

T. Austin-Sparks:

Reading: Numbers 7:1-84.

The first thing that becomes apparent from the record in this chapter is that the Lord's people, as represented by their princes - the princes of all the fathers' houses, you notice - are looked upon as a princely people. God's conception of His people is that, and He desires His people so to conceive of themselves. They are a princely people, a royal priesthood.

Princeliness: The Character of the Lord Jesus

What is princeliness in its real nature, when it is a true princeliness? Ultimately, fundamentally, it is that which takes its character from the Lord Jesus. We are very ready to extol the Lord Jesus, to acclaim Him and proclaim Him as King of kings and Lord of lords, to put Him in the highest place. We glory in the fact that "God highly exalted him, and gave unto him the name which is above every name" (Phil. 2:9). I trust that it can truly be said of every one of us, that that is our estimate of the Lord Jesus. If that is true, and He is to us Prince as well as Saviour, then surely we who bear His Name, and are of His family, over which He is Prince, should take our character from Him. It is God's thought, and God's will, that there should be about us something of the princeliness of the Lord Jesus.

(a) Spiritual Dignity

Princeliness is a very different thing in the spiritual realm from what it is in the temporal and the natural. We have already seen through this series of studies the great difference that there is in priestliness, in Levitical service, between what is temporal and what is spiritual: it is a different realm, a different kind of thing altogether. When it comes to the Lord Jesus and His princeliness, again we say that it is not just official, it is not just by appointment, it is not ecclesiastical or formal. It is spiritual and it is moral - for princeliness is pre-eminently a moral and a spiritual thing. If we take our character from the Lord Jesus, we shall not be mean, contemptible, petty, or 'little' people, or anything at all like that. That is not princeliness.

No, to take character from Christ means something noble, something fine, something big, great, honourable, dignified. You expect that of a prince, do you not? Even in the natural realm, you expect dignity in conduct, behaviour, presence. You lose all respect for a prince who is mean or contemptible.

(b) Spiritual Stature

Princeliness seems to speak, too, of stature. I expect these princes in Israel were men of physical stature, dignity of presence - men whose presence impressed. That is, everybody could look up to them - perhaps literally, as well as in other ways. Princeliness is stature, and stature in the Bible is always spiritually and morally a matter of the measure of Christ - just how much there is of Christ.

(c) Spiritual Wealth

It seems an anomaly for a prince to be poor. Here you find the princes were men of substance, men of wealth. They were people who had a competence, who had plenty, who had whereof to dispose. Not only were their own needs met and satisfied, but they had plenty to give away.

Now, this is not a mere artistic presentation of things, or exaggeration in words. This is exactly what the Lord wants His people, His spiritual Israel, to be. He wants big people, in the spiritual sense, people of stature, people of dignity. And I think, as I have already said in earlier messages, that that may well come down to very practical matters of our personal presence and appearance. We can so easily let the Lord down by our appearance, by our carelessness, by our behaviour, by the way we talk, and so on. 'Letting the Lord down' is only another way of saying - taking from the grandeur of Christ, instead of showing forth the excellencies of Him.

That covers much ground and includes many things. But what I am trying first of all to impress upon you is the Divine conception and idea of His people: that that is to be true of them, not only when they are together in meetings, but at home, at business, wherever they are. There should be something about them that is fine, something about them that is grand - not petty, not small; something about Christians which will lead people to look up to and speak highly of them; something about them that is honouring the Lord. We should be people,

too, of stature and people of substance - not going round, as we say, cap in hand, having to try to get something for our subsistence. No, we have plenty. I verily believe that, if we really come into what God wills for us, we shall be people of plenty. There will always be a margin; we shall never be at the end of things. Plenty! Plenty! Twelve basketfuls over all the time! It is the Lord's thought for His people that they should be spiritually wealthy. That should be true individually as well as collectively. This is what is represented here by the princes of the fathers' houses of Israel.

A Great Appreciation of the Cross

But what was it that particularly brought into view their princeliness? How is it that we are made to take note of them? What was it that gave them a place in the Bible? What was it that caused them to occupy all this long chapter of eighty-nine verses? In a word, what was it that showed their princeliness?

The answer is very simple, but very, very striking and searching. It was their appreciation of the altar, their estimate of the value of the altar: in New Testament terms, their appreciation of the Cross. If you think about it, you will see how true that was. Was the Apostle Paul a prince in Israel? Was he a man of stature? Was he a man of substance? Was he a man of dignity? Why? "Far be it from me to glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal. 6:14). It was his glorying in the Cross, his estimate of the value, the importance, the meaning, of the Cross. It is our apprehension of the Cross which reveals our spiritual measure. Measure always comes along the line of a very deep regard for the Cross of our Lord Jesus. It is the way of our enlargement; it is the way that makes a lot of room; it is the way of spiritual wealth. Despise the Cross, hold the Cross lightly, think little of the Cross, and you will become a very small person spiritually. These princes had a tremendous conception of the significance and value and importance of this altar which was being dedicated. I leave that with you to think about. The more you enter into the meaning of the Cross, as you really do in heart give an adequate estimate to the sufferings of God's Son, the greater will your spiritual life be, the more will you emerge a person of account, the more wealth will God lavish upon you.

