

The Divine Purpose in the Continuation of the Conflict

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Lord's people must continue to fight and overcome the enemy through spiritual growth and fellowship, as the conflict is a progressive and ongoing process.

Scripture: Exodus 23:29-30, Judges 1:1-26, Ephesians 6:12, Colossians 2:15

Topics: "Spiritual Warfare", "Collective Prayer"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the ongoing nature of spiritual conflict, asserting that while Christ has secured victory over evil, believers must progressively realize this victory through spiritual growth and maturity. He explains that God allows conflict to continue to develop His people, ensuring they are spiritually equipped to occupy the territory won through Christ's sacrifice. Sparks warns against complacency and encourages believers to engage in persistent prayer and fellowship, highlighting the necessity of collective action in overcoming spiritual adversaries. He calls for a renewed commitment to prayer and cooperation among believers to effectively confront and drive out the forces of darkness.

Transcript

Reading: Judges 1:1-26; Colossians 2:15; Ephesians 6:12; Exodus 23:29,30.

We come to a closing word on this matter, the nature of which is indicated by what is contained in the passages we have read.

The first thing we have to grasp fully is the fact which is brought before us in the Colossian passage: that in the case of the Lord Jesus the battle is a finished thing. So far as He is concerned, the victory is secured in absoluteness, in fullness and in finality. He did strip off from Himself principalities and powers, and made a show of them, exhibiting them, triumphing over them in His Cross. That brings us to the ground represented by Israel when the Lord said: "I will drive them out..." That means that the Lord is in the place of complete possession already. So far as He is concerned, the victory is secure. Now from that point there is this other side of the progressive realization of that victory by the Lord's people. We have the victory in absoluteness in Him, but we are to enter into it progressively ourselves; and it is the progressive aspect of this conflict, and the great need in relation to it, that is to concern us for a little while at this time.

THE PROGRESSIVE NATURE OF THE CONFLICT

1. The Fact

The progressive character is clearly seen; that is, we see it to be a fact. That is perfectly clear from the Old Testament type as well as from the New Testament statement. The words in Exodus 23 are true to what we find later in the latter: "I will not drive them out from before thee in one year... by little and little I will drive them out..." (verses 29-30). We may cite Ephesians 6 as a chapter in the New Testament that indicates this progressive nature of the conflict: "... our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers..." (verse 12). In spite of the fact that the Lord Jesus has Himself stripped them off, overcome them, displayed them as defeated, we are still in conflict with them. We are not represented as having sat down with the battle over, we are still in it. Of course, that hardly needs to be said to those who have spiritual experience; but here is the fact of the progressiveness of this battle for spiritual life, spiritual ascendancy, over the forces of spiritual death. We need not dwell more upon the fact.

2. The Divine Reason

Seeing that the Lord Himself has gained an absolute victory, and that, so far as He is concerned, there is nothing more to be done - all the enemies have been met and vanquished in His Cross - why could He not just give that victory over to us in its completeness and we go happily on through life without any spiritual conflict at all? That may sound rather a foolish question! But we have to bring that question to the Lord and ask Him to explain why it must be that in His will, in His ordaining, conflict should go on and victory be progressive, instead of absolute all at once. Why must the fight go on to the end? Why must it continue? This passage in Exodus explains the matter for us: "I will not drive them out in one year; lest the land become desolate, and the beast of the field multiply against thee. By little and little I will drive them out from before thee, until thou be increased...". The Divine reason, then, is that there must be development in order to possess the ground which the enemy still usurps. Our full possession of the victory tarries because of inability to occupy, because of lack of capacity, because of spiritual limitation, spiritual immaturity.

Now let us pass from the Old Testament literalism into the New Testament spirituality, and, if we can, think in terms of spiritual territory, see territory occupied by spiritual forces. No material forces can dispossess them, nor occupy that territory. Spiritual forces alone can occupy spiritual territory. If such are found in possession, and the only thing that can supplant them is what is spiritual, then there has to be that which is at least equal to such forces in order to occupy the place which they as yet occupy. Therefore it becomes a matter of spiritual measure, spiritual capacity. What the Lord says here in principle is that He will make spiritual ascendancy contingent upon spiritual growth. So often in the battle we go to the Lord and pray, and plead, and appeal for victory, for ascendancy, for mastery over the forces of evil and death, and our thought is that in some way the Lord is going to come in with a mighty exercise of power and put us into a place of spiritual ascendancy as in an act. We must have that mentality corrected. What the Lord does is to enlarge us to possess. He puts us through some exercise, some experience, and takes us by some way which means our spiritual expansion, an increase of spirituality and spiritual capacity, and as we increase spiritually so we occupy the larger places spontaneously. The statement in Exodus makes that so clear.

