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by T. Austin-Sparks

"Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things that were heard lest haply we drift away from them.", Hebrews 2:1

If you know anything about this letter at all, you know that it is the great letter of spiritual crisis. The writer compares what he has to say with the crisis of Israel at Kadesh Barnea where they came after so long a period of instruction, to the point where it was all to mature into the realization of its purpose or all to fade out so far as they were concerned and they miss it all. This writer gives quite a lot of his message to that particular application. Indeed we would all agree that that was a very great crisis in the life and history of Israel. And this letter really circles round a spiritual crisis comparable to that.

As you know, there is here throughout, the blending of two dominant notes; one of warning, the other of exhortation. Nine times in the letter we have this warning note: Â“LestÂ”. Lest... it begins in the verse that we have just read, Â“Lest haply we drift awayÂ” and then it goes right on to chapter twelve. The other note which is struck ten times through the letter is Â“Let usÂ”. Â“Let usÂ… LestÂ”. ItÂ’s not our intention to trace the warning and the exhortation through the letter but just to note the fact that it is a crisis which continually arises in the history of the LordÂ’s people. It arose as we have seen with Israel in the wilderness. Here, quite evidently, it had arisen at the time of the writing of this letter; a very serious crisis indeed for those to whom the letter was written. And itÂ’s the kind of crisis that arises from time to time and it just amounts to this: taking this first verse of chapter two, there has been a deposit, there has been much given, the Lord has revealed Himself to His people. Now, after a period, a sufficient period, a period of probation and of testing in relation to that, the question arises: Are we going right on into the full meaning and value and realization of all that He has given or are we going to drift away, to fail to enter in? It's something that the Lord presses periodically. It came with Israel after forty years of testing in the wilderness. ItÂ’s a point of interest that most probably this letter was written about forty years after the Lord Jesus commenced to present all that we have here in chapter one, in the incarnation in His presence in this world.

It was a crisis and the crisis had two particular points, one, as to all that the Lord had given which He would never allow to just pass without some very real effort, some entreaty, some warning that all that He meant could be missed. The other, the fact that very near to the time of the writing of this letter was IsraelÂ’s own great crisis. If the letter was written as we have suggested, somewhere about the year 60AD or in the sixties, we know that it was 70AD when Israel and Jerusalem were completely shattered and scattered over the earth by the Roman destruction of their city, their country. And their temple and all that it represented, the synagogues - these were to be finished. And now the test would be, what of the spiritual value of it all? Take away their meeting places and their public meetings and their public ministries and all that upon which they depended so much externally; remove it all! That was imminent. What remains? The Holy Spirit had these two things in mind in directing the writing of this marvelous letter. It was indeed a great crisis. Who is to say that that on the second point will not be repeated worldwide as it is taking place in quite a large part of the world today? The Lord may know of a day not far away when that will spread and all those things which are the externals of Christianity, upon which Christians depend, will be swept away and no longer available. WeÂ’ve had a little touch of it in our lifetime, many Christians have in this very country, and it could be very much more so and very quickly, that crisis may be looming upon the near horizon.

So this letter is indeed a letter of crisis in both ways. We ask what was the cause or what were the causes of this crisis? On the spiritual side, firstly, I think there's no doubt about it, it was the cost of the way that these Christians had embarked upon and had been called upon to follow. You read the letter again and you will see the suggestions or the indications that it was because the way was proving so hard. They had started... started upon the heavenly way, partners in a heavenly calling, they had taken a position with Christ. That position is hinted at at the end of the letter, Â“Let us go to Him without the campÂ”. To be outside of the religious camp, outside of the popular camp, outside of the traditional camp, is a

hard place and a hard way. They had taken a position with the Lord but were finding that it was a very testing way indee d. They were being tested on every point in every possible way. It was a hard way. A hard way. Reference is made to w hat they suffered as they took that position.

