

T. Austin-Sparks:

Will you read with me from the first chapter of the book of the Revelation. Book of the Revelation, chapter 1. Read the first clause and then pass to verse 4:

"The Revelation of Jesus Christ... John, to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace to you, and peace, from Him which is, and which was, and which is to come; and from the seven Spirits which are before His throne; and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the first born of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. Unto Him that loveth us, and loosed us from our sins in His blood, and He made us a kingdom, priests unto His God and Father; to Him be the glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen."

"Behold, He cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see Him, and they which pierced Him: and all the tribes of the earth shall mourn over Him. Even so, Amen. I am the Alpha and the Omega saith the Lord God, which is, which was, and which is to come, the Almighty. I, John, your brother and partaker with you in the tribulation, and kingdom, and patience which are in Jesus, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God, and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet, saying, What thou seest, write in a book, and send it to the seven churches; unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamos, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea. I turned to see the voice which spake with me. And having turned, I saw seven golden lampstands; and in the midst of the lampstands one like unto the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the breasts with a golden girdle. His head and His hair were white as white wool, white as snow; and His eyes were as a flame of fire and His feet like unto burnished brass, as if it had been refined in a furnace; and His voice as the voice of many waters. He had in His right hand seven stars; and out of His mouth proceeded a sharp two-edged sword, and His countenance was as the sun shineth in its strength. And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as one dead. And He laid His right hand upon me, saying, Fear not; I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead; behold, I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of death and of hades."

Chapter 4, at verse 5: "And out of the throne proceed lightnings and voices and thunders: and there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God".

Before we proceed with the message itself, dear friends, may I repeat something that has so often been said in times like this, as to this ministry. Firstly, it has always been our aim, and does still remain our aim, to see that the messages given lead to very practical issues and that those who hear them are really faced with those practical issues. That is, we are not at all concerned with, or interested in, just teaching as an end in itself. If it cannot lead to something quite definite, then we realise that we are wasting our time. While that is true, and is always our aim, of course no teacher can ever make actual in his hearers the things which he imparts, the intention of his ministry. He gives what he believes to be the message that God has given him, commits it to the Lord in much prayer, the rest is with the people and with the Lord. I well remember Dr Campbell Morgan once saying with emphasis, "God help the preacher whose hearers do not fulfil his ministry!" That's just what we feel about it.

Now, as to this message, you see, we've come back to this book of the revelation of Jesus Christ. In keeping with what we have just said about the essential, practical nature of ministry and of a message, we come to a book which, I fear, has resulted not in too much that is of practical value, for there is no book in the Bible perhaps, that has resulted in more confusion than this book. This book has produced a considerable number of conflicting schools of interpretation. To mention them by name would be only to open the door to the confusion; it is not my intention to do so. But this is quite certain: that God never intended any part of His Word to lead to confusion. Confusion is not a characteristic of the Lord, He is not the God of confusion. Therefore, it becomes necessary that we reduce the whole matter to some quite simple conclusion, or conclusions.

I think the first three chapters of this book, as forming a distinct section, are an excellent example of how the whole book can, and should be, reduced to a simple conclusion. You are at liberty to leave the place-names if you like, you can forget Ephesus, and Smyrna, and Pergamum and the rest as names and as places. You can indeed leave quite a lot of the symbolism; not all of it, because some of it is so obvious, but what you cannot understand, you can leave. And you can resolve this section in this way.

Firstly, we are here, in these first three chapters, in the presence of timeless spiritual principles. They are truly being applied to particular conditions, situations, and places, but there is something more than the place and the time and the particular situation, there is a spiritual factor that is governing everything and we are in the presence of those factors which are more than local, more than geographical, more than of a time setting - they are age long, and more than that: they are eternal. So that the very first thing that we have to recognise and grasp as we come to this book and to this section as an example is this: here we are being presented with

something that is in the mind of God which touches this situation, or all these situations which are set forth here, and what we have to do is to get hold of what that is in the mind of God. It is one thing; it may have many aspects, but it is one thing. And to get hold of that one thing is the key both to this section and to the whole book. I'll not mention for the moment what it is, we are coming to that presently.

Secondly, we are in the presence of one of those crisis points, it may be the last, when the Lord calls to account for all that He has given. Is that clear? That is, of course, quite clear in this section, it governs all the rest of the book, but keep to this section; the Lord had given much to the church and to the churches. They had received a lot through His apostles, through His servants. They had a great wealth of spiritual inheritance. And when the Lord has done anything like that, at any time in history, it is as though at given points He comes back and says, "Now, what about it? What about it? I have given, I have revealed, I have made known. I have entreated, I have implored, I have besought. I have exhorted, I have warned... now the time has come when some reckoning has to be made and an answer given." You will see that the Lord has done that more than once in history, but here we are in the presence of such an occasion. I say, it may be the last, because this book does stand in relation to the end, doesn't it, the Lord's coming. But here is a principle as well as a time application of the principle, and it is: we are here in the presence of a crisis, the nature of which is just this. The Lord is saying, "How do you measure up to all that I have given? How do you stand in the light of the whole deposit that has been made with you?" And this crisis is a very serious one. It is critical indeed, as you notice, because the issue is the alternative between continuance or discontinuance; the vessel, the lampstand remaining, or being removed. That's the crisis. It's that of the whole future.

Thirdly, we are here made aware that the Lord's desire is to bless. His is a positive attitude, not a negative. While He has to put His finger upon the things that are lacking, the things with which He does not agree, you'll notice that He invariably ends His quest with, "To him that overcometh will I grant..." "Will I grant..." The Lord's desire in every case, in every situation, however bad it is, His desire is to bless. He is on positive lines. There may be rebuke. There may be exposure and uncovering. There may be warning, there may be exhortation, but there's a promise suspended before everybody. A wonderful promise. Everybody is faced ultimately, not necessarily with doom, but with the good pleasure of the Lord. His desire is to bless. He may condemn, but His condemnation is to clear the way for blessing. He may have to judge. He may have to break, but that is to provide the ground for blessing. He may warn with a solemn voice, but His warnings are coupled with His desire that these people should come into something more of His grace, of His goodness. And you cannot read these promises to overcomers without being tremendously impressed with this: that it seems that the greatest delinquents