

T. Austin-Sparks:

Reading: 1 Samuel 4:10-11, 17-22.

"And delivered his strength into captivity, and his glory into the adversary's hand" (Psalm 78:61).

We have been occupied with the greatness and glory of Jesus Christ as represented in the ark of the testimony. Amongst the various titles of this ark we noted that one is 'the ark of his glory'. We also noted that the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews speaks of Jesus Christ as the effulgence of God's glory, and one of the names of the Lord Jesus is 'the Lord of glory'. Here, in our last consideration of this matter, the ark is called 'the ark of glory', for, when the ark was captured by the Philistines, it is said: "The glory is departed from Israel."

Although there is very much more to be said about the history of the ark than we have said, we are going to finish this consideration where we began - with the glory of Jesus Christ, and once again the ark will be our illustration.

We must notice that there is one word which covers the whole history of the ark: it is always the ark of life. Wherever you touch it in its right place, in one way or another you touch life.

Look at what was in it! There we have life revealed in three ways, or, I should say, there we have the testimony of life revealed in three ways. The first thing in the ark was the Word of God, and God said that His people should live entirely by His Word, and be governed by it: "Man doth not live by bread only, but by every thing that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord doth man live" (Deuteronomy 8:3). The Word of God was intended to save people from death, and to be their life, so the testimony of Jesus is the testimony that He is the living Word of God, that is, that in Him all the mind of God has been revealed for His people. "The word of the Lord abideth for ever" (1 Peter 1:25). It is the word of eternal life, and that is one aspect of the glory of Jesus Christ. He has brought to us in His own Person the revelation of God's mind, and in that way we are to find our life. How often, in a time of trial and difficulty, we have gone to the Word of the Lord and in the Name of the Lord Jesus we have made that Word ours, and it has been our salvation and our life - "For all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him, Amen, unto the glory of God by us" (1 Corinthians 1:20, A.V.).

Looking again into the ark - and, thank God, we may look into the ark now! - we see the testimony to the living provision of God for His people. There was a golden vessel with manna in it, testifying to how God met the needs of His people in the wilderness and thereby saved their life. God has made full provision, in our Lord Jesus, for all our need to be kept alive.

And the third thing in the ark was Aaron's rod which budded and brought forth fruit. Do you remember how it came about that that rod was put in the ark? There were certain men in Israel who said to Moses and Aaron: "Ye take too much upon you, seeing all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them: wherefore then lift ye up yourselves above the assembly of the Lord?" (Numbers 16:3). They were disputing the priesthood of Aaron, so God said: 'We will answer this dispute. Let a man out of every tribe of Israel bring a rod, write his name on it, and then let them all be laid up in the house of the Lord overnight, together with Aaron's rod.' You know, things don't usually bud, blossom and bear fruit in the dark. They really do need the sun! However, God made this test in the most difficult situation. He said: 'The man whose rod is found in the morning to have budded and blossomed is the one whom I have chosen.' When morning came Moses went in to look at all these rods. Eleven of them were dead, and only one was alive. The strange thing was that all the seasons were represented in that one rod! Not only was there blossom, but there were also buds and there were fruits. When God answers a question He answers it thoroughly! That rod was Aaron's. You notice what happened: the others died, under the judgment of God, but the house of Aaron lived, and in this way God signified who was the living high priest. The high priest is the one whom God raises from the dead and makes abundantly fruitful. The work of the priest is salvation, and he is the mediator between God and man.

We are here because Jesus "ever liveth to make intercession for us". And so, in the Lord Jesus, there is the testimony of life in relation to the revealed will of God, life in relation to God's full provision for us here, and life as our High Priest Saviour.

We move from that to the Jordan again, and you will recall how the ark, moving into the bed of the Jordan, made the waters withdraw. The waters at that season were overflowing all the banks, and all that overflowing testimony of death was destroyed when the ark moved into the bed of the Jordan. We can say that in that ark death was swallowed up by life. The ark destroyed the power of death, and the people were saved from death in

all its fullness. Here we have the glory of life overcoming death, and that is the testimony of Jesus. That is His glory.