The figure is interesting. Here are people who are called to victory, to conquest which is progressive and ever developing, and the Lord is doing the dispossessing, and is going before: "Behold, I send an angel before thee..." Now supposing the Lord goes in advance of His people, drives out all the enemies and leaves the territory unoccupied, but His people are so small that they can only dwell in a part of it. What is

going to happen? Neither God nor the devil believes in a vacuum. Leave yourself in a state of passivity and lack of definite occupation, and you will soon find yourself in trouble. So far as the Lord's people are concerned, the devil does not believe in having a vacuum, so he fills it. The principle of this is seen in the story told by the Lord Himself about the man in whom there was a demon: the demon was cast out, the house was left without an occupant, and the demon went wandering in waterless places seeking rest. Finding none, the demon at length returned to the man out of whom he had been cast. He found the house swept and garnished, but unguarded, so he promptly took possession. But this time the evil spirit entered with seven others. It is quite clear from the Lord's illustration that the enemy does not believe in a vacuum.

The Lord likewise does not believe in a vacuum. He believes in things being filled. He believes in full possession, full occupation. That demands, in a spiritual matter, that there shall be spiritual enlargement before He can give greater space. I am afraid that Christendom has twisted things round the other way and has made large space, hoping to grow to it. So great buildings are put up, and then an immense amount of work and labour is set in motion to try to fill them. The Lord does not do things in that way. First of all He enlarges, and then He gives accordingly. Let us not, however bring the matter down on to so low a level, but keep it in the realm of spiritual conflict and warfare. The law which the Lord sets forth here in this passage is that spiritual ascendancy over the forces of darkness and death corresponds to spiritual growth, and spiritual growth is essential to spiritual ascendancy, to enlarged territory. The challenge with which the Lord meets us is this: 'Can you fill it? Can you occupy it? Can you possess it? Are you able, if I give it to you?' The disaster would be all the greater if the Lord gave large territory and we could not occupy it and fill it. How important is spiritual growth, spiritual maturity, spiritual increase!

The whole question of progressive victory rests upon progressive spiritual development. It does not rest upon our having the gift of ascendancy from the Lord. Ascendancy is, in effect, developed in us by spiritual growth and enlargement; it is a matter of capacity. Hence those who know most of victory are not always those who talk most about it, but are those who have been through experiences and processes by which they have been mightily extended in Christ spiritually. Turning that round the other way, it should be a comfort to know that everything the Lord does with us which is in the nature of a painful stretching: that cutting of deeper channels, deeper furrows; that leading into depths; that breaking up and breaking open; all that which is in the direction of making for a deeper, wider, higher energy of the Lord through suffering is intended to bring into a place of spiritual power, spiritual ascendancy. Thus the power of the enemy becomes weaker, because the power of the saints is becoming greater through their growth in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. The power of the saints becomes greater only on that ground. We have to be built up unto power, unto ascendancy, unto conquest. It is quite evident that if there is not an adequate spiritual background to the life of those who make assaults upon the enemy, they will be knocked to pieces, for they will not be able to stand up to him. It requires that there should be spiritual competence, spiritual wealth, spiritual background and spiritual fullness in order to stand up to the enemy and force him to quit the position. It is important that we should recognize that.

We must be enlarged to occupy. The Lord will not give otherwise. He is governed by infinite wisdom in the way in which He deals with us: "I will not drive them out from before thee in one year... by little and little I will drive them out from before thee until thou be increased..." The measure of spiritual ascendancy is the measure of spiritual increase.

3. A Deterrent if Regarded in a Wrong Way

We hurry on to note another thing. That progressive character can become a deterrent if it is regarded in a wrong way. It seems clear that many of Israel were deterred and discouraged from going on in the fight and in utterly driving out the enemy because it was a progressive, or a slow business. Somehow or other this human nature of ours likes to get things done with one bound, to have it all cleared up with one stroke, and the long-drawn-out process of spiritual growth is often a very discouraging thing to the flesh. So they did not utterly drive out those nations, simply because it required persistence. It required, as we say, a pegging away at it, a steady devotion. It demanded a continuous prosecution, ever something more yet to be done.

