see that they could not enter in" (Heb. 3:19). Why could they not? It says, because of unbelief. But what is the basis of unbelief? Is it not desire to have it in ourselves, to see it, to feel it, to know it, to have it according to our minds? What is faith? Well, faith has nothing under its feet but God, just God. It is the Lord.

May the Lord just indicate the meaning of the word, show us the great distance that lies between ourselves as Christians and Christ, and give us a heart that yields to the Spirit's work in teaching that lesson and making it good and bringing us more and more to the measure of His Son.

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