

The Fundamental Matter of Worship

by T. Austin-Sparks

Worship is the fundamental matter of relationship with God, and it is the governing factor in the creation, giving the significance of God to things and redeeming everything unto Him.

Scripture: Nehemiah 6:3, Psalm 40:8, Psalm 137:3, Isaiah 29:13, Jeremiah 17:9, Matthew 22:37, John 4:24, Romans 12:1, Hebrews 12:22-23, Revelation 5:9

Topics: "Redemption", "Worship"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the fundamental matter of worship as central to the work of God, illustrated through Nehemiah's efforts to rebuild Jerusalem's wall, which symbolizes the restoration of true worship. He contrasts Jerusalem, the place of God's worship, with Babylon, the center of false worship, highlighting that worship is the essence of our relationship with God. Sparks explains that worship is not merely a religious act but a life lived for the Lord, driven by a motive of worthwhileness and a longing for Him. He warns against the deception of self-interest that leads to a divided heart, urging believers to commit wholly to God. Ultimately, worship is about bringing everything back to God, delighting His heart, and constituting a testimony of His glory.

Transcript

We are occupied with what is represented by a clause in a statement made by Nehemiah when, being invited by his enemies, in their subtlety, to come and meet them in some place apart, in order to ensnare him, he said: "I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down". We are shortening that statement to "a great work": for this book of Nehemiah sets forth, in figure, in historic illustration, the great work of God. Nehemiah, as we have seen right at the beginning of the book, says that he disclosed to no one what God had put in his heart to do. Later he did disclose it, but this great work to which he refers was something that God had laid upon his heart.

Before we proceed with this matter of the rebuilding of the wall of testimony, I want to put in here a very important and inclusive parenthesis - not based upon any particular clause or text, but upon that which pervades and underlies the whole: that is, worship.

For when we come to think about it, Jerusalem, defined by its wall, just speaks inclusively and comprehensively of the matter of worship. Indeed, Jerusalem's very existence was for that purpose. Babylon, as we saw earlier, was the seat and centre of false worship, idolatry, something that was not of God. Jerusalem always stands over against Babylon in the Bible as the opposite of that. It stands for the

worship of God; it is the place of God's worship. So this wall of Jerusalem is a figure of that which encompasses the worship of God, and is in itself a figure of worship. Worship is the first thing in the whole history of relationship with God, and worship is the last thing. We find reference made in the Bible to worship going on before the world was, before the creation was undertaken - the "sons of God" occupied with worshipping Him before the foundation of the world. Who those sons of God were we do not know, but there is the statement. They sang together for joy, they worshipped the Lord. It was there, it was happening.

Then worship comes in as the governing factor in the Creation. As we know, it was a breakdown in worship which was the basic sin of Adam: then, when that matter has been upset here in this earth, God institutes the whole course of worship during the ages and maintains a testimony to Himself. One of the last things we have in the Bible is this universal worship of Him. And Jerusalem was, I repeat, so far as type and figure and historic illustration are concerned, the Lord's earthly seat of worship - of the maintenance of worship unto Himself. We are carried in the New Testament and in this dispensation from the earthly to the heavenly, we are come to "the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable hosts of angels to... the church of the firstborn" (Heb. 12:22-23): and it is worship. It is worship re-established in heaven.

Worship is Redemption Unto God

So we look at this matter of worship for a few minutes. We are seeing that Nehemiah's work was the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem, and really it was a redemptive work - the work of redeeming the situation, redeeming the testimony. It was a work of redemption. Now, we know quite well that redemption is unto God. "Hast redeemed us to God" (Rev. 9, A.V.) - that is the phrase. And worship just simply means that - everything redeemed unto God, brought back to God, recovered for God; and that mighty work of redemption is still operating - in this sense, that it is against a certain natural trend and course of things which has come into the creation through what happened between Satan and Adam. Redemption is recovering from a certain trend. The trend of the creation now is always downward. In every part of the creation, the natural course is downward. You are contending with that in some way or another every day. Anybody who has a garden knows that it is a constant day-by-day work of redemption from a downward tendency. Any doctor or nurse is day by day contending with the downward course of physical life. Unless the body is looked after, unless there is a 'counter operation' brought in, the course is naturally downward, there is deterioration; and so the medical profession are in their realm occupied with redemption. And so we might go on into every realm, because everywhere and in everything that is the natural way - decline.