It is like that with us. We are so often discouraged and deterred from going on because we seem to make so little progress; because there always seems to be more before us than behind; because we seem, after all, to have gained so little; because we see so much still to be gained. Mark you, that is a part of the Divine, sovereign ordering. So long as we are here the Lord will not give us any occasion whatever for saying: 'Now we can settle down! Oh, but how we are expecting that almost any day! Our thought is that it will not be long before we come to a place where we have got the upper hand, where we are in ascendancy, and the fight will then be over, at any rate in the main, and we can come to rest. I want to tell you in all faithfulness that right up to the last stroke in this battle you will feel practically nothing has been done in comparison with what there is to be done. You will have a sense that the forces before are still well-nigh overwhelming. No matter how far you progress spiritually, you will often come to the place where you feel that you are being almost overwhelmed and that the real back of this thing has not been broken. The pathway to the glory is the pathway of increasing conflict, and the most bitter part of that conflict will take place just before entering the glory. The Lord will never give us reason for settling down.

That is another phase of Israel's failure. On the one hand, while many were discouraged because of the progressive and long-drawn-out character of the conflict, it is quite clear that many others entered into a state of unholy content. They said: 'We have fought, and we have got so far, and that will do.' Discontent can be both holy and unholy. There is such a thing as holy discontent. While there remain spiritual forces to be driven out, to be dispossessed, and while the whole range and realm of what is spiritual still has in it that which is opposed to the Lord, you and I have no right to be content. We must not settle down and say: 'Oh, that is the ideal, but it is impossible! It is all very well to see what ought to be, but it is no use setting up a counsel of perfection, and expecting and aiming at what is not possible amongst the Lord's people or in our spiritual experience!' If we begin to reason like that, we shall find ourselves in a very sorry state. During the four hundred years occupied by the Judges, an attitude of that kind produced misery, continuous defeat and weakness, and a terrible state of up-and-down experience throughout that long period. Look at the account in this book of the Judges, and mark the periods under which Israel laboured in bondage and defeat! Why? The explanation is found in the first chapter. Read through the chapter again, and note how repeatedly it is said of certain tribes of Israel that they "drove not out" their enemies. The result was that they had this long time of defeat, failure, and misery. What had happened? They had entered into a state of unholy content. They had said: 'Well, the ideal, of course, would be to possess the whole land, but the present measure of occupation seems to be all that is possible, and we must accept things as they are.'

That comes to us as a very serious challenge in relation to the Lord's testimony. We look out on the world today, on what we call the Christian world, and we see its state, which is indeed very like that in the days of the Judges. We see divisions and failures in what is called the Church, and the question arises: Is it possible to have a whole testimony, a full testimony? Is it possible to have a complete expression of the

Lord's mind? The answer that is so often returned may be stated thus: 'Well, that is the ideal, but you are setting yourself an impossible task if you attempt it. You had better accept the situation, regard it as all in ruins, and make the best of it!' Are you content with that? I am not, and I have decided that even if I die in the attempt I will give myself to the obtaining of a fuller expression of the Lord's mind. In so far as my own life is concerned, it is going to be poured out to the last to get His people to the fullness of His will, and I am not going to accept this situation which is so far short of it. It is an unholy thing to enter into contentment of that kind. It is that failure to go on, in spite of the seemingly impossible, which has produced the terrible paralysis and spiritual ineffectiveness of the Lord's people that is almost world-wide today.

THE NECESSITY FOR FELLOWSHIP

We come to the final word which we feel to be the note which must stand above every other note. We see the reality of the battle, we see the many laws which govern the battle, but what is it that we need if we are to win? You might answer in different ways, but what I see as being a dominant need, if not the predominant one, is that which is at least suggested in the first part of the first chapter of the book of Judges. There the question is asked: "Who shall go up for us first against the Canaanites, to fight against them? And the Lord said, Judah shall go up... And Judah said unto Simeon his brother, Come up with me into my lot, that we may fight against the Canaanites; and I likewise will go with thee into thy lot. So Simeon went with him. All Judah went up, and the Lord delivered the Canaanites and the Perizzites into their hand: and they smote of them in Bezek ten thousand men." Here you have real business, real effectiveness. What was behind it? It was fellowship and co-operation. Here you have the spirit of brotherhood manifesting itself in mutual helpfulness and support in the battle. The enemy has held the position and withstood the people of God because of the lack of that. One of the strategies by which he has gained his end has been to keep the Lord's people from a downright spiritual co-operation in the battle; to get them scattered, divided, disintegrated, and on individual lines instead of coming right in as a corporate and collective instrument for God and dealing with the issues in a mighty way together. We cannot lay too much stress upon that.

