

The History of the Ark

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon explores the historical and spiritual significance of the Ark as a means of revealing Jesus Christ and emphasizes the importance of personal spiritual experience in understanding biblical truths.

Scripture: Hebrews 1:1

Topics: "Spiritual Journey", "Revelation of Christ"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks explores the significance of the Ark of the Testimony as a representation of Jesus Christ, tracing its journey from the formation of Israel at Mount Sinai to its resting place in the house of God. He emphasizes that the ark's varied history reflects the spiritual journey believers must undertake, moving from an objective understanding of Christ to a subjective experience of His reality in their lives. Sparks highlights that the true testimony of Jesus is revealed through the Holy Spirit, and that spiritual growth requires personal experience rather than mere intellectual knowledge. He warns against separating the objective nature of Christ from the spiritual reality, as this leads to misunderstanding and trouble. Ultimately, he calls for believers to embrace the Holy Spirit's work in making Christ real within them.

Transcript

We have been considering the greatness and glory of Jesus Christ, and have been looking at this matter through the ark of the testimony in the tabernacle of old. We have seen the glory and greatness in the materials of the ark, and in relation to the mercy-seat over the ark. Now we shall begin to look at the history of the ark.

The ark began at the time when Israel was formed into a nation. They were constituted a distinct nation at Mount Sinai. Of course, they were a chosen seed before that, and as Hebrews they began with Abraham, but there is always a difference between the Hebrews and Israel. Israel is the national name for the people. So it was at Mount Sinai that they were constituted a distinct nation with their own national constitution, and it was then and there that the ark was made by direction of God. And that ark goes right through their national history, from the beginning until at last it comes to rest in the fulness of the kingdom under David and Solomon. It had a long journey, and a very varied history.

We have been seeing that the ark is the Old Testament means of revealing the Lord Jesus Christ, and what we have now is that very varied and long journey that the testimony of Jesus has to take. How many different situations the ark came into! How many strong forces it had to contend with! All the way through the wilderness, and all through the battles in the Promised Land, the ark was governing everything until at

last it came to the end of its journeys in the house of God. There the staves were drawn out, the journeys were all over, and the testimony had reached its end.

The Letter to the Hebrews takes up all these things and translates them from the Old Testament to the New. It tells us that what was true in a material and literal way in the Old Testament is now true in a spiritual and heavenly way. So the Letter begins with the statement that God, having of old times spoken in many different ways, has gathered up all those different times and ways into His Son, and He has spoken fully and finally in His Son, so that everything led on to the Lord Jesus, and we have the explanation of all that was through those times in Jesus Christ.

This Letter to the Hebrews has two sides. On the one side it tells us that the end has already been reached in Jesus Christ. In Christ all the journeys have come to an end. He has come to His rest in the heavenly House, and personally the Lord Jesus has no more journeys to take. He has sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in the heavens, and, so far as He Himself is concerned, He will remain sitting down. He has reached the end in fulness. That is what this Letter teaches. Fulness and finality have been reached in the person of Jesus Christ. He has no more work to do for Himself, no more journeys to take Himself, and He has nothing to add to Himself - He is perfectly full. In Him all the fulness dwells and He has reached the end of all His journeys. That is one side of this Letter to the Hebrews.

The other side is that what is true about Him has to be made true in His new Israel. He is now forming a new heavenly Israel. The kingdom has been taken away from the earthly Israel and, as Jesus Himself said, it has been given to "a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof" (Matthew 21:43). The true vine is that which is bringing forth the fruits of Jesus Christ, and if we are in Jesus Christ we belong to the new heavenly Israel which He is forming. That is what is going on in us now. What is true and final of Jesus Christ in heaven is now being made true in His Israel on earth.

I expect you are familiar with the truth that the New Testament teaches. It looks as though there is a contradiction, and almost as though Paul and Peter do not agree. Paul says: "(God) made us to sit with him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:6), while Peter says: "I beseech you as sojourners and pilgrims" (1 Peter 2:11). Paul says: 'You are in heaven', and Peter says: 'You are on earth', but there is no contradiction. You see, Paul says that we are in the heavenlies in Christ. It is a spiritual position. In Christ all the work has been done for us, and we are already sanctified and perfected. That is the great spiritual truth, but we know very well that we are still on the earth. The other side is that what is true of our position in Christ is being made true of our position in this world.