And if that is true in the natural creation, the physical creation, how true it is in the spiritual. The Bible is one comprehensive revelation of the fact that, unless there is a counter power brought in from heaven, everything goes down. Again and again and yet again, in the Bible, we find these movements downward taking place - decline, degeneration, and God reacting to redeem from that course, to redeem unto Himself. Worship, then, means the redemption of everything unto God, giving the significance of God to things.

Worship a Matter of Motive

Let us think for a moment of the rudimentary element in worship, leaving religion aside for the moment. Worship goes on altogether apart from any religious system or form. It is there in the very constitution. What is worship in its elementary principle? Well, it is just the element of motive in life - that is, worthwhileness to live, it being worth while to live. The very lowest, the very saddest and most tragic state

to which anyone can come is to have lost all interest in life, to be saying, 'There is nothing now for which to live, I have nothing to live for'. You could not get lower than that. Life has been given up; life holds nothing worthwhile. That worthwhileness is the principle of worship. It is a motive for living, something for which to live, and that is present in all the world, except in those tragic realms where people have already given up life because they have no more interest and no more motive. I say that is the saddest and the most terrible thing that can ever come to anyone. Except where that obtains, worship is just this, that there is something to live for, that there is something worth while in being alive. That is the principle of worship.

Now you carry that into a much larger and higher realm. What is there to live for? What is the greatest thing for which to live? And there you bring worship into its right realm, and worship becomes this - 'Why, the greatest thing to justify life and to give meaning and value and worthwhileness to life is the Lord!' Not this world, as something to be worshipped, nor its kingdoms, nor its princes or its god; but the Lord being worthy, the most worthwhile object in life, having all the worthwhileness of our very being and existence: so that He holds the full place, the central place; the Lord is the object always in view.

Worship is not going to some ecclesiastical building week by week, perhaps once or twice, to attend what is called Divine worship. That is not worship. That may be just empty form; that may be patronising God. It may be anything short of the reality. Worship is a life thing, not a weekly thing; certainly not once a quarter at the 'quarterly communion', or on the great feast days of the Church - Easter, Christmas and so on. Worship is this, that life is for the Lord. Every moment, every hour, every day, every week and every year - it is all for the Lord. That is worship. Our first thought in the morning is the Lord, and our last thought at night is the Lord; and although there are many occupations of mind and hand during the hours of the day, there is something behind the one who has been redeemed unto God that is always reaching out to Him.

The lives of such are the prayer of worship. They are not always putting it into language and phrases, and they are not always on their knees, and they are not always in meetings; but from behind them, so to speak, there is that which is reaching out to the Lord - they long for the Lord. It is true of them, as it was true of those in Israel in the days of Jerusalem's glory, though they were far from Jerusalem, that they long for Jerusalem. 'Oh, to be there, the place of the altar, the place of God, the place of worship!' Their longings were there, and away they could never be satisfied. They expressed this true principle. When in Babylon they were taunted, this remnant whose heart was in Jerusalem - taunted by the Babylonians: "Sing us one of the songs of Zion" (Ps. 137:3). 'Sing us one of your folk-songs of Jerusalem'. "Upon the willows... we hanged up our harps... How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" Their longing was to be there. They were drawn. We should understand that in a spiritual way. Our Jerusalem is no focal point on this earth, but there ought to be that about us which is always out to the Lord; which asks: 'How much more of the Lord can there be in our lives?'

