

T. Austin-Sparks:

“Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place?” (Ps. 24:3).

“Thou shalt bring them in, plant them in the mountain of thine inheritance, the place, O Lord, which thou hast made for thee to dwell in, the sanctuary, O Lord, which thy hands have established” (Ex. 15:17).

“And I saw, and behold, the Lamb standing on the mount Zion, and with him a hundred and forty and four thousand” (Rev. 14:1).

The great question of the ages, we have said, is this: “Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord?”. The answer is found, in the first instance, in those who are called “firstfruits unto God and unto the Lamb” (Rev. 14:4); in a representative company, symbolically (not literally but symbolically) said to be one hundred and forty-four thousand. We indicated the significance of that number in our previous meditation.

Of course, our first business must be to identify “the hill of the Lord”. It is not something new to most of you when I say that as there is spiritual history behind literal history in the Bible, and spiritual geography behind literal geography, and so on, so it is with this place called “the hill of the Lord”. What I mean is that in the Bible everything has a double meaning, and things which are seen, which are visible and tangible and palpable, are used to indicate a counterpart which is spiritual. The Bible is full of history, but you know how that history is all a portrayal of something spiritual that is going on. Events and happenings have behind them spiritual meanings. Even in the physiological realm of our bodies this is so. They are used to suggest and indicate spiritual principles. And when we come to the geography of the Bible, perhaps it is more patent than anywhere else. Think of all the place names which have not merely taken on a symbolism, but which do actually represent something spiritual that has happened or does happen there. For instance, “Bethel” (which means “the house of God”) is not just a name given to a place, but something happened there which had implicit in it all the spiritual meaning of the house of God. When Jacob came first to Bethel and laid down there that night to rest, the heavens opened. In his dream he saw a ladder, and upon it communications were set in operation between heaven and earth, and God above it began to speak to him, telling him of His covenant. If all that does not really mean to us the house of God in a spiritual way, well, we have not seen the house of God yet. For the spiritual house of God is surely this, that it is something which LINKS heaven and earth and through which the communications of God are brought to men. This implies that there are those on the earth who have an opened heaven and who have entered into the blessings of the covenant; and very much more than that. That is Bethel. It is not just a name; it means something spiritual which was borne out by the experience of a man. We could go on dealing with place names, showing that, while you have come upon a name, a place, you have come upon something more than that. You have come upon some divine thought, divine principle, divine law, something in the mind of God. When you get behind the thing seen you are encountering something which, though unseen, is eternal, mighty, tremendous. So that places, mountains, valleys, and all that have to do with geography, have a spiritual meaning in the Bible.

The Hill of the Lord — Christ in Absolute Ascendency

Here, then, is “the hill of the Lord”. We have to identify that hill, first literally and then spiritually. It does not take very long to do that because the Psalms almost open with the identity of the hill of the Lord. “Yet I have set my king upon my holy hill of Zion” (Ps. 2:6). “My holy hill of Zion” is, historically and literally, the hill of the Lord.

What, then, is Zion spiritually? Do you remember that that second Psalm was quoted right at the beginning of the church’s history? When the earthly forces set themselves in array against the Lord and against His anointed ones, the latter met in prayer and quoted that Psalm, and the place where they were assembled was shaken (Acts 4). The very shaking of heaven came into that place. What did it say? You have touched the holy hill of Zion! Where is that? The Lord Jesus is ascended to the right hand of the Majesty in the heavens. It is the place of absolute ascendency, victory, power. Who is Lord now? “The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord, and against his anointed... Yet I have set my king upon my holy hill of Zion”.

Zion, then, is not a place on the earth: Zion has now resolved itself into the absolute lordship of Jesus Christ at God’s right hand. Thus the apostle writes, “Ye are come unto mount Zion... the heavenly Jerusalem... the... church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven” (Heb. 12:22-23). It is no longer a place, it is a spiritual position. That is Zion, and we have identified the holy hill.

