

**T. Austin-Sparks:**

There is a very old hymn called "Tell me the old, old story". When we have sung "Tell me the old, old story" so heartily, we are confronted with the most difficult thing that has ever been called for by angels and men. To put the story of Jesus and His love to music is to employ the whole range and compass of every note of every octave, and then to want more notes. It reaches the highest; it goes down to the deepest. It is the very range and compass of His Person and His work that show how great He is; so much greater greatness than all others. It is the universality of the Lord Jesus that is His supremacy. There is no language or tongue in all human speech into which that story cannot be interpreted, which cannot grasp something of its meaning. That has been proved, and is being proved continually - it compasses all language and all languages. Although it has taxed and over-taxed the greatest intellects of all the ages, it is enjoyed, appreciated and loved by the simplest and the most unlearned. It meets the problems and difficulties of the mature and the aged, and yet it is the delight of little children. Of all the various temperaments into which the human race is classified, there is no temperament that does not find in Him something to meet its own peculiar problems and demands. Jesus and His love are an ocean of the profoundest mysteries and treasures. He is a mine of inexhaustible wealth. In a word, it is going to take all eternity to reveal His fulness. That is what we are up against when we so easily sing: "Tell me the old, old story." It just cannot be told!

But it may be that in these chapters a little more of the light of that story will break upon our hearts. There is a phrase in the Word: "Thine eyes shall see the king in his beauty; they shall behold the land of far distances", and that twofold statement can quite truly, and rightly, be applied to Him. He is the King in His beauty; and He is also the Land of Far Distances.

To come into a living relationship with the Lord Jesus is to come, sooner or later, to the impasse of the incomprehensible, and we just have to say: "Lord, You are beyond me! Lord, I cannot comprehend; You are too much for me!" That, of course, on the one side, means difficulties, for it puts us into a difficult position in that we cannot trace Him, follow Him, and understand Him. But, on the other side, we would not have it otherwise; we would not have a "little" Christ whom we could comprehend and altogether understand with our little minds. No, He is beyond us altogether, and what you and I, as His people, are destined to come to if we go on with Him, is just this: that He is ever reaching farther and farther beyond us, and drawing us out beyond ourselves, beyond our resources of mind and will, yet drawing us on, and making us know that we have got to go on. We just cannot stand still; we have to go on.

Now, dear friends, the Bible rests upon one tremendous affirmation, upon a truth which it affirms in a thousand different ways, and that truth is this: that everything related to the great destiny for which man was created is bound up inseparably with the knowledge of Christ. You have two tremendous things there: the greatness of the destiny for which man was created - and the Bible has a very great deal to say about that. That destiny, that great divine purpose in creation, demands for its realization the knowledge of Jesus Christ; it is bound up with the knowledge of God's Son. Within that compass of divine purpose we have man's creation, man's redemption and salvation, man's transformation, man's glorification, and then man's eternal vocation. These are all features of the great purpose of man's creation and I repeat them: salvation, transformation, glorification, and eternal vocation and all that, rests upon the knowledge of Jesus Christ. None of it is possible without knowing Him.

We look at a little child from the day that it comes into this world, and the one thing the parents are watching for continually, and waiting for, is the sign of intelligence. For the normal development of a human life is marked by growing intelligence, that is, in the first place, the ability to identify objects. It is very simple, but very real, when, first of all, the parent is able to recognize that the child knows him or her - the child identifies. And so its development of its very life is marked by this growing intelligence, this ability to identify objects, and then to interpret and grasp their meaning. It comes so slowly, and yet it is there. To apply those recognized, identified objects to practical value, to turn them to account, to know that they mean this, and that they are meant for this or that; the application of their intelligence to practical needs or situations, these are the indications of normal development and it is along the line of growing intelligence.

If that is true in the natural, it is equally true in the spiritual. The mark of spiritual growth, the growth of the spiritual life, is this power to recognize the meaning of Christ; to identify Him in things; to interpret Him - the power to interpret Him and to explain Him; and then to apply Him to practical situations, our own and others. That is "knowing" the Lord. That is the way of spiritual growth to full manhood, to the fulfillment of the ultimate vocation. And let it be recognized at once that what is true in the natural is true in the spiritual in this sense - God created man with an object. A life has missed its way and purpose if it fulfils no vocation and if it becomes an end in itself. Vocation is the object, the end, of all life and all development. That is true in the spiritual life.