If you read this book of Nehemiah in the light of that, it will be entirely revolutionized for you, marvellously illuminated. Nehemiah begins with this tremendous yearning for the Lord, away there in Babylon. He comes to Jerusalem and takes in the situation and deplores that this is not to the honour of the Lord, and he weeps and he prays and he sets to work and he draws others in, and he is not at rest until this thing is finished at all costs - a testimony to the Lord raised up in fullness, in completeness. It is all a spirit of worship; and the people who came in, of whose work we have yet to speak, they had a mind to work, they were of a willing spirit; but, you see, it was the spirit of worship. They, in their own way, were fulfilling what Paul says in his letter to the Romans: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rom. 12:1, A.R.V.). They were giving their bodies to this work, and it was spiritual worship in motive. Worship, then,

springs out of a motive.

The Lord Draws Near on the Basis of Worship

Now that is just the divide point in the Bible. When God made man and brought him into fellowship with Himself, everything was for the Lord. Man had no other object in view for which to live and work than the Lord. It was a beautiful state of things. It was man and the Lord, and the Lord, it would seem, coming in the cool of the evening, walking in the garden to receive those whom He had made and there was joy in their life and in their work. The Lord had pleasure in that. It is always shown in the Bible that the Lord has pleasure in, and draws near to, those who are in a state of worship. That is to say, the Lord's drawing near is on the ground that their heart is out to Himself. You never find the Lord drawing near when it is otherwise, unless it be in judgment. But when the Lord comes in blessing, in benediction, it is because there are hearts out to Himself, and if the Lord came there into the garden, as He is shown to have done, it was because there were hearts toward Him, because He found there that which satisfied Him. When the Lord Jesus was here it was like that. He loved to be where He found a heart open to Him, ready to receive Him, ready to answer to His desires. That is why He went to Bethany so often. There was a heart there for Him, for the Lord. There was a spirit of worship.

The Devil's Deception of Mankind

But then there came the terrible break, and the enemy came into the garden to divert from God, to divert to himself. But how? - and this is a terrible thing to recognize. He brought man's own personal interests into view, man's own personal interests first, and showed him that he could have something - he could get something. Up to that point it was all that the Lord could get, and now the situation is that man can have something. The enemy was working in a deep and subtle way to draw away from God to himself; and so, getting man into alliance with himself; he deceived man into thinking that he was going to have the benefit, when all the time it was the devil who was going to have the benefit. That is the deception of mankind. He was turned from God to get something, a good time, this world, and all that, and in the end he finds he has been duped, and the devil has got it all - and him into the bargain. That is the tragedy and the deception. But you see the point: it was in order to draw away from God by this self-interest, this self-ishness - and that broke the worship. From that time it has been like that. The world is a selfish world, a world that draws to itself, that does not give God His place, does not let Him have everything, first and last. That is how things are.

But now God wants His spiritual Jerusalem: He wants that recovered where everything, voluntarily and gladly - delightingly - is for the Lord; a people who delight in the Lord. Our Lord Jesus was the embodiment of this principle. "I delight to do thy will, O my God" (Ps. 11:8). His delight was in the Lord. He is the true embodiment of the spirit of the heavenly Jerusalem, where everything, not under constraint but wholeheartedly, is unto the Lord.

A Divided Heart

Now you look at this wall in its ruin, in its brokenness, as we are doing at this time, and you say again, 'Why this state of things? Why this picture of tragedy? What is come to pass that everyone seeing it wags the head or heaves a sigh? What has happened that that which was once so glorious has come to this? Why is it?' And the answer is: 'Their worship went away from the Lord; the very thing for which Jerusalem existed, that is, to be wholly for the Lord, was broken into; they allowed other objects of worship to seize upon their hearts and lives'. Yes, the Lord was displeased, and therefore Jerusalem had no justification in

continuing in the sight of God. God sees no reason why it should go on at all, and so He hands it over to destruction. It was not what it was meant to be.