That brings us back to the journeys of the ark, that is, that what is true concerning Jesus Himself has got to be made true in our experience. What we have to see clearly is that the journeys of the ark were not only literal, material, earthly journeys, but were spiritual journeys. It was the journey from what the ark was in itself to what it had to become in the life of the people.

You see, I can take up this Bible and say: 'Now, that is a very literal book. It is something that I can see. It is something that I can feel and move about.' I can say that that Bible is a real thing, and I can also say that I believe in the reality of the Bible. I can do all those things with the Bible as I hold it away from myself and look at it. In that way the Bible is objective, but for that Bible to be really a power in my life, it has to take a journey. It has to take a spiritual journey, and that journey is from the objective to the subjective. It has to get inside me somehow. I must have what is written in this book written in my heart, and what is written in this book has to be an experience in my life. Now I ask you, does that happen in half an hour?

Does that happen in one day, one week, one month, one year? Well, I would not like to tell you how many years ago it is that I took the Bible in my hand, but all through these years of my life this spiritual journey has been taking place, and I am not at the end of the journey yet. I have a long way to go for all that is in this book to be made true in my experience.

The Journey from the Objective to the Inward

That is how it was with the ark in Israel. There was the ark, a material thing. The people knew that it was there as a definite object. They knew what it was made of and what was in it, and they could see it being carried on the journeys in front of them, but what was the real history of that ark? It was not just the history of the movement of an objective thing. God was making them know that that ark was a power in their lives. God was saying something to them through the ark, from place to place and from time to time, and through all their difficult experiences they were learning something about the meaning of that ark. They were learning that what was true of the ark in itself had got to be made true in their own lives, and that was never accomplished by preaching about the ark. Neither Moses, nor Aaron, nor the priests just gave them daily expositions on the ark. It was only as they came into situations that they learned by experience the meaning of that ark. Experience is the only school in which we truly learn.

I expect the experience of many of you has been similar to my own. You see, for some years at the beginning of my ministry I was occupied with Bible teaching. I took all the books of the Bible, analysed them, and put the outline on a blackboard. By that method I got to know what was written in the Bible. Well, of course, that is of some value, for it is a good thing to know what is in the Bible, but after some years of doing that kind of work, God took me personally in hand and through deep, deep experience He brought me to know the meaning of the Bible. Well, I could tell you that the Gospel by John has mainly to do with life, and I took my coloured pencil and put a coloured line under every occurrence of the word 'life'. This matter of eternal life was a wonderful thing - in the Gospel by John. Then the Lord began to work in my life in such a way that the only thing I needed was divine life. Spiritually I came into a situation of death. In my ministry I came into a situation of death, and physically, too, and it was then that this whole question of life became a very serious matter for me. My whole future, spiritually, physically, and in ministry, depended upon whether God gave me new spiritual life. And through that deep experience the Gospel by John was no longer in a book. It got inside me. Divine life moved from the position of teaching in the Bible to become a reality in myself. If that were not true I should not be talking to you now.

And so I could go on. I could have given quite a good analysis and outline of the Letter to the Ephesians, and could tell you on a blackboard all that that Letter has to say. It is the great Letter about the Church as the Body of Christ. Well, I thought I knew all about that. And then God took me in hand, and through a very deep experience He brought me to see the real heavenly nature of the Body of Christ, and all this other idea of the Church seemed to me to be like nonsense. Putting up buildings and calling them 'The Church'; going to services and saying 'I am going to Church'. That whole system became empty. I had come to see that the Church is, after all, only an earthly expression of the heavenly Lord Jesus.

Now, I did not start out to speak about the Church, but I am just emphasising one thing: We only come into spiritual reality through spiritual experience, and it is in experiences that we come to know what Christ is.

That was the history of the ark in Israel. It was not only going from Mount Sinai to the next place... to the next place... and so on, to the Land. It was going more and more from the objective into the very life of the people as a power, and we are going to see, as we go on this journey of the ark, that when the people put

those two things apart - that is, when the ark was only something objective and separated from spiritual reality - then they got into trouble. There were times when Israel used the ark only as a superstition. They thought that if they took the ark into battle against the Philistines, then it would work like magic for them, but it did not do so - the Philistines captured the ark and Israel were defeated. You see, they had separated between the ark as an object and the ark as a spiritual reality.