Life comes because Jesus is glorified and the glory of the Lord Jesus destroys death. That is the great testimony of what our Lord has done in His Cross. He is risen from the dead and cries: "I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death" (Revelation 1:18) - 'The authority of death is in My hands.' "Through death he might destroy him that had the power of death" (Hebrews 2:14). He came to bring "life, and incorruption to light" (2 Timothy 1:10). And that is the ark in the Jordan.

We move on with the ark to Jericho, where we have seen all the powers of evil represented. The seven times round the city represented the seven-fold victory of the Lord Jesus over the evil powers, the number seven being the number of spiritual perfection. In His resurrection Jesus has completely overthrown the authority of Satan. So at Jericho we see the glory of Christ's power over all the evil forces in this universe, and "this is the victory that hath overcome the world, even our faith" (1 John 5:4). "By faith the walls of Jericho fell down" (Hebrews 11:30). The Lord teach us how to stand firm in faith when the enemy is trying to demonstrate his power, and to stand firm in faith believing that the enemy is going to have to give way because Jesus has fully conquered the powers of evil. This is the glory of the power of Jesus Christ over all the power of the enemy.

From Jericho we move to Ai, and this looks like a contradiction of all that we have just been saying. The ark is there at Ai, but instead of victory there is defeat. Is that a contradiction? Is it the defeat of the ark or of the Lord's people? Is this the defeat of the testimony of the ark itself? Does this really speak of the glory departed? No, this is only another aspect of the glory. It is the testimony to the glory of holiness. The story of Ai begins with a little word: 'But'. There is the great story of victory at Jericho on one side, on the other side is the defeat at Ai, and in between is this little word 'but': "But the children of Israel committed a trespass" (Joshua 7:1). The whole story of Ai centres in that little word 'but'. It is really a testimony to holiness, and how very holy is this ark! To violate that holiness is to bring defeat. When the sin was judged and put away, victory was restored. There is no glory where sin governs, but there is glory when sin is judged and put away. Holiness and life are inseparable.

It is a long time before the ark is mentioned again, perhaps three hundred years, and it is more than that when we come to this first Book of Samuel. Here we have this terrible story that we have read: the ark captured by the Philistines and taken into their country. You see, this is a long story of spiritual decline. I have often said that the most terrible book in the Bible is the Book of Judges, and as you go through all that long period you see how the spiritual life of the people of God was going lower and lower. That leads up to this story of the ark being captured by the Philistines, and the old man, Eli, dying after judging Israel for forty years. As representing the whole people, he is a pathetic picture of spiritual weakness and blindness. Eli was physically blind, and when Samuel was born it says that "there was no open vision" (1 Samuel 3:1). Eli was a type of the spiritual condition of the whole people, and because of the spiritual decline this terrible thing happened: "The glory is departed from Israel."

But we are not going to dwell on the negative side, though we could say a great deal about how glory goes out when the spiritual declines. It is always like that. If the spiritual level goes down, the glory goes out. We shall come back to that, but we will keep on the positive side.

Now note exactly what it says. It does not say that 'there is no more glory'. The glory may have departed from Israel, and it may have gone into the hands and the country of the Philistines. Be that as it may - but the Philistines are going to discover that this thing is not dead. They put the ark into the house of their god, Dagon, and had a great celebration, spending the evening and the night rejoicing. They had a night of feasting and singing, and said: 'Dagon is greater than the God of Israel.' They took the glory from Israel and gave it to Dagon. Well, so much the worse for Dagon! When they got up the next morning and went to the house of Dagon, they found that he had fallen on his face before the ark. If it were not so serious it would be humorous. Think of having to lift up your great god after he had fallen on his face and stand him up again! Jehovah has never needed that! However, they got round poor Dagon, lifted him up and put him on his feet again. They were having to have some second thoughts about this matter! They went away, and when they came back the next day they found that Dagon had fallen down again. But this time he had not only fallen down - his head, his hands and his feet were off. Poor Dagon! But the glory has not been destroyed. The testimony of Jesus still holds good, and if the Lord's people are not living in the good of that testimony the enemy is being made to know all about it.

