

T. Austin-Sparks:

Reading: Eph. 1:3,20; 2:6; 3:10; 6:12; 1:6,9-10; 3:11,21.

In meditating on the subject of spiritual enlargement as seen in Paul's epistles, when we pass into this letter to the Ephesians we come into an entirely new realm. It is like passing from one world into another. In 'Corinthians' we find everything earthbound in a carnal and soulish way, and all the features which we find there are due to an earthliness of Christian life. In 'Galatians' we still find things earthbound, but this time in a religious way. When we pass into 'Ephesians,' the earthly ties are severed. The one governing word is "the heavenlies." It is a new realm with a new time factor. We have passed out of the earthlies into the heavenlies, and out of time into eternity. We want to understand as far as we can what that means.

The Limiting Effect of Things 'On the Earth'

We can, of course, conclude at once that if our horizons are pressed back so far and if that is our realm, it must surely mean spiritual enlargement. But how? If we want to interpret this word 'heavenlies' in a practical way, we find the key in verse 3 of the first chapter of the letter - "...hath blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ." It means that now, in this realm of the believer's life, spiritual values are pre-eminent. That is easily seen by a comparison with the two letters preceding. In 'Corinthians' spiritual values were not really pre-eminent. Personal interests governed there. Everything was judged from the standpoint of the advantage to the people concerned and of its effect upon them here in this life on the earth. Even spiritual things were pulled down, spiritual gifts were dragged into the realm of display with a view to making something of the people themselves.

In the Galatian letter the same thing is true, but from the standpoint of religion. All is brought down to earth. The Apostle put his finger upon the heart of the matter when he said of the Judaizers who were capturing the Galatian believers that they wanted to glory in their flesh (Gal. 6:13); that is, that they might be able to count heads and say, 'See how many converts we have! See how successful our movement is, how many people are joining us!' And he sets that over against the offence of the Cross. The offence of the Cross is that there is nothing to glory in in the flesh. All the glorying in the flesh, even in a religious way, is removed by the Cross. There is an earthliness even of religious life that wants to make of Christianity something here, seen and sentient. It is earthliness in another form. It is an earthly 'Church.'

Only Spiritual Value Counts with God

So here, when we come into the 'Ephesian' position, we are at once introduced to the pre-eminence of spiritual values. That is what 'in the heavenlies' means - how things are viewed from above; not what they look like and seem to be from the earthly standpoint, not how we weigh and measure them down here on this earth, but how they stand from heaven's viewpoint, how the ascended Lord looks at them. That is what governs all the way through this letter, at every point - spiritual value; not numbers, not what men call success, not all these things which are of such importance to people here, but just that which weighs with God; and that is spiritual value.

"Hath blessed us with every spiritual blessing," or, more properly and literally, "every blessing of the Spirit." We saw how Paul sought, with both the Corinthians and the Galatians, to get them away to the place where the Spirit was the great, dominant reality. Now here that realm is brought fully into view, where the spiritual matters more than anything else. So if we want spiritual enlargement, if we are really coming to that greater fulness, we shall have to forsake these earthly standards and judgments and interests, and get to the place where, after all, nothing matters but spiritual value. How far is a thing of value in the Lord's sight? We may take it as settled that only spiritual value counts with God.

Knowledge of Christ in Heaven the Measure of Spiritual Value

Christ is in heaven. We must know Him now only in a spiritual way, and no longer after the flesh. We do not know Him as men know one another on the earth. He truly said, "The world beholdeth me no more; but ye behold me" (John 14:19). For the moment, that raised a problem for His disciples: they could not understand Him. They said "What is come to pass that thou wilt manifest thyself unto us, and not unto the world?" They came afterward to understand that perfectly well. Christ can be known truly now only in a spiritual way; He is in heaven. So here again the great phrase is "in the heavenlies in Christ"; that is, the great spiritual values are Christ known in a spiritual way. Enlargement is a matter of knowing Christ. "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). Paul tried to make the Galatians see that. His epistles are full of the name

'Christ' - the Galatian epistle as much as any.