And may that not be the explanation of a good deal of weakness - yes, in our lives, and in the Church as a whole, in that which bears the name of the Lord; defeat, brokenness, the absence of those signs that the Lord is present those marks of the Lord's pleasure? May it not be that there is a dividedness of heart, a reservation in our lives? that there is, after all, somewhere deep down, some self-principle at work? May it not be that? I am not judging but I do know the deception of these hearts of ours. They are indeed "deceitful above all things" (Jer. 17:9). Very often, when we think that what we are doing is for the Lord, we are having a good deal of pleasure in it ourselves, and if in the service of the Lord the element of personal pleasure is withheld or covered, we have a very bad time - after all, it was somehow or other for ourselves. Yes, it is like that. We do not want to be too introspective, but you see what I mean. The Lord looks on the heart, and when He really sees that the heart is wholly toward Him, that there is no mixture, no other god, no other interest, then the Lord commits Himself to that life, to that Jerusalem. The Lord commits Himself where it is wholly for Him. That is worship.

Now you see, the ground of Satan's detracting and diverting from God is this wretched self-life in one or other of its numerous forms. Over against that, God's ground, where He encamps, where He commits Himself, is the ground of Himself alone. God commits Himself to Himself, and to no one else. If the Lord is here, if the Lord has His place fully and wholly, utterly, if it is all for the Lord, the Lord will commit Himself to that ground; not to our ground and certainly not to Satan's ground; but to Himself. If it is for Himself, then He will be for Himself, and we all agree that that is perfectly safe and anything else would not be safe at all. The Lord is the only safe ground upon which He Himself can work and be present.

A Disposition for the Lord

Now, with just one little further word about this motive, I will close. The Apostle, in that great word on worship in Romans 12:1-2, follows on - and we must not stop short half-way through the statement, we must watch the conjunction as he goes on - "... which is your spiritual worship. And be not fashioned according to this age: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind" - the 'making anew' of your mind. A 'mindedness' is the principle and motive of worship. What are we disposed to? Is our whole disposition for the Lord, all our 'disposedness' unto the Lord? "Be... transformed by the renewing of your mind" - your mindedness, your inclination, your disposition - unto a new disposition, altogether different from that which came in with Adam in what we call the Fall.

Thank God for this; it is true. It is more true, perhaps, than we often realize or recognize. I think that very often we are troubled and bothered about something that is not true as to ourselves. We are thinking untruths about ourselves. Of course, we know our proneness to sin, we know the evil that is in our flesh, we know how wicked we are and how unworthy, and all that; but then we allow that to go too far. I ask you this: with all our unworthiness, all our sinfulness, all that is evil in our flesh, have we not a heart for the Lord after all? We feel we blunder, we err - yes, but we have a heart for the Lord. Where did that come from? There was a time when we had no heart for the Lord, when we had no disposition, no tendency, that way; we were not inclined after the Lord. But something has happened in us deeper and stronger than all our weaknesses and our waywardness and our faults and our follies and our sins. There is a reaction that rises up every time we make a mistake, and sends us back to the Lord in grief, in sorrow, in disappointment, in longing, and we are not happy again until we have found the Lord.

Where does that disposition come from? It is something done by Him. That is the basis of worship; that is the ground upon which the Lord will get everything. So do not let us be discouraged by ourselves too much. You will never think that I am saying that we are to condone our sinfulness and our foolishness and to give place to them; but it is a glorious fact that, while all this is true, and Satan can tell us so much about ourselves that is bad, nevertheless we can reply in the words of the hymn:

I know it all, and thousands more:

Jehovah findeth none.

We can come back against all accusation and say, 'Nevertheless God has done something in me that has set my heart toward Him. With all my failures, my heart is toward Him. With all my breakdowns, I am for the Lord'. And so we go on. This spirit, this law of worship, consumes and consumes, and we find at last in His presence that there is nothing else left but Himself, just Himself.

That is a simple word, but that after all underlies all that is here about Jerusalem. All that we shall have to say, or could say, as to the details of this matter of the rebuilding of the wall has its roots in the soil of worship. This Jerusalem is to be a praise in the earth; it is to speak of the glory of God. It is all to point toward the Lord. It is all to testify to His glory and honour. That is what Jerusalem exists for, and that is what we who are of the spiritual and heavenly Jerusalem exist for - to bring everything back to the Lord, to bring delight to His heart, and to constitute a testimony that He is satisfied.

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