

The Nature of Life and Testimony of the Lord's People

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Lord's people must know the Lord in a new way in the power of resurrection life to maintain their testimony in a day of spiritual declension.

Scripture: John 11:25, Acts 4:33, Romans 8:11, 1 Corinthians 15:20, 2 Corinthians 4:10, Galatians 4:6, Ephesians 1:19, Philippians 3:10, Colossians 3:1

Topics: "Resurrection Life", "Spiritual Warfare"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks preaches on the significance of Elisha representing the nature of resurrection life and the Testimony of the Lord's people, emphasizing the power of resurrection in the midst of pressure from a hostile world. Through the stories in 2 Kings 3 and 4, he illustrates the importance of maintaining the Testimony of Christ's universal sovereignty in times of spiritual declension and external pressure. The central theme is the need for believers to experience the power of Christ's resurrection in conflict, service, and life, highlighting the obedience of faith and the fullness of His life overcoming all spiritual foes.

Transcript

Reading: 2 Kings 3 and 4.

As we meditate on these chapters we must with every fresh step remind ourselves of the significance of Elisha himself. That is, that he came in on the ground of resurrection, to represent the nature of the life and the Testimony of the Lord's people. That was represented by the anointing, the coming of the spirit of his ascended master upon him, indicating that through Calvary, through the work of the Cross, he was in union with heaven in the power of resurrection, and everything that obtained in his life was in one form or another the expression of that resurrection life. Thus he came into touch with people and situations in various directions in the power of resurrection, and whatever Elisha touched was connected with the issue of life triumphant over death.

There are three things before us now, the details of which we shall not stay to deal with, but just be content with taking out the central thought.

1. The Valley Filled With Water

Resurrection Life in the Midst of Pressure From a Hostile World Outside

Chapter 3 is occupied with the rebellion, or revolt, of Moab against Israel. Probably you will recall that David had subdued the Moabites, and had put them under tribute to pay to Israel annually one hundred thousand sheep and lambs. That tribute had continued through the reign of Ahab. With the death of Ahab, Moab revolted. That revolt is mentioned right at the very beginning of this second book of Kings in the first verse of chapter 1. There is then a break in the general history, in which Elijah is translated and Elisha comes into his place. It is interesting and significant that Elisha does come in right at that point.

If you get the larger background of spiritual interpretation in the light of the New Testament, what you have as represented by David is the Lord Jesus in absolute sovereignty, overcoming all spiritual enemies. You remember David went over the whole ground of every foe which had ever lifted itself against the Lord's people, and subdued them all, and established his throne upon a universal victory. That is typical of Christ by His Cross overcoming every spiritual foe. But then we find, not so long after the universal victory of the Cross spiritually established, the breaking out of hostile forces against the Church, seeming to be a contradiction to that victory, and yet not so in fact. Elisha typically is connected with the Church, and his ministry is to show and to bring in the power by which the Church is to know its life of victory in relation to the ascended Lord. That power is the power of resurrection life.

So we find that immediately upon Elisha's coming into his ministry, there is this revolt of Moab against Israel. Things are not in a very good condition amongst the Lord's people. Ahab has been responsible for a good deal of spiritual declension, weakness, contradiction. He has handed on a heritage of unfaithfulness, and things are at low ebb spiritually at this time. The alliance between Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, and the king of Israel in Samaria, is an unholy thing, a state of departure and weakness. That gives Elisha his real value. It clearly indicates why Elisha is brought in at this time. That is, the necessity is made very manifest by the situation.

The first lesson, therefore, that arises here for the Lord's people is the manner of establishing beyond any question the Testimony to the absolute Lordship of that One Who is at the right hand of God, in a day when in general things are spiritually at low ebb amongst themselves, and when from the outside world itself, as represented by Moab, there is severe pressure. How shall the Testimony of Christ's universal sovereignty be displayed? On what ground can it be maintained here? Elisha makes very clear to us by his own typical person what the Divinely employed means for that purpose is. It is a matter of conflict with the world in a day of inward weakness.

