

The Nature and Motive of Spiritual Ascendancy

by T. Austin-Sparks

Spiritual ascendancy is the process of rising above our circumstances and challenges to serve the Lord and others, motivated by a desire to please Him and bring glory to His name.

Scripture: Exodus 23:17, Psalm 8:6, Psalm 24:3, Psalm 122:2-4, Acts 20:24, Ephesians 4:8-11, Philippians 3:14, Hebrews 3:7-8, Hebrews 10:35, Revelation 14:1-5

Topics: "Service to God", "Spiritual Ascendancy"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the significance of spiritual ascendancy, urging believers to cultivate a deep desire for spiritual elevation akin to the Israelites' longing for Zion. He challenges the audience to examine their motives for spiritual ambition, highlighting that true ascendancy is rooted in service to God and others rather than self-interest. Sparks warns against the 'malady of not wanting,' which can hinder spiritual growth, and stresses the importance of perseverance and faith in the face of trials. He illustrates that spiritual ascendancy is not merely a personal achievement but a means to serve and uplift the community of believers. Ultimately, he calls for a renewed commitment to spiritual aspirations that glorify God and fulfill His purposes.

Transcript

Reading: Ps. 24:3; Rev. 14:1-5; Ps. 122:2-4.

We have been led to look afresh at this whole matter of spiritual ascendancy. We have looked at the vast expanses, seeing the thing very much as a whole. Now we get closer to some of the aspects of it.

The Challenge of Ascendancy

But first of all there is this question of ascent. "Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord?" If I say something that may sound rather blunt, you will understand what I am trying to get at. At the outset I would say, Well, who is concerned with ascending? Who is interested in ascendancy? What is the point in raising the question at all? Such a way of approach immediately raises this question: Have we yet become really concerned with this matter of spiritual ascendancy? You see, here in the Old Testament, in the illustration of the thing in the life of Israel, there is a good deal taken for granted. It is assumed that there is both interest and desire to ascend. You find the thing in existence. No one is asked about it at all; no one is appealed to. The people of God are not told that they ought to go up. It is not a command in that sense, that some obligation is put upon them. If you get the atmosphere of this Zion factor as in the Psalms, you

will find that there is nothing like that at all. To go up is one great longing, a life-ambition. "I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go unto the house of the Lord. Our feet are standing within thy gates, O Jerusalem". Everything that is said about it is just an expression of a great life-desire. One thing which overshadowed everything else in the aspirations of a true Israelite was -- If only I could go up to Zion! There was the trek three times a year, as the Lord had prescribed through Moses. "Three times in the year all thy males shall appear before the Lord God" (Ex. 23:17). You may take it that was not some onerous business they had to perform. For weeks before, they were all astir about this trek to Zion. It was the one thing in their thoughts, it governed the whole of those three sections of the year. The culmination of those months was Zion, and that visit to Zion gave zest and new aspiration to get over another period. It was the one thing for which they lived. I think that is the spirit of the psalms, and certainly it was the spirit of David. It is just assumed there was interest in this matter and great desire concerning it.

That ought to test us and challenge us. As we come to understand, to see more fully what it means to come to the place of spiritual ascendancy, there ought to enter into our lives a new zest. Of course, literally and historically, we can understand it. For instance, it is a good thing to gather together in conferences periodically and have a valuable time of fellowship and ministry, and perhaps many of you scattered over the earth look forward to it. It is good to have a literal coming together from all over the place from time to time, to enjoy the Lord, and the fellowship of the Lord's people. It is not that we are talking about, good and valuable as it is, and much as we should encourage it, for mutual help is strength. But there is something which is far greater, far more important than that. There is the spiritual meaning of such things, and we are seeking to enter into that spiritual meaning.

But we begin with this: Is there really in us by a work of the Spirit A MIGHTY URGE UPWARD IN THE SPIRITUAL LIFE? Have we got it? Is it in us? Are the highways to Zion really in our hearts?