Earthly Features Must Not Govern

Now, the letter to the Ephesians begins - not only ends - with that: "...every blessing of the Spirit in the heavlies in Christ." That is, knowing Christ in a spiritual way is the way of spiritual enlargement; there is no other way in which we can truly know Him. So in 'Ephesians' we find this idea of the spiritual. The Spirit and 'spiritual' occur frequently in this letter. The earth touch, we have said, is severed. That earth touch seen in the Corinthian letter meant divisions - "I am of Paul, I am of Apollos, I am of Peter": parties, circles, sects, dividing the Body. That is the earthly aspect and the earth touch, and we always come into the realm of divisions if we touch one another on the earth level. In 'Corinthians' and in 'Galatians' it is - Jew and Greek, bond and free, male and female (Gal. 3:28). That is the earth touch, the divisions of the earthly life. But "in the heavlies" there is no earth touch, and that results in there being no earth man. Here in 'Ephesians' we come into touch with the heavenly man, Christ, and then with the "one new man." Here there is neither Jew nor Greek: it is not Jew and Greek brought together in fellowship; here there are not bond and free; here there is nothing of those divisions at all, but one new man in Christ. "He... made both one, and brake down the middle wall of partition... that he might create in himself of the two one new man" (Eph. 2:14). So that spirituality and heavliness mean that we meet all believers solely on the ground of Christ. We do not meet them for what they are in themselves, nor on the ground of what their connections are religiously - whether they belong to this or that, or do not belong to this or that. Those things do not come into consideration at all. We meet them on the ground of Christ, and the measure of our practical unity will be the measure of Christ. We go as far as we can with the spiritual measure of everyone; we make that the thing that governs.

Now, if we are to deepen and increase in fellowship we must grow in spiritual measure. Spiritual enlargement will result in the fuller expression of fellowship. That is the teaching of this letter.

Spiritual enlargement, then, is a matter of getting away from the old-man-level, 'the earthlies' in the Corinthian sense - and even religiously, in the Galatian sense - to 'the heavlies,' in this sense, that Christ known in a spiritual way is the ground upon which we live. Other things do not govern at all; it is the Lord Himself and the things that are spiritual which predominate with us. That is heavenly ground. When we get there, we are introduced to the realm of very considerable spiritual enlargement. There is so much more, of course, in this letter, but that is just a beginning.

Only Spiritual Values to Concern Us

Well now, what weighs with me most? Where am I living? Is it on this wretched, earthly ground of people and things down here, or is it on the ground of Christ? Is it spiritual life and spiritual values that matter? If we can get up there and say truly, 'It does not matter one little bit to me how a thing affects me personally; the question is - how much of the Lord is there in this? How much can there be for Him? I am not influenced by people's relationships down here; I take the higher ground of the heavlies and meet them, not as this, that or something else according to earthly designation, but I meet them on the ground of Christ, the one new man.' On that level there is nothing to impede spiritual enlargement. Spiritual measure is not a matter of anything here, even for the Lord - its success, its support, its maintenance - but just how much it is answering to the full thought of God in a spiritual way. That is what counts, and that is heavenly ground. We know so well that if people are more concerned with the maintenance of something for the Lord on this earth - keeping it going, building it up, making it successful - they are in a realm of spiritual limitation, and not until they are completely lifted out of such considerations with the one question - How far is this answering to the Lord's fully-revealed mind? - and are governed by that alone, can there be real progress and spiritual enlargement. Is it not true? And it is impressive that people who are really tied up with some thing - some organization, some piece of work, some society, some mission, some institution - even though it be for God in all sincerity - if that is their horizon, if that constitutes their world, they are limited spiritually. They go just so far spiritually and no farther. They are bound by their own earthly fences, the fences of that particular thing. Get away from things, out to the vast range of God's eternal, timeless purpose, and you find all fences are down and spiritual enlargement takes place. It is the only way.

So we come back. What is the Lord after? - not just good things for Himself, however good; He is after nothing less than that great summing up of all things in Christ (Eph. 1:10).