The Bible reveals progress toward eternal vocation, and essentially along the line of spiritual intelligence, or the knowing of Christ.

#### The pre-eminent factor in life

God has placed supreme importance upon this very basis. Hear His Word: "Thus saith the Lord, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might; let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth Me" (Jer. 9:23). Above all other things in which men do or may glory, God puts this, with His tremendous emphasis: Thus saith the Lord. The supreme thing with Him is to understand and to know Him.

We have read how the Lord Jesus put this matter in relation to the most vital thing, even that of eternal life, and there is no more vital thing than that. In one sense eternal life is the key to the Bible. "And this is life eternal, that they may know thee, the only true God, and him whom thou didst send, Jesus Christ" (John 17:3). Life eternal, with the Lord Jesus, is placed upon this basis of knowing Him. That man Paul, Paul the aged, with a long life of learning Christ, and of perhaps incomparable revelation of Jesus Christ, is now standing at the gate of eternity and crying, "Â...that I may know HimÂ..." You might say that that was the cry with which Paul entered into heaven. And alongside of that, you remember, he said: "I count all things to be loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord" (Philippians 3:8). Not to be learning, is to stop growing, for growing, is along that line. The knowledge of Christ is the beginning of salvation; the knowledge of Christ is the whole meaning of the Christian life; the knowledge of Christ is God's motive in all discipline and training. You and I find ourselves in those hands of the "Father of our spirits", who is putting us through a hard school, and on a difficult way. And the one question which should always be in our hearts is not "Why?" as to His dealings with us in a general sense, nor any murmuring, but: "What do you want me to learn by this? What is there of Christ that I am to understand by this means?" For, I repeat, all the dealings of God with us have but this one thing in view: our education as to Christ, the knowledge of Christ. The very essence of glory will be the knowledge of Christ. Perhaps that sounds a strange word, but it is not so difficult to understand. When at last we see in Him the answer to all our questions and our problems, and He becomes the answer to every cry of our need and heart, we see Him as He is, and He fills all the vacuum of our longing, that will be glory. It is so now in the smallest ways, is it not? If, after a very difficult time when we have been brought through deep and terrible suffering, we have our eyes open to see something of Christ that meets our need, that is glory! He becomes our glory. Glory is not just something of an external, shining radiance - it is a state of heart, it is full satisfaction, full gratification, and possession of a full explanation and understanding. That will be wonderful! So the knowledge of Christ will be the very essence of glory.

But having said all that, mark you, this is not, in the first place, a knowledge in the reason, nor the satisfying of the natural mind and intelligence. This knowledge of Christ is essentially, in the first place, spiritual knowledge. It is what we might call "life-knowledge". It means life; it brings life; it is life; we know by life. We may not yet be able to interpret it in human language, even to our own satisfaction, or be able to explain it, but we have come into a knowledge of the Lord which has brought life and which is life. "This is life ... that they may know." This kind of knowing is life-knowledge and is altogether deeper than natural intelligence. We do not say, in the first place, that now we know because the thing has been explained. We say: "I know because that meets my heart need, because something has happened in me through that. It has brought me into life." That is spiritual knowledge.

And it is by way of experience. The Lord's school of instruction, training, teaching, is not to tell us things, or to write them in a book for us to study and memorize, and then say: "We know now!" This is not a manual education at all. It is the education, the knowledge, that comes by experience, and experience simply means that something has been done in us by a certain process. We know in that way. We know the Lord in our constitution, and how much better it is to know Him constitutionally - that is, in our being. He has become a part of our being, and not just something explained to our minds.

That is the way in which we learn Christ. It is very practical, deeply practical.

#### Christ, the embodiment of heavenly order

That is all by way of leading up to our present particular consideration. You will realize, in the light of this little that has been said, that Christ is many-sided, vari-sided. He is far too great to be comprehended, though we spent all our days trying to do so. And we can only look at Him from time to time from particular standpoints.

In the light of the situation in the world, and in the church, and churches, I have been very greatly exercised about one thing. I have put it aside as being too difficult, but I am compelled to face it. It is concerning divine order. Of all the ways in which Christ is to be known unto life and unto growth, there is one way in the Word of

God which, we might be tempted to say, is supremely important - though we could say that of every way in which He is to be known. However, that one way is this: To rightly understand Christ is to see that He relates to a heavenly and eternal order of things.