This is the burden of my heart: The Lord's great need is of a prayer instrument that comes together with one object, and that is the driving of the enemy off the ground. Not just offering petitions, nor just pouring out words which are intended to be prayers, for however good they might be, however right they might be, such prayers fall short of this mighty laying hold of the Lord's own victory and bringing it into operation where the enemy is. The victory is in the Lord's hands. He did strip off principalities and powers. He has said: "I will drive out." What has to follow? There has to be a coming together, and, in faith, a laying hold, as it were, of that victory; an appropriating of it, and a bringing of it to bear upon the spiritual situation. Until we get something like that we are not going to see the spiritual counterpart of this mighty sweep of triumph in Judah and Simeon. Here is real progress. Here we see the enemy having to quit.

Oh, for the coming together of God's people for real business in prayer; coming in business-like spirit, with a business-like mind, with full purpose of heart and as one man in a spirit of fellowship, because of the testimony of the Lord which is at stake, which is involved, and which is bound up with it. The Lord's need today is this coming together and squaring right down upon Satanically ridden situations to clear the ground of the enemy. I feel that to be the Lord's pre-eminent need. We do not take the thing enough to heart. We have not got the Lord's testimony sufficiently at heart. If we really were concerned for the Lord's testimony in this earth, we should only need to hear of the impact against the Lord's people and the prevailing of death in any one situation for us to get down on that situation with such purpose that we

would not give the enemy any rest until he withdrew from it. But we can hear of such situations, hear of need, hear of our brethren in the fight pressed out of measure, and can be content with a mere momentary petition: 'Oh, Lord, help them! Oh, Lord, bless them! Oh, Lord, come to their rescue!' when the Lord is saying quite definitely, if only we had ears to hear: "Wherefore criest thou unto me?... lift up thy rod..." (Exodus 14:15-16). We have the rod of the Lord's victory in our hands - or we ought to have. We have the rod of the mighty name of Jesus, and we come with cries to the Lord, when the Lord is saying, in effect: 'Bring to bear upon that situation this victory which is in Me for you!' The need is for the coming together in fellowship, in co-operation, to bring to bear upon the situation the great victory which is in the Lord's possession for us.

Oh, may the Lord stir you in this matter unto this mighty prayer in the name of Jesus, and get an instrument, a vessel, in which and through which there will be this registration of the power of His throne upon those situations which are under the domination of the enemy! That is the Lord's great need. There are many of the Lord's people and many places in this world where the Lord's testimony is defeated, arrested, locked up, smothered and unable to break through; everything is at a standstill; the enemy is holding the ground, and it is as much as the Lord's people can do to hold their own, to stay there. There needs to be some power coming through to clear the ground of the enemy, and that power will come through only when the Lord's people take up the matter in such a mighty fellowship of prayer that through that prayer the throne will operate.

There are many who know they are not getting through in their prayer life on their own and that they cannot deal with the situation themselves. Many are deeply and terribly conscious that what they need is a mighty reinforcing by prayer cooperation in order to get through, but the trouble is as to where such reinforcement is to come from? Those who are sufficiently concerned are not to be found. There are not those who know how to pray like this in the power of the name. Forgive me for being so emphatic, but the prevailing conditions demand strong words. The need is to recover a prayer instrument by which the power that is in the hand of the Lord Jesus shall be released upon situations which are locked up in the power of the enemy. The Lord rouse us, stir us deeply in this matter, and make us at least a part of such a prayer instrument.

Let us purpose to come together for prayer! Let us not wait until we are called! If it is possible to get together, and if there are those around us whom we can call together for prayer, let us do it. Do not wait for the appointed meeting of prayer. If you can get prayer fellowship with anybody, get down on the Lord's interests with them, and lay yourselves out in this matter for the deliverance of situations from the domination of the power of the enemy.

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