The situation becomes, as you see, very precarious. This designed resistance of Moab finds the Lord's people without the resources to carry it through. They move out, but they have no power by which to meet the situation. When they come to the actual moment of launching their assault they themselves are completely crippled and paralyzed by the lack of spiritual resource. The waters upon which they were counting did not exist; they had dried up. When these people came to the place where they expected to find the streams of water, those streams were not there, and the whole army was in peril of perishing for want of resource.

The issue is perfectly clear, and is stated by the king of Israel. This confederacy is going to perish, this whole situation is going to end in death, calamity, destruction. But Jehoshaphat, who represents the spiritual instinct in the situation - one who more than the others is in touch with God, who does know the Lord, has a relationship with Him - raises the question of consulting the Lord through His prophet: "Is there not here a prophet of the Lord...?" This leads to a consultation with Elisha.

Elisha in the first place is moved by the unholy state of things. He refuses to have anything to do with the king of Israel, because of his unholy condition. Elisha seems to be inclined to turn the whole thing down; but then he remembers Jehoshaphat, and says: "...were it not that I regarded the presence of Jehoshaphat the king of Judah, I would not look toward thee, nor see thee." Wherever there is a true, a genuine looking in the direction of the Lord, the Lord does not despise that, nor refuse to take account of it. And so Elisha, taking Jehoshaphat into consideration, deeply and terribly moved by the evil of the situation, seeks to get detached from that side of things and says: "bring me a minstrel." Let us not be misguided by this to think that he sought inspiration through the minstrel. No such thing! He did not seek any soulish stimulus to get inspiration. Revelation from God does not come that way. Elisha had become terribly moved to wrath by the evil of the situation amongst the Lord's people, and it was quite impossible for him quietly to give the word of the Lord while he himself in his spirit was entangled in this thing. And the request for a minstrel was simply to get quiet in himself, to get his own spirit detached from this situation. You know that the quieting effect of the minstrel is mentioned on more than one occasion in different parts of the Scripture. Elisha disentangled himself from this situation, and then, in that detachment, was able to open himself to the Lord, and receive the Lord's Word. "Thus saith the Lord, 'Make this valley full of trenches.'" We need not stay with all the details of this story; we note the central message.

Here we are in conflict with a hostile company, in conflict with forces which are bent upon the full and final destruction of the Lord's Testimony in His people, forces which are taking advantage of a day of general spiritual declension. In ourselves we have no resource with which to meet those forces, and that situation. How then will it be met? Upon what basis will the Testimony be maintained and brought out into fullness? Purely upon the basis of our knowing the Lord in a new way in the power of resurrection. It is a very simple lesson, but it is a thing which runs through the New Testament continuously.

You see it marking the life of the Apostle Paul again and again. You note the uprising of the hostile forces to quench the Testimony as represented by him, and a seeming advantage of those forces from time to time, so that the Lord's servant appears at times almost to be brought to a standstill. It does look as though the advantage is on the side of the enemy. And then, without any noise, without any sound of wind or seeing of rain, there is a reinforcing with the power of resurrection, and all the forces which have been ranged against the Testimony in him are scattered, confounded, and there is an establishment or a celebration of victory.

On one occasion those forces rose up and withstood the vessel of Testimony. It looked as though they had gained the advantage, that the enemy was in the place of power. The next thing you read is that Paul rose up and went back into the city, and at Lystra there was a great and abiding celebration of the power of resurrection as working in the Apostle. At Ephesus the same thing happened in another form - the rising up of the forces antagonistic to the Testimony, a riot, a driving out, and to all appearance the enemy in the place of strength. Nevertheless we have a letter to the Ephesians in which we have a great story of the establishment of the Ephesian assembly, and the Testimony there is of a very definite and positive form. And concerning Ephesus the Apostle said that it was there that he despaired of life. He was so sick as to despair of life. Ephesus, though as a church non-existent today, still moves in mighty power spiritually. We never read the Letter to the Ephesians without recognizing how vital it is, and it has gone on in its spiritual persistence, in power and strength, for all these centuries. Eternity will reveal marvelous fruit from the battle for Ephesus which looked at times to be lost. The power by which the Testimony was established was the power of His resurrection.