Ascendancy a Right Ambition

Historically we see that this was a phase of Israel's life; and especially when they were in good spiritual condition was this something which characterized them with great joy. But what is represented is of much longer history, the spiritual history of this principle. May I pause for another parenthesis, by way of reiteration? Everything in the Word of God, everything that God has appointed as ordinance and function and event in the life of His people, is only His way of saying something deeper. It is the embodiment of something eternal, something which belongs to a realm that is not passing, not of this earth at all. In this going up to Zion we have embodied in type this thing which has a so much longer spiritual history; that is, the inborn constituent of human nature to rise. As we have said before, it is not wrong to have ambition or aspiration. I think a lot of people think that is a form of soulishness which ought to be killed. Be careful how you set about killing your souls! They have to be redeemed, not killed; and in the matter of aspiration, of ambition, it is not a question of quenching but of redeeming and sanctifying. Aspiration is something which God put into the very constitution of man. "Thou makest him to have dominion" (Ps. 8:6). It is there. There is nothing wrong with the thing itself, and bound up with it there is this long history of ascendancy. But, of course, as we have said, it was distorted, twisted, polluted, corrupted by the self-motive, the self-interest, the self-principle. Therefore in man by nature, aspiration and ambition is usually to be something himself, to come into a place of ascendancy himself, in order to feel power in his own hands. While there may be timid souls who think that their trouble is all the other way round, let me say at once that even an inferiority complex is only your way of saying how you hate being down there; you want to be something! It is there, whatever form of expression it takes; and these psychological disturbances, which create this depression and self-occupation and false humility and circling round our wretched nothingness all the time, are only

the cry-out of something in our constitution. They express a revolt in us; nature will out somehow, and nature is this, "Thou makest him to have dominion". Now the Lord is not going to quench that. He is going to redeem and sanctify it, and through the Cross purge it of all the personal interest and motive, and every element of self, until He has that Christlikeness of true meekness and humility which can govern, which can reign and take the throne. It is the LAMB Who is in the throne. The very symbol of weakness and dependence has come to govern.

So we are thrown back to this: Are we without the right kind of chastened, sanctified aspiration? There is an awful malady which overcomes some people, and it is fatal. It is what someone has called the malady of not wanting. We might change the word and say the malady of not caring. Something has gone very far wrong with us as Christians if there is anything like that about us. While, on the one hand, it should be farthest from our thoughts that we in ourselves should be anything, on the other hand there is this mighty ambition which God would have in us, that we should be unto the praise of His glory, that in all things He should be glorified in us. Are you suffering from the malady of not wanting or not caring? Something has gone wrong, there is a deep injury to your spiritual life, if it is like that. Ask the Lord to heal you of that fatal malady. It may be, of course, just the result of frustrated personal desire. The personal element has been disappointed and you find you have nothing to take its place. That is terrible.

Testing of Motive -- The Lord or Self?

Well, it is here, you see, in this realm of spiritual aspiration, this outworking of the great power of ascendancy as God would have it in us by the Holy Spirit, that all our testings take place -- the testing of all our motives. Why should we aspire, why should we go on with the Lord, why should we pay the price, why should we endure hardship? If the answer is that we do not stand to get much out of it, then there is not much reason why we should aspire if we live on that level. Motives are tested along this line. Can you bear a seeming rebuff (it will never be a real one) from the Lord? Can you go on when He gives you no stimulants, when He seems to be standing back? What is your motive for going on? If it is a personal one, then you will have very little to feed it. The Lord will starve all our personal interests in this matter as we advance. He does not want us to go on simply because He is all the time giving that which would stimulate our going on. He wants us to go on for His own sake, because we have come to see the transcendent value of the things of the Lord. That is where we are tested. It is the life of Abraham in a nutshell. It is the life of many another servant of God who has stood closely related to His great purpose in Christ; testing, withholding, hiding, giving very little to encourage. Why should we go on? Motives are tested.

Ascendancy Demands Spiritual Stamina

Faith is tested, and endurance is tested, in this realm of spiritual ascendancy. We have to see something bound up with this which puts stamina into us. We have to see, as did the apostle, "the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:14) for stamina to be put into us as it was into him. Oh, what stamina, what endurance, that man exhibited! How did he do it? He saw the on-high calling, he had the heavenly vision, and all the vast accumulation of discouraging and disconcerting things here could not move him. He was able to say, "None of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself"; "that I may gain Christ" (Acts 20:24, A.V. and Phil. 3:8).