But I have gone a long way ahead. Our great lesson for now is that the work of the Holy Spirit is to make true in us what is true in Christ, and things will go all wrong in our lives if we separate those two things. It is therefore most important that we really understand the spiritual nature of the ark, or the spiritual nature of Jesus Christ. We are dealing with the true testimony of Jesus in the Church, in the people of God, and for the present I will just put my finger upon one thing.

By Revelation of Jesus Christ

In the beginning the ark was made as the result of revelation and inspiration. In other words, God allowed no man to think of this, and to make it according to his own ideas. The ark was the first thing in all that belonged to the tabernacle, and therefore, right at the beginning, this thing had to come from God Himself. This is not man's idea. God did not say: 'I just want you to make Me a box and you can make it of whatever materials you like. You can choose just what size it is, and you can decide what shall be in it.' God never did anything like that. He did not leave one thought about this to man. In a very meticulous and particular way He revealed what this ark was to be made of, its shape, its size, and everything to do with it, and, having given the pattern, He divinely inspired the men who made it. It says that the Spirit of God came upon Bezalel and Aholiab, and it was made by revelation from heaven and by inspiration of God. The testimony of Jesus is not something that man makes. Man has nothing to do with this in the first place. It comes by revelation and inspiration from heaven.

Do you know that in Christianity there are a number of different kinds of arks? Do you understand what I mean? Man's interpretation of Jesus Christ, man's ideas of what to preach, and man's conception of the Church. Nearly all the hundreds of different bodies of the Lord's people have a differently shaped ark. You see, the Baptists say: 'It must be like this', the Methodists say: 'It must be like this', and the Lutherans say: 'No, it must be like this.' There are hundreds of different arks in Christianity. No, God never, never meant that. We shall only come to oneness, to unity, as we have it straight from God, that is, as the Holy Spirit Himself reveals Christ in our hearts.

There was no greater denominationalist or sectarian in this world than Saul of Tarsus. Indeed, he was a bigoted sectarian. He had no room for any other denomination, and so strong was his sectarianism that he would persecute to the death anyone who did not agree with him. What a mighty miracle it was that that man became the Apostle to the Gentiles! That that man could say: 'Now the Church is not just a Jewish Church, but whether it be Jew or Gentile, whether it be barbarian, Scythian, bondman or freeman, in Christ Jesus we are all one man!' I say, what a mighty miracle! What brought that miracle about? Only one thing that he says explains it: "It was the good pleasure of God... to reveal his Son in me" (Galatians 1:15,16). He no longer spoke of 'Jesus of Nazareth, that false prophet', or 'those heretics called Christians'. He would say: 'I have seen Jesus. I have seen God's Son, and that has worked the miracle', and he could speak of all those who loved the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity as being 'my brethren'.

I am just saying that, when this spiritual journey takes place, the movement from the objective, even Jesus, to the inward Son of God, everything changes. Man cannot make that! He may have all his

committees and his conferences on Christian unity. He may get all his own ideas about Jesus Christ, but in the end it gets nowhere. The true testimony of Jesus is not of man, nor of this world. It is by the Holy Spirit revealed in our hearts.

From Creed to Reality

If I said to you: 'Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?', I am sure that most of you would say: 'Yes, certainly I believe in the Holy Spirit.' If any of you belong to the State Church, every time you go you recite the Creed and say: 'I believe in the Holy Ghost.' But whether you belong to the State Church or not, you believe in the Holy Spirit. But, really, do you? Do you believe in the Holy Spirit objectively or subjectively? Do you realize that the very coming of the Holy Spirit was to make Christ, in all that He is, real inside us? Jesus said: "He shall guide you into all the truth: for he shall not speak from himself; but what things soever he shall hear, these shall he speak... he shall take of mine and declare it unto you" (John 16:13,14). The Holy Spirit shall cause you to take this spiritual journey from the objective to the subjective. What a wonderful inheritance we have in the Holy Spirit!

May the Lord show us the meaning of this spiritual pilgrimage! It is going to be a longer or a shorter journey according to the openness of our hearts. Israel could have got into the Land in eleven days, but it took them forty years, and that was because their hearts were not wholly over for the Lord. We shall come on to that again later.

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