Who shall ascend? Who shall stand? You see, this is a present question. While the consummation of this lies at the end of the way, it is something which has a present bearing upon the life of the Lord's people. Let me say in fuller definition that Zion, or the holy hill of the Lord, spiritually embodies all that divine thought which the people of God will express when He has them, as He will have them, wholly according to His will. In other words—when God gets a people where He has ever determined to have them, He will have them in what is the spiritual counterpart of Zion—absolute ascendancy over all other powers.

Ascendancy—The Normal Outworking of Implanted Divine Life

That divine thought begins in a very simple way. It begins by the implanting and imparting of divine life.

“Glorious things of thee are spoken, Zion, city of our God;
He Whose word cannot be broken, formed thee for His own abode”.

The psalm upon which that hymn is constructed makes comparisons between other great cities and places of world fame. “I will make mention of Rahab” (that is, of Egypt) “and Babylon... Philistia, and Tyre, with Ethiopia”; and men were saying, “This one and that one was born there, and is proud of it”. But “of Zion it shall be said, This one and that one was born in her”. “The Lord loveth the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob... this one was born there” (Ps. 87). It is in birth that the beginnings of God's thought about Zion take place. By the receiving of divine life we have inherent in us all the power of this mighty spiritual ascendancy which in the end, if it is not thwarted, will bring into the throne.

I say that for this reason among others, that what we are talking about is not something extra to and altogether apart from the normal course of Christian life. It cannot be argued that to be a Christian and a simple disciple of the Lord Jesus, a lover of Christ, is one thing, but this is something else. Not at all! It is an entirely confused mind which thinks like that. This is the normal outworking of that life which every born-again child of God possesses, if that life is allowed to work out normally. If you stop short, if you do not go on beyond a certain point, if you become contented too soon, if you become turned aside, if you allow yourself to be prejudiced, disaffected, influenced by anything that prevents you from going right on, you have intercepted the normal course of the divine life which is in you. If you will accept all that is involved (and it is following the Lamb wherever He goes, which means suffering and sacrifice), if you will give the Lord implicit obedience, if you will trust Him where you cannot understand Him, if you will allow Him to do all that He wants to do with you, your normal course will be to arrive at the throne; that is, to come to absolute spiritual ascendancy. We are not seeking to put something extra upon Christians, but to say to Christians, “This is your birthright”.

We were speaking earlier about Jacob. To return to him for a moment: whatever there was about Jacob, he did see that in the birthright the place of ascendancy was found, and so it came to be that he gained the place of ascendancy. Eventually he became a prince with God, the father of the twelve tribes, the governmental body in God's electing thought, the fore shadowing of the hundred and forty and four thousand, the twelve times twelve a thousand times over. It is all implicit in the birthright. No one has any particular favouritism in the matter of the birthright. No one is elect to the birthright; that is, no one is elect to salvation. If we are elect, it is according to the PURPOSE of salvation. That is another subject. The point here is that it is right there in the gift of eternal life at new birth that the throne is implicit, that ascendancy is found. Well, it works out in that way, at any rate, and we must remember that this divine life is not something abstract, but personal; it is the Spirit of life Himself.

And what does the Holy Spirit do with a life in which He has a free, full way? Well, He never allows that life to drop down on to low levels without the one concerned knowing it. You know quite well, in the very simplicity of your relationship with the Lord Jesus from the beginning, that if you make a blunder, say or do something, look or feel something, that is on the lower level of the old life, you are made aware of it, and you are not happy until you put that right. As you go on further with the Lord, you become not less, but infinitely more sensitive. You suffer very much more over lapses the further on you go. You know with increasing intelligence what it means to grieve the Holy Spirit. Why? Because the Spirit is gravitating back to the place from where He has come, gravitating back in us, and the whole gravitation of a Spirit-governed life is upward. It is a test as well as a statement of fact. Are you gravitating thus? Is there a pull upward? Can you be happy and comfortable living a low-level Christian life? There is something wrong if you can. That is very simple. The very beginnings of this life of ascendancy are found in the gift of divine life, and the whole course is the outworking of that life. When we come (if we do by the grace of God come eventually) to that place of Rev. 14, it will not be because of any particular merit, but simply that the life has triumphed in us. So you see the consummation of that great thought and purpose of God is glory. The beginning is life, the end is glory.