It is here, of course, that all the exhortations and appeals and warnings come in Scripture. What are all the exhortations about? They all revolve around this one thing: Go on! "Cast not away therefore your boldness, which hath great recompense of reward" (Heb. 10:35). All the appeals are on this ground and all

the warnings are connected with this. You remember those warnings which are taken out of the very life of Israel, such as: "Today if ye shall hear his voice, harden not your hearts" (Heb. 3:7-8). That is said not to unsaved, but to believers. "Harden not your hearts". It is so easy for a believer, should he take the situations and the circumstances of spiritual development as an end in themselves, to get hard of heart, bitter of spirit, resentful and rebellious. "Harden not your hearts", as they hardened theirs and lost the inheritance. It is in this realm that crises constantly arise in our life.

Ascendency Acquired in Common Affairs

Again and again we find ourselves brought to a crisis: Are we going on or are we not? How many of you have been at that point, many times perhaps, in your spiritual life? It is almost as though you had been brought right to a standstill by reason of the fury of the oppressor, the hardness of the way, the difficulties of the situation, the discouragement of the circumstances. Then you have started to go round in a circle, and sooner or later you have had to come to the place where you say to yourself, "Well, what is going to happen? Either I am going on or I am not!" A place of crisis, and the crisis is always on the question of utterness. If I am going on, I see that I have to go on without many things I want. I have just to go on, and that is all there is to it. That is utterness -- going on because you can do no other than go on with God, you have no alternative. And every fresh crisis is a weakening of crises. You eventually come to the place where you say, "I have been down this street too many times before not to know where it leads. I am not going down it again. It leads to deadlock, there is no way out here at all". The Lord is working at us till He gets us to the place where we will go on, no matter what the circumstances are. That is spiritual ascendency in its practical outworking.

What then is this matter of ascending into the hill of the Lord? It is not some mountain on this earth that we are going to climb. It is this everyday thing: Am I going on with God right through to His full end? There are ten thousand things to discourage and set back. Am I going to allow them to do that? Spiritual ascendency meets us from the first moments of consciousness every morning and it is there with us all day long. Something is said, and we go down under it. Some situation arises, and we at once collapse. We all know it. There is not one of us who has not been caught by this situation. For the moment, we get down under it. We know quite well we shall never go on till we get on top. The Lord does not lift it off us; He says, "Come out from under it". "What doest thou here, Elijah?" (1 Kings 19:9). It is the challenge to us to leave the place that we have taken under things. That is spiritual ascendency; that is the nature of it.

Service the Motive of Ascendency

What is the motive of spiritual ascendency? The motive, surely, as revealed in the Word of God in this very connection, is the motive of service. The Bible is a book of spiritual principles. What is the central thought of the throne in the Word of God? It is service. Take Joseph, for example. There is a man who through deep discipline, frustration, disappointment, abandonment, loneliness, and every kind of adversity, at last came to the throne. We may say that he climbed there. It was a moral and spiritual climb up. It was not just official, not just haphazard. God's eye had been upon him in secret, and when the Lord had tried him ("the word of the Lord tried him" Ps. 105:19), when that trial was accomplished, they sent and brought him out, and he was made prince in Egypt. But what was connected with that? The story is so patent. It was service. It was for the life of others. It was usefulness in the day of need.

That was the whole thought in the case of David. Starting from that low place as a shepherd lad looking after the few sheep, and the Lord looking into his heart, what a climb his was to the throne! How much

discouragement, how much frustration, how much setback, how much heartbreak through those years of the reign of Saul! Hunted, driven, pursued; there was plenty there to make a man say, "Well, it is not worth it. I am going back to my few sheep, to a quiet personal life. At least I had that!" But he never did turn back. He went on. It was a moral climb to the throne. When David came to the throne, he came there because he had proved himself a man after God's heart. It was an inward spiritual history that had been developed. He came there, but when he was there, what did it all mean? It is not just a case of David in solitary isolation at the top of the tree, having achieved and realized all his personal ambitions. Oh, see the good, the benefit, the wealth, the fullness for the people of God! It was not until David came to the throne that Israel really did enter into their destiny, their fullness. His reign and the earlier part of the reign of his son, Solomon, was the peak of Israel's history. Far more marvellous than you and I have yet recognized was that reign. There were powers, kingdoms, rulers, which had held their ground and menaced the people of God literally for centuries. They could never be overcome even by Joshua, and right on through the Judges they still held their ground within the compass of that land of Canaan. But when David came to the throne, every one of them was subjected. His kingdom was a vast kingdom of a great triumph such as had never been before. Yes, it is usefulness to the Lord's people that the throne represents, it is service all the time.