That word "order" lies right at the back of everything in the Bible. Everything that the Bible has to say to us is related to an eternal order that God intended to obtain in this universe. And His key to that order, without which nothing of all His glorious purpose is possible, is Christ. The Person of Christ is the very embodiment of all the principles of a universal order. If we could comprehend, discern, understand and know Christ, we should see that in that one universal Person are gathered up all the laws of a great heavenly order.

We are told that "in Him, through Him, by Him, and unto Him were all things created". His creative activity at work is marked by a marvellous order, and we shall say more about this as we go on. Creation, as it comes from His hand, as it is projected by Him, is a marvellous system of coordinated forces and objects in a wonderful relatedness and harmony. Everything is in its own place, everything is in its own time and everything has its own function. And so you could go on, but, I repeat, we will come back to it.

His redemptive work, the whole of the redemptive work of the Lord Jesus has this one thing in mind: the recovery of a lost order. He stands in His Person, in His creative work, and in His redemptive work, related to this whole matter of an eternal, heavenly order.

Let me pause here with a parenthesis lest you should be as near despair as I have been in this matter.

Everything seems positively to contradict what I am saying, especially concerning the Holy Spirit; that is, that the Holy Spirit, who is the custodian of the whole purpose of God concerning His Son, is occupied with this matter pre-eminently - a heavenly order; the will of God as it is done in heaven to be done eventually on this earth in like manner. If you want to know the meaning of the Holy Spirit - and this will perhaps be a suggestion to you if you turn again to the Word - the answer is here. The Holy Spirit is meticulous about order, He will not overlook disorder. For divine order to be overlooked, violated, ignored or frustrated, is to perpetuate the loss, the suffering, the disappointment and the despair of the creation, for the hope of the creation lies in the direction of God having it according to His order. This is the matter with which the Holy Spirit is supremely concerned.

You might well interject: "Is that really true, seeing that things are as they are, everywhere and in everything?" The answer is twofold. Firstly, the fact is proved by the condition. Where the divine order has been violated, a condition arises which clearly indicates arrested maturity and a limitation of spiritual measure. It shows that what could and should have been, and what God intended, has been missed and lost. There may be the illusion - the seemingly pleasant illusion - of a false liberty and freedom to do as you like, but, in truth, things are less and other than God meant. The New Testament includes for our instruction for all time a document which is the classic on immaturity due to disorder. It is the First Letter to the Corinthians. The situation is summed up in a sentence: "I could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, as unto babes in Christ. I fed you with milk, not with meat; for ye were not yet able" (3:1,2). Then there follows the explanation of that arrested growth. Twice the apostle uses the word "for", meaning "because", "for these reasons", and the reasons? disorder. The rest of the whole letter is occupied with the disorders and the apostle's labour to correct them. It would be quite difficult to find in the New Testament a stronger proof of this fact that spiritual maturity is governed by divine order.

The second thing to include in our judgment of things is that eternity is governing this matter. While the Lord wants as much as can be of heavenly order in time, especially in the church, the churches and the individual, and there can only be limitation of Christ in each if this order is ignored, violated and disregarded (undoubtedly this explains the poor level of Christian life), it will be in eternity that measure will be the criterion of position and vocation. The apostle tries to say something about this eternal difference in glory and position hereafter in chapter 15.

We may be responsible for the upsetting or contravening of God's order and seem to get away with it, but no Christian believes that what we do in this life is the end. We have always to reckon with Romans 14:10 and 2 Corinthians 5:10. The apostle includes himself - "we ... all".

So eternity bears down upon time, and time is revealed in eternity. When God's Kingdom comes, it will be perfect order!

Now we return to our main line: God is a God of order. But there is a personal evil intelligence in this universe

who is God's archenemy and, as such, is the instigator of all disorder. He is called "the god of this world" (or age) and "the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience" (what an enlightening phrase - "children of disobedience"). The hall-mark of all satanic rule and influence is disorder. That rule is rapidly moving to its fulness and final judgment. The test of the measure of Christ is spiritual order under His government.

Important as a fuller consideration of this matter is, so as not to overload you at one time, I will break off for the time being by reiterating the four main points:

1. God is a God of order;
2. Satan is the instigator of disorder;
3. Christ in Person and work is the embodiment of the divine order;
4. The church is the elect vessel in which and through which that divine order is to be manifested and administered in the ages to come.

We might add that God's disciplinary work with us is with a view to measure and position in the ultimate order.