But what is glory? It is the triumph of life. The body of our humiliation shall be made like unto the body of His glory (Phil. 3:21). How shall this be? Well, it is all by the Lord the Spirit. It is all by the inworking of His life, resurrection life; glory at the end where life is triumphant. That is said for this reason, that this is the normal Christian life; and the abnormal Christian life is that which acts by fits and starts, up and down, and can be content not to go right on. There is something wrong about that; something has interfered with the normal growth.

Here you see that Zion is really something that is planted in us by birth. You remember that other fragment from the Psalms in this connection — “In whose heart are the highways to Zion” (Ps. 84:5). It does not say, Whose feet are on the highways of Zion. It is something subjective: Zion is inside, and it represents a tremendous transformation or change.

Israel’s Failure — Egypt, Not Zion, in Their Hearts

Now we have to come back again and use our great illustration of Israel. Israel came out of Egypt and were ostensibly going toward that holy hill, but really they were not. You look for the reason why they took such a long time about it and made such poor progress, and eventually did not arrive at all. You ask for the explanation, and it is this, that, while they were out of Egypt, Egypt was not out of them. Something objective had been done, but nothing subjective. All the time in their hearts they harked back to Egypt. The world was still in their hearts, and that was the cause of all the trouble. When you have the highways of Zion in your hearts, you have not got the highways of Egypt in your hearts. Something has been done inside to supplant something else. It is the only way of eradicating anything from the heart. You have to supplant it, to put some greater power within; what Dr. Chalmers called in his famous sermon, “the expulsive power of a new affection”. The only way to expel the world is to have a new affection. “I will make mention of... Zion... this one was born there... All my fountains are in thee”.

This ascendancy takes its rise from the supplanting in our hearts of the world by Christ and all that Christ means. It was that again — and we find ourselves at every turn coming back to the great example of the apostle Paul — it was that which made him cry, even when so far on in the way, “I count all things to be loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord” (Phil. 3:8). That word “excellency” is interesting. It means “the ‘ascendancy’ of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord” — that this is above everything else: all things counted loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus. That kind of thing in the heart is the only way to get rid of all the rest.

Egypt Flatters Self — Zion Slays It

But the rest is so subtle, it does find so great a response in us. It is here, of course, that the enemy cunningly works to arrest spiritual progress. The world? “Oh yes”, you may say, “I have given my life to the Lord: I am born again, I have finished with the world, I am out and out for the Lord now. All my life, service and energy is for the Lord”. “Very well”, says Satan, “let us placard your name everywhere as a great witness for the Lord, and then you will begin to be made a lot of by organized Christianity!” It is all wrapped up under the guise of affording you a great opportunity, and you are altogether unaware of how nice it is, and how you like it. What has happened? That is not the way of the Lamb. What is the way of the Lamb? He “emptied himself” (Phil. 2:7) — “made himself of no reputation”, A.V. “He emptied himself”: the devil is out to FILL you. Since he could not fill you with the world, he is going to fill you now with the gratification of the natural life in the service of God. It will not live very long. It will spend itself, and it will, moreover, mean spiritual immaturity. It is not the way of the Lamb.

If we were to press this, we could expose that whole thing very thoroughly by a good deal of evidence. If the enemy cannot get us in one way, he will get us in another, and he has got many a young life by flattery, ruined many a powerful servant of God by popularity. Yes, he has brought him down from his excellency by deeply-laid devices in the way of fame, pushing on, bringing to the fore; getting into the limelight, giving a name. Spiritual life has gradually receded and the end has been tragedy. That is not fiction, that is a tragic fact. The way to Zion, the way to the throne, the way to spiritual ascendancy is the way of the cross, and the cross ever more deeply planted right down to the very roots of self-interest, self-gratification, self-pleasure, even in the things of God. In the end we shall be brought to the place where it is not the Lord’s things that delight us, but the Lord Himself alone Who is our life. So the whole scheme of the enemy is to make the work of the Lord so attractive, to offer the prizes, the spheres, the opportunities, and all that sort of thing. It is very nice, it is very pleasant, it answers to something in our fallen nature. That something has to pass through the crucible of the cross. It may be something legitimate, something God-implemented, something essential to the outworking of this

divine purpose, but it has been dragged into a realm of defilement.