What was true of Lystra and Ephesus was true in many other directions and on many other occasions. You see the rallying of the forces, a situation which appeared to be very precarious for the Testimony, and then, without any great noise, a rising up and a working of the power of the risen life of the Lord in the vessel, and a celebration of His victory. Instead of the vessel of Testimony being destroyed, that very life was the destruction of the forces which were set in opposition.

If you read this story in its details you will see that the thing which became the life of the Lord's people became the death of their enemies. We are in that position today very truly. The full Testimony of the Lord is hard pressed. There is great profession, a great deal of Christian tradition, but the Testimony in reality is the Testimony to the power of resurrection in the life as a living thing within the saints. This is limited to a comparative few, and the pressure is tremendous upon that Testimony, to extinguish it altogether. The need is the need which is seen here - a fresh knowledge of the Lord in the power of His resurrection.

There are many remedies for the situation which are being suggested. Numerous Conferences are being held to discuss how the work of the Lord shall be brought into a better condition, and made more triumphant; as to how there can be more success, more effectiveness, and so on; and we are wearied to death of these Conferences, the discussions, the round tables, which issue in nothing. THE need which touches the heart of the whole situation, and which will solve every problem, is a fresh knowledge of the Lord Himself in the power of His resurrection, a fresh experience of the risen life of the Lord Himself. There is no other means by which these spiritual problems will be solved, these spiritual deadlocks be removed. The only way is the uprising of the fullness of His life, and then the world will know. The Lord would say to His people today that, rather than for better ways and means, the need is for a life more mightily energized by that risen power of the exalted Head.

Elisha, who comes on the scene because he saw his master taken up into heaven and received a double portion of his spirit, forever tells us quite clearly that the Church's power in a day of declension and antagonism is the power of the risen ascended Lord. That is taking the heart out of the story. But let us remember that there had to be a real exercising of faith. The obedience of faith in the power of the ascended Lord became the victory which overcame the world.

2. The Widow's Oil

We pass on to the next incident in chapter 4:1-7. The woman here was the widow of one of the sons of the prophets. Inasmuch as the sons of the prophets were representative of those who were to be responsible for the Lord's interests amongst His people, but who were in a state of immaturity and preparation, we have the right background for what is here in this chapter as spiritually interpreted.

(a) The State of the Church

Unable To Meet Obligations

We find this widow of one of the sons of the prophets in a state of terrible impoverishment. She represents the spiritual state of the Lord's people, and that state is one of inability to meet the obligations. "Thy servant my husband is dead; and thou knowest that thy servant did fear the Lord: and the creditor is come to take unto him my two children to be bondmen." "I cannot face the creditor; I am not in a position to meet these demands; my two sons are going to be taken into bondage." Typically that means that the sons, who are types of the works, the fruit, of her life, are going to be taken over by the merely formal religious world. The Church is simply going to hand over its works, its fruit, and the world is going to take possession; the

Church is going to lose all the value of its own activities.

(b) The Power of the World Over "The Church"

This is quite clearly the thing that is happening today. The world is using "the Church" for its own ends. It is the world that is getting gain out of "the Church" today, though not in a spiritual and right sense. "The Church" is in bondage to the world today. The Church is simply on its knees to the world. Every concert, every bazaar, every entertainment, everything like that in "the Church" is her unwonted, perhaps unintended, confession that it cannot live its own independent life. It is dependent upon the world for its very life. It says by these things, "It is no use trying to get on; we cannot maintain things even as they are, we cannot make ends meet, only as we recognize the claims of the world, recognize the strength of the world." Why do you provide entertainments and such things in your "Church" for your young people? Because you will never have your young people unless you do. They must have something of the world in order to hold them to "the Church" (so called), and thus "the Church" is slavishly in bondage to the world, on the knee to the world.