You come over to the New Testament and there you find the matter plainly expressed. "When he ascended on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men... and he gave some apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers" (Eph. 4:8-11). Is not this service in relation to ascending?

Come over to the Revelation. "These are they which come out of the great tribulation, and they washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before the throne of God; and they serve him day and night in his temple" (Rev. 7:14-15). Upward to service, ascension and service -- it is a principle. We could draw on the Scriptures to bear it out so much more fully. But there it is, a divine law.

Spiritual ascendancy carries with it serviceableness, usefulness, and we know quite well how it works in our present lives. A man or a woman who is spiritually down under is no use to the Lord. Only in the measure in which we have learned spiritual ascendancy -- learned how to get on top of things, and how to bring the enemy under our feet -- can we really be of service to the Lord. Our ministry is not a ministry of truths, words, teachings, ideas. It is the ministry of life, resurrection life, ascension life. That is to say, it is the life which overcomes, it is the power of ascendancy, and we have to minister that. That is the effect of life.

When we come together and the Lord's life is amongst us in any measure, what is the effect? We all feel lifted up. You will never minister life if you are down under all the time. We cannot really serve the Lord, except as we learn what it means to overcome -- which is another word for spiritual ascendancy. It is the secret of service.

Ascendancy Persistently Assailed

Now is that not just the focal point of all the enemy's assaults and attacks? Why does he bring about situations to get the Lord's people under? Why all the quarrels among Christian workers, why the disagreements and disaffections? Why situations where it is impossible to go on any longer with so-and-so? Oh, yes, shame on us that it is so, but that is the sad story of Christian work. Why all these

countless methods and ways of the enemy to get the Lord's people under? Simply to rob them of their usefulness to the Lord, to put an end to their service to Him, to open the way for death to counter the power of life. We know quite well that our usefulness to the Lord is a very practical matter, and very often depends upon our going and humbling ourselves before someone else, getting off our pedestal and getting down very humbly and admitting we have been wrong. Even if we have not been wrong, it means sometimes taking the place of one who has been in the wrong in an effort to get a situation cleared up, washing anybody's feet if only the way of a release of divine life can be secured. It is very practical, this matter of "marching upward to Zion". It is not mere poetry, no mere beautiful idea. It is right here every day, and our usefulness and our service to the Lord may be held up by some seemingly little practical matter of everyday life. Nothing is small if it limits our usefulness to the Lord. What we might call the smallest thing carries with it no less an issue than the release of the mighty life of God to some other lives. That makes everything very big. Oh, if only we had a sufficient motive for seeing to things! Our motive is not big enough. We have taken a situation as something in itself. We have looked upon it as something merely human, something quite natural, just a happening. It may be a thing very common to man, a thing to which we are all very prone by nature, but we have failed to recognize that behind that are vast issues, far-reaching interests. The enemy knows all about it. Do not let us think that the enemy will do very big things to get us out if he can achieve his end by insignificant things. Sometimes we think a thing is so insignificant that of course the devil is not in that: he is occupied with bigger things than that! But if it achieves the end, it will serve his purpose best not to display himself too much. If he can upset you and put you out of spirit, and out of use to the Lord, by simply making someone say something inadvertently, so long as the end is accomplished it is as good as though he had rallied all his diabolical forces and concentrated them upon you. Why should he do that if he can succeed by a mere phrase? It is the end he is after.

The incentive to ascendancy is service, usefulness to the Lord. After all, ascendancy is the outworking of ascension union with our Lord, and everything comes from that. The ascended Lord in heaven: everything flows from that. But how can He fulfil all the purposes and possibilities of His glorious ascension, if He has not got a people in ascension union with Him through whom to do it?

Let us ask the Lord to write this thing in our hearts -- that it is spiritual ascendancy that is so important, in order that the Lord may be able to express Himself in fullness; because, if you look again, you will find that Zion is the symbol of spiritual fullness.

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