Ambition Right If Selfless

You can call it what you like; aspiration, ambition, wanting to get on, wanting to rise. It is there in the constitution of man, and rightly so; God put it there. "Thou makest him to have dominion" (Ps. 8:6). That is not just official, positional. That is the fulfilment of some divine power at work in the very constitution of man that makes him feel he must rise, but it has been perverted. It is perverted by the great pervert, who himself was perverted by his own pride when he said, "I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High" (Isa. 14:14); and who came down to Eve and said, "Hath God said...? Why, God knows that in the day that you eat, you will have the root of the matter in you, you will not be dependent on God for your knowledge, you will not have to obey God, you will have it in yourself!" Adam and Eve fell to it, and the race fell with them, and from that day to this that holy thing of aspiration—shall we call it ambition?—that great power in us that makes us know we are born for a destiny, is perverted and tainted by self, by pride. So that a man has advanced far on the road to holiness who can never be caught along the line of flattery and popularity, to whom the siren charms and voices are as nothing, because he walks so humbly with his God, meek and lowly in heart. All the prizes and baubles have no attraction for him. I say that is in the HOLY hill of Zion. We are touching another thing now, how holiness is inherent in ascendancy. But that must wait.

It is not wrong to have ambition, to have aspiration, but it is wrong to have it actuated by personal interest and motive. That has to go through the crucible of the cross and be burnt out. Here is the paradox, the problem, the difficulty of a true Christian life: to be broken, emptied, humbled, reduced to nothing, and yet at the same time to have a fiery ambition. How reconcile these two things? I find it in Paul. With the exception of the Lord Jesus Himself, no man was more mastered by the spirit of ascendancy and dominion—shall we call it ambition, aspiration?—than he was, and no man was more selfless in it all. How he suffered at the hands of those who owed everything to him instrumentally! There is no personal thing here. He is the man who can write, "Love... seeketh not its own, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly—giveth itself no airs". All that is ascendancy; not just geographical location, but spiritual ascendancy. Oh, let us ask the Lord to put in us a passionate ambition for His glory, and that we may be kept purified by the cross so that our glory does not force its way in. That will need a lot of the grace of God.

Holy Ambition—To Attain to Zion

All this is the meaning of Zion, of spiritual ascendancy, and we have really to face its implications. As I have said before, it is a matter which has a very present application. I know I run the risk of being charged with spiritualizing everything in the Bible. However, what I am after is that which is eternal. Everything else will go. It may be a casket in which eternal jewels are deposited, but the casket will go. I am after the jewel. At the back of all the symbols and of all actualities there is something spiritual, and for me it is far more profitable to get to what is God's inner thought in things that He says, than it is to be only occupied with the thing said. You may take the book of the Revelation and deal with it historically if you like: you can take it on the futurist basis if you like; you can interpret it literally if you like; but it does not get you very far spiritually to do that. What we need is that spiritual life should be increased, and what I see as the grand issue of the book of the Revelation is a company standing with the Lamb upon mount Zion, whatever that may be. For me, interpreted in the light of all the Scriptures, it is not merely a time nor a location. It is the arrival at the end of God's thought in our redemption, coming to the fullness of the meaning of having been redeemed from this present evil world and translated into the kingdom of the Son of God's love, and reaching the place of highest usefulness to Him when time shall be no more. I suggest to you that it is those things that have very much more immediate spiritual value for us than such questions as whether or not the Jews are going back to Palestine.