So the creditor comes to take and to despoil "the Church" of its real spiritual value. "The Church" is in a position where it cannot meet its obligations out from itself. It has not the spiritual resource with which to do so.

(c) A Little Oil

"The Church" has a little oil, like this widow. It is not altogether devoid of the Spirit, not absolutely and finally bereft of the Lord, but not by any means has it enough to stand up and live its own life independently of outside resources. To put that in another way, is to say that the fullness of life is not in itself, therefore it cannot face the demands made upon it. It has become an institution, enlarged by human effort, extended by man's organization, and therefore has become involved in the demands which are beyond its own spiritual growth. Its own spiritual growth has not kept pace with its external development. The life is not commensurate with what it has taken on, and attempted to do. That is the situation. That situation cries out, as through the voice of this woman: "There cried a certain woman..." It is a pathetic position.

What is the remedy? It is the same remedy, only applied in another direction. It is Elisha, to begin with, the power of resurrection again, the risen life of the Lord, the full issue of the work of the Cross in absolute ascendancy over spiritual death. Thus Elisha comes into touch with the situation. Here we see that THE need in all such times of spiritual inability to meet spiritual demands, is a fresh knowledge of the Lord in the fullness of His risen life.

It will work at one time as to the pressure of the world from without in its antagonism, as represented by Moab. At another time it will be expressed by reason of the inward impoverishment of the Lord's people to meet the demands which are legitimately laid upon them. Paul recognized those demands and did not say that they were wrong. "I am debtor" he said, "both to Greeks and to Barbarians..." He was under obligation to meet the spiritual needs of all men. But the spiritual needs of the world can only be met as we know the fullness of the risen life of the Lord.

"What hast thou in the house?" "Thine handmaid hath not anything in the house, save a pot of oil." "Go borrow thee vessels... not a few." You notice that in every one of these movements for renewal (revival, if you like), the knowing again of the Lord in the power of His resurrection, there is a challenge to faith.

"Make this valley full of trenches." See these men, with no sign whatever that there would be any rain, with no idea whatever as to where water could come from, yet in obedience digging away and making the valley full of trenches. Their part was the obedience of faith. They had to leave the rest with the faithfulness of God. "Go borrow vessels..." The natural man would have reacted to such a suggestion with the question, 'But where is the oil coming from for the vessels? I do not see how it can be done!' That is always the attitude of nature; wanting first of all a demonstration to the senses before it will act. God's principle is the obedience of faith. "Go borrow vessels abroad of all thy neighbours..." 'But what will the neighbors say? They will laugh at me!' Nevertheless obedience of faith often involves us in situations which to the world are very ridiculous. Such obedience involved Abraham in what looked like a very ridiculous situation: "Now the Lord said unto Abram, 'Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred... unto the land that I will show thee,'" "...and he went out, not knowing whither he went." To all inquiries as to where he was going he would have to answer: "I do not know." How ridiculous that would appear to the world! However, that is just where faith has its real value, in that it is prepared to move, not caring what other people think, but trusting God.

How are these obligations going to be met? The means will be the risen life of the Lord. First of all it will necessitate stepping out in faith on the Lord's Word. Then it will involve putting into operation the little that you have of the Lord. Do you know the Lord in a little measure? Have you the one pot of oil? Put it into operation in faith! So many of the Lord's people are wanting to know a great deal more of Him before they will move at all. They have just a little knowledge of the Lord, and the Lord's principle is that there is never any increase until we have extended to the full what we have. Have you some little knowledge of the Lord? Well, extend it to the full, and act in faith in relation to it, and you will find your increase comes that way. Believe that this life in God is a fullness of life, although your measure of it at present may be very limited. It is not the measure we have that is the ground of expectation, but that from which we received what we already have. It is the fullness, of which we have received perhaps only a small measure, that should be our confidence.

If the woman had simply fixed her attention upon that one pot of oil, and said: "That is the beginning and the end of all my hope and expectation," then nothing would have happened. But she had to see that vessel in relation to a fullness which was boundless. If you take your little as the all, you will not get very far, but if you relate your little to God's all, you can go on. It is His fullness, not just the measure that we have experienced of His fullness. The fullness of God is a fact lying beyond our present experience, but a fact concerning which we have to act in faith.