I believe that the Philistines are a type of rationalism. They were always trying to look into Divine things with

their own minds. They took hold of the ark as uncrucified men, and are always called 'the uncircumcised Philistines'. If you look into the second chapter of the Letter to the Colossians you will see that Paul interprets circumcision as being the effect of the Cross. We will read verses 11 and 12:

"In whom ye were also circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands, in the putting off of the body of the flesh, in the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with him in baptism, wherein ye were also raised with him through faith in the working of God."

So circumcision is a type of the death, burial and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and this word says that baptism is the testimony to that.

Therefore the uncircumcised Philistines were men who knew nothing about the Cross, and yet they were always trying to get hold of the things of God and look into them as uncrucified men.

Now if, as I have said, the Philistines were a type of the rationalists of our time, it is interesting to see what is happening. I will give you an illustration.

I usually have a book beside my bed at night so that I can read before I go to sleep. One night I went to my bookshelves, looked along the books, and saw a book that I bought fifty years ago. It gave an appreciation of the lives of some of the great theologians. I opened the book at the chapter about a great modernist theologian of fifty years ago, a man who did not believe in the inspiration of the Bible, nor in the deity of the Lord Jesus, but believed in a lot of other things of the new theology, as it was called. That man got a great name in his time. The writer of this book said: "Now the teaching of this man is the teaching of the new age. It is going to change the entire belief of the Christians. It has come to stay, and everyone will have to accept it." 'Well,' I said, 'that is enough of that!' and I put the book back into the cupboard. A little while afterward I went to find another book. This book was written by one of the great theologians of our own time, and he started by saying: "No reputable scholar of our time will believe the theology of fifty years ago. It has gone for ever."

You see the big change? The testimony stands. Let it go into the hands of the Philistines, and the Dagon of intellectualism will come down on his face sooner or later. The glory may go away from the Lord's people, but it does not lose its power. The glory of Jesus Christ still stands.

Now I must come to an end, and leave several other things.

We come right over to 1 Chronicles 16. David is on the throne at last. After all the troubles of his past life, he is now enthroned as king, and his first thought is to bring the ark to Jerusalem.

What a chequered history this ark has had! How many enemies have been against it! What various conditions it has known in the Lord's people! What difficulties it has come through! But at last it is in the house of God, and the last thing about it in the Old Testament is this:

When the ark came to rest in the house of God the glory of God filled that house. That had been reached of which the Apostle Paul spoke, as he looked forward to the end of the testimony on this earth: "Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus unto all generations for ever and ever" (Ephesians 3:20,21).

That is the testimony to the glory of Jesus Christ. It goes through all these sufferings, sorrows and adversities. It sees the spiritual life of God's people rising and falling. It sees the powers of this world trying to take its glory away, but after the long, long story, when perhaps sometimes we might tremble for the ark of God, for the greatness and glory of Jesus Christ, it will come to rest at last in the House of God, and the glory will be in the Church by Jesus Christ unto all ages for ever and ever.

May the Lord keep us faithful to His Son! When the testimony is in adversity, passing through troublous times, and it seems that the enemy has prevailed, may we abide faithful to the Lord Jesus, and His glory will be in the Church for all ages for ever and ever. The testimony of the ark is a true representation of the history of the Lord Jesus. All the forces of this universe are against the testimony of Jesus, but the Word of God shows that in the end that testimony is going to triumph. "If we suffer, we shall also reign with him" - when our Greater David brings the ark into the House of God at last.

If we cannot understand all that has been said with our minds, may the Lord give us a greater impression of the

The Ark of Glory

greatness and glory of the Lord Jesus Christ!