Now, this suffering came largely from without. We donÂ't know where these believers were, whether they were in Jerusa lem or in Rome; thereÂ's argument for both, but we can very well imagine that if it were in Jerusalem they were right up against a very, very severe testing of their position spiritually. They were in the place where the Lord Himself was crucifi ed, the place where Stephen had been martyred, where the believers had been scattered. If they were in Rome, it was o nly quite recently that Claudius had issued his edict against the Christians and they had been expelled and scattered an d martyred. Whatever it was, it came from the outside in the beginning and it was a hard and costly way, but it is signific ant to note that before weÂ're at the end of this letter, the writer (the Holy Spirit through the writer) speaks of all this suff ering as the child training of a father. Â"My son despise not thou the chastening, the child training of the Lord, for whom t he Lord loveth He chasteneth...Â" and so on. Their sufferings may have come from devil-driven men, from the very devil himself, and yet theyÂ're in the hands of a Father, Father has hold of those sufferings for the training of His children. Th atÂ's impressive! But it doesnÂ't altogether ease the situation to know that... the sufferings are still the sufferings wherev er they come from and whatever their nature is and even if the Lord has hold of them theyÂ're still sufferings. And becau se of this costliness of the way, these believers were losing heart, becoming discouraged, and the crisis of their going on arose. Hence this tenfold repetition: Â"let us, let us, let us go onÂ".

Perhaps also in addition to that, it was occasioned by some disappointment that the LordÂ's coming was so long delaye d. I think that is hinted at, at one point at least, where it says, Â"Yet a little while and He that cometh will comeÂ". They w ere evidently a bit disappointed that all the promises of His coming and the assurances that He was coming soon had no t matured and He delayed His coming. It was a real test of faith and patience over that. We may know something about t hat too.

Sometimes, you know, it loses its charm and its helpfulness to be told the Lord is coming, you say, "Well weÂ've heard t hat for so long and so often and thatÂ's what people have looked for in every age and He hasnÂ't come yet". The hope f ades. Well, it began then. It began then and they were disappointed and, because of that disappointment, inclined to let go instead of go on.

There are hints also in this letter that the crisis was occasioned by the deceitfulness of the soul. I think chapter 4 verse 1 2 hints at that: Â"The word of God is quick and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the dividing of soul and spiritÂ". The deceitfulness of the soul... I think that will be borne out in what we have yet to say. You know ou r own souls can lead us astray. Our own soul desires and ambitions and conceptions and what we feel and think ought t o be. ThereÂ's a contrast in this letter between a realm of Christian life in the soul and a realm in the spirit. I think we co uld immediately, almost immediately, take that up for a minute or two.

The nature of this crisis... there are the causes, what was the nature of it? That, I think mainly, if not entirely, is a matter of contrasts. Contrasts... a new era had come in. A new economy or order had been introduced with Christ and now, the changeover was the change, the tremendous change, from the earthly to the heavenly. With the Son of God from heave n, there had come in the heavenly order and from that time onward, the old earthly order of the things of God, as we hav e in the old economy of the Old Testament, ceased.

I donÂ't think, dear friends, that we, or Christians at large have yet grasped the tremendous, the immense significance of the martyr Stephen. You know that he was a young man full of faith and full of the Holy Ghost, who did mighty things an d then was martyred. Have you studied StephenÂ's discourse? Have you seen that in that discourse, right there in Jerus alem under the very shadow of the great temple and all its system of many centuries, right there, Stephen simply wiped off the slate, the whole of the Old Testament regime! Â"God dwelleth not in temples made with handsÂ" said he. Say tha t over against the temple at Jerusalem and see what youÂ're going to meet!

In that discourse Stephen clearly declared that all that earthly system was finished with, all finished with, and a new hea venly system had come in. And the Lord put His seal upon that as he was passing from the earth himself, he saw the he avens opened and the Son of Man seated at the right hand of God. The only occasion after Christ Himself in the New Te stament where that title occurs of Jesus, Â"Son of ManÂ" - the Man is at GodÂ's right hand. Everything now is heavenly; itÂ's passed from earth. But what a testing position is a heavenly position! ItÂ's a crisis! It creates a crisis, itÂ's the very essence of a crisis: Â"Pull that down to earth, have something here, something on this earth, have something here, aban don that heavenly position, (that heavenliness by which those who so speak, mean that which is so abstract and unreal), letÂ's get down to earth, to reality!Â" That was the nature of this crisis: the contrast between the heavenly and the earthl

y, and they were at the point of leaving the heavenly for the earthly. Great warnings are connected with that and all the e xhortations, Â“let us go on, let us go onÂ”... The contrast between the tangible and the spiritual. The soul wants somethi ng that it can take hold of, can manipulate, can grasp! That is the soul, to have something tangible... and all this talk abo ut the spiritual and spirituality, how "unreal" it is... ThatÂ’s the crisis, is it?

With the coming into this world of Christ, the whole thing changed: not in this mountain, not in Jerusalem but in Spirit, in Spirit and in Truth from this time the whole thing is a spiritual thing. But how they longed for the thing that was here! To b e grasped... thatÂ’s a crisis. The contrast between the temporal and the eternal. Do you see how in this letter, and oh do read it again with these things in mind, how in this letter there is always the forward look, the look to the end.

You come to that great chapter of faith, chapter 11, itÂ’s the onward-looking faith, itÂ’s still onward, "let us, let us, look of f, let us run", is the great summary of it all; itÂ’s still onward, it's still before us! The eternal is the thing to govern. This life and all that is here is not the whole by any means. ItÂ’s all unto something that lies in eternity. With Jesus Christ the eter nal has invaded time and the Church is taken out of time into eternity. We belong to eternity but the soul wants it now, n ow! The only, the only place for Â“nowÂ” in this letter is that now is the last hour of time. Now, today, is the acceptable ti me, this is the last hour of time, that is the only "now" here. It is the eternal that is everything. But how difficult for our sou ls to let go the "now"... the present, for the eternal. WeÂ’re not made like that. Our whole being says, "LetÂ’s have it now , we must have it now!" ItÂ’s not natural for us to live for an unknown future - if thatÂ’s the right way to put it - the contras t between the visible and the invisible. Of Moses this writer says he endured as seeing Him who is invisible. Oh, but we must see, we must see it, our soul says that, our whole nature says we must see it, we must see it today, we must see it here, we must see it! There's something that our eyes can see, can behold! In other words, something that we can grasp with our physical senses.

This letter is constructed upon the principle of the invisible. They in the old dispensation had it all visibly, they had an ear thly tabernacle and priesthood and all that belonged to them, but now, the reality is in heaven, itÂ’s not seen! That was b ut a shadow, the reality is unseen, but itÂ’s far more real! But it's unseen, and thatÂ’s the test of the soul. IÂ’m sure you'l l know the meaning of this.

Well, all this constituted this crisis of whether they were going to choose this or that, the one or the other. Go back to so mething earthly from the heavenly, to something tangible from the spiritual, to something temporal from the eternal, som ething visible from the invisible. And it is quite evident I think, in this letter before youÂ’re through, that a division was co ming about between these believers. They were dividing into two camps. That is the point of the exhortation "forsaking n ot the assembling of ourselves together as the manner of some is". Some were saying, "WeÂ’re not going on with that a ny further" and they were having their own meetings and their own circle and not going on, not going on in this way. A di vision was taking place; two companies. Here were those who had seen the heavenly calling and the heavenly vision an d were going on with it; here were those who, if they had seen it, were letting it go, were drifting away from it. And what a forceful word that is! It has a nautical meaning in the original, as you know. ItÂ’s the picture of a ship approaching its mo orings on the current and missing its moorings and drifting away and onto the rocks. Lest we come up to this and miss it and drift away and as Israel at Kadesh Barnea were wrecked, we should be wrecked. ItÂ’s a warning, itÂ’s an exhortatio n.

It surely does, dear friends, touch us in our own individual lives and it touches us as a company of the LordÂ’s people. It defines very much for us, but may we all hear not only the warning, yes the warning, but the constant note of exhortation , Â“let us fear, let us go onÂ”. The Lord help us.