That action of faith demanded on the part of this woman the bringing of vessels. Those who have ministry in the Word know quite well of what we are speaking: for example, that you do not stop gathering the Lord's people together because you feel empty. In the consciousness of emptiness, weakness, smallness of resource, you go on, and you find the Lord meets the need as you go on in faith. If at times we were to act according to our own feelings we would say: "We will not have a meeting today, we have nothing to give." But the Lord is our Resource, and as we go on the Lord comes in and fills the emptiness. It is a sound principle for the Lord's servants to work upon. If we are in the way of the Lord's Testimony we can trust the Lord to meet all the need, though we may have a very small measure consciously at any given moment. Do we believe that the Lord can meet the need, and fill wherever that need exists? There is no need represented in this world which, if brought before the Lord, cannot be met. If you have any doubt about that, there the Testimony stops. The point where you cease to believe a situation to be capable of solution by the Lord is the point where your Testimony fails; you are contradicting the power of His

resurrection. The power of the risen life of the Lord Jesus is without limit, and there is no situation and no life which truly represents a need of Him which cannot be met.

For this woman it was a case of keeping on keeping on! She set the limit, not the Lord. When she ceased to find vessels then the oil stayed. The limit is not on the Lord's side.

The Testimony is along those lines. There will be differing ways of application. You and I will know how it touches us and our situation. From time to time we shall find that this applies to the position in which we find ourselves. It would be quite impossible for us to cover all the ground of application, but here is a fact stated. It is the power of His resurrection which meets the obligations; not what we have but what He is; not the measure of what we have already received, but the measure of what there is yet to receive. The Lord's thought for us is fullness, but we shall not have it all at one time. His fullness will come to us progressively. We shall not always be living in the consciousness of being full, but we can live continually in the knowledge of being filled again and again as the demand arises.

3. The Shunammite's Son

Let us turn to the latter half of chapter 4, verses 8-37. We want to condense this into as concrete a thought as possible. There is a change here which is somewhat significant.

In the case of the wife of the son of the prophets we have a woman manifestly in poverty, in emptiness, in privation, and the oil brings to her fullness in her emptiness. When we come to this woman of Shunem we find that we meet quite another situation. She is called "a great woman." That means that, so far as temporal matters were concerned, she was well provided for; in comfort, in plenty, in affluence, in position; just the opposite of the other woman. Unlike the widow of Zarephath, to whom Elijah went and whom he sought to persuade to give him something to eat, this woman has to try to persuade the prophet to eat. It is quite the other way round. She has plenty in every way but one thing. The prophet contemplates this woman. He looks at her home, her table, her servants, her possessions generally, and does not see anything about her home that is lacking, and for him it is quite a problem how to enrich her. The needs are not obvious; it is something to cause consideration. What can be done for a woman like that? Gehazi touches the vital spot: "Verily she hath no son..." A deeper depth is touched. Everything but the one thing which can really mean more than everything else. One thing representing more than all these outward things. That fact is disclosed by the prophet's word concerning the son. The woman replied, "Do not lie unto thine handmaid." That seems to say: "There is one desire of my life, but it is impossible, and I have had to settle once and for all that that cannot be. I have fought my battle: I have accepted the denial; and now that is a closed door. Do not begin to bring me into a realm where that whole thing is raised again, and I have to fight my battles all over anew. Do not suggest things that, should they never come to pass, would put me back again into a place where all that I have means nothing to me because of that lack!" Nevertheless the prophet's word comes to pass, and from that time all things are swung over to this son. Then "...it fell on a day, that he went out to his father to the reapers. And he said unto his father, My head, my head.' And he said to his servant, 'Carry him to his mother.' And when he had taken him, and brought him to his mother, he sat on her knees till noon, and then died." She took him and laid him on the prophet's bed and went for the prophet. You know the rest of the story.