Oh, the sweet wonders of that Cross
Where Christ my Saviour loved and died!

It is a tremendously enlarging thing to grasp, rightly and sufficiently, the meaning of the Cross.

A Spontaneous, Voluntary, Heart Expression

Now these princes had such a large appreciation of the altar that it required wagons to convey their appreciation. A wagon is a very large vehicle. It is not an ordinary little thing that you can carry in your hand. They did not want just a little bit of truck! Here are wagons, and here are these many wagon-loads expressing the large appreciation of the altar.

But note two other things about the wagon. All this was something for which, so far as we know, no prescription had been made, and, from the account, it almost looks as though Moses did not know what to do with it. He had nothing in the 'Blue Book' about this! God had said nothing about this sort of thing; there were no laws and regulations about what was to be done should a thing like this happen. Evidently Moses looked to the Lord about it, and the Lord said, 'Take it, receive it, turn it over to the ministry of the sanctuary'.

Here is something that is not by legal demand. This is a voluntary, spontaneous expression from the heart, something altogether outside of the book. This is princeliness, this is greatness: not just to do what we are expected to do and what is required of us and what is commanded to be done; not, 'Lord must I do this?' - but, 'Can I do it? Is there anything that I can do - in the book or out of the book?' That is the spirit of it. It was the spirit that prompted this offering that made it so princely, so grand, so noble.

A princely life is one that is not just doing because it must, or giving because it is expected to conform to the regulations, but a spontaneous life that 'goes the second mile'. It does not stop just at the set time, but looks for how much more can be done. There are some Christians - watch this, young Christians! - who talk like this: 'Must I give this up if I am going to be a Christian? Is this not allowed? May we not... this, that or something else - do this, go there? What is wrong with it?' That is so negative. Princeliness, if it is taken from the character of the Lord Jesus, never talks or argues like that, it says: 'What more can I do? Is there anything more that I can do for my Lord, who did everything for me?' You are not surprised that the Lord takes note of that sort of thing, and those people become the expression of His thought.

That is princeliness - the voluntary giving without any consideration whatever of whether it must be done. Can

we give like that? How grand it will be when we are all people whose worship is so lavish, so free, so spontaneous, that we so to speak do not know what to do with it all! Our worship is so little, so poor, instead of being a lavish pouring out of the heart. And in many other ways it is like that. May the Lord make us His princely people like this - large of heart, magnanimous of spirit: not for its own sake, but because we have come to see something of the greatness of what our Lord has done for us in His Cross. The Cross, rightly apprehended, is a wonderful delivering power from all littleness - from our poor, miserable, contemptible little selves.

A Covered Wagon

They were covered wagons. I do not know altogether what they may have implied from their standpoint, but I think I can see something at any rate in the spirit of it. Princeliness, real princeliness, makes not display. It does the large thing and never calls attention to it, never lets it be known or seen. Real princeliness is that kind of meekness and humility accompanying an uttermost outpouring for the Lord, without looking for admiration, or any return. An uncovered wagon with all this might have drawn attention, so that people might have said, 'Look what So-and-so is giving!' It is like a Harvest Festival: that used to be a great occasion for people to bring along the biggest cabbage, or the biggest bunch of grapes, to draw attention. 'Who brought that?' 'Oh, So-and-so!' The lesson of the covered wagon is: "Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth" (Matt. 6:3) - a real spirit of meekness; going, perhaps, further than many others, but covering it.

In this series of meditations, which we now conclude, we have heard much about the service of the Lord, what is service to the Lord, and the spiritual character of the servants of the Lord, but it all gathers up into this. The Lord is seeking a great people, in every spiritual and moral sense; not perhaps in the eyes of the world, but in the eyes of God. Sometimes the smallest and most insignificant person, naturally, can be somebody very princely, very precious, full of values to the Lord. We do not judge and estimate naturally, but always and only according to the measure of Christ. You may be a very small person naturally, either physically in stature, which sometimes produces a serious inferiority complex, or you may be small of gifts, small of resources; but you know the Lord Jesus attributed far greater stature to the widow who cast in her two mites than to those wonderful fellows who were displaying before everybody what they were giving. Stature is different in the sight of God from what it is in the sight of man.

No, you may not be of much account in any way naturally, but you can be something in the eyes of the Lord if the Cross has become a great thing in your life and in your heart, and its deep, full, rich meanings have come to be practical realizations in your life. I have no hesitation in saying these things, dear friends; they are true. Enlargement of life comes by the application of the Cross, the apprehension of the Cross. The more there is of the Cross, the larger your life. It sometimes seems like reduction, but - make no mistake - it is increase.

The Lord make us a princely people - in this sense, that we have so greatly seen, grasped, sensed, the wonder of His Cross that our hearts go out, leaping over all the regulations, to be able to bring to the Lord all that is possible through life and through service, the fulness of our hearts turning to the service of the sanctuary.