The Supreme Need: Fullness of Resurrection Life

What is it that comes out as the central reality, the thing which is the SUPREME factor in life? There may be many other things. There may be a condition such as was found in one of the Churches in Asia to

which the Lord addressed these words: "Thou sayest, 'I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing;' and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked!" There is a lack which by its very existence makes all else that you have as mere poverty. You may have all this, but the absence of one thing makes it plain that you have really no heart in all that. The thing which counts above all things is to know within our own being the power of His resurrection. We may have much that is good externally, even in a religious way, but the one thing upon which the Lord puts His finger as the primary, the paramount thing in the life of any child of His, is not the abundance of the things possessed, but the knowing of Him and the power of His resurrection.

Look at Philippians 3. Paul there goes over all the things which were of value, which men would value and regard as things worth having. Then he sums them all up and says: "I count these, after all, great as they are in the eyes of men, as utter refuse, and suffer the loss of all things that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection." This woman came to know this thing in a very deep way. The son was given; that was wonder enough! And yet there might still linger some suggestion that nature had had something to do with it, that the gift of the son could somehow be accounted for along natural lines. Psychology has tended to undermine the whole realm of the objective and exclusive activity of God. But God is going to demonstrate that this was wholly outside the realm of nature: and so the son dies, and is brought back to life, and every question of nature having a hand in it has been silenced. There is no room for anything natural when it is a case of resurrection from the dead. That is the ultimate Testimony. That cannot be explained in any other way than "God"! Resurrection is knowing God. Psychology tries to explain a good many things in Christian experience, and some of us have had much painful experience over the psychological explanation of religious experience. But the Lord has put us outside of that realm by making us know something for which psychology can never give an explanation, even the knowing of "Him, and the power of His resurrection." Psychology cannot raise the dead. There is an inner secret history of knowing the Lord in a way that cannot be accounted for on any other basis than the power of His resurrection.

That is where the Testimony reaches its final point. It is the Testimony that Jesus was raised from the dead. That may be but the basis of the Testimony, but it is not merely the creed, the doctrine, it is the inward knowledge of the risen Lord. That had to be wrought in principle into the very being of this woman, until it was beyond the reach of any question. What was the full thought? It was Sonship. Read Romans 8, and Galatians, and see what sonship is when brought through into its fullest meaning. When the child was born, that represented what the New Testament has to say about our being children of God by birth. When the son was raised, that represented what the New Testament has to say about sonship by resurrection. The New Testament teaches by its two distinct Greek words that by our new birth we are children of God, but that sonship is something in advance of childhood. It is childhood brought to maturity in the power of resurrection. "Adoption" is the word used, as we know. But in the New Testament adoption has nothing to do with the taking into the family of an outsider. It has only to do with the adopting of your own child at his majority in the place of honor and responsibility. The Greek father adopted his own son when his son came to his majority, and that was the moment when he ceased to be a child and became a son. That is the New Testament teaching.

Here is the woman who had the child, and that is wonderful. When we are born again it is a miracle, a glorious thing. But when the Lord takes us through experiences to bring us to know Him in the power of His resurrection in our very being - not something done outside of ourselves, but something which has been done in us - and we are taken through deep depths, until in our very being we come to know Him and the power of His resurrection, that is sonship, that is the Testimony. The Testimony in its fullness is

not bound up with spiritual infants, it is bound up with spiritual maturity. This woman was great, and yet there was a "but"! We may have a great deal, even in our Christian lives and in our Christian work, and yet there may remain that "but." There may be so much of it external, on the surface. The necessity is that that shall come right down into the depths of our inner being, so that we know Him in the very substance of our being as the Resurrection, and the Life.

It is only as the Lord's people come to that position that they are constituted a vessel of His full Testimony, and that explains why He takes us now, as His children, through the depths, that we may so learn to know Him.

Whatever the direction the principle remains the same, whether for conflict, as with the hostile forces around, or service, in the meeting of our obligations, or in life, the coming to the fullness of the Lord's thought. The one governing law is "Him and the power of His resurrection"; knowing the risen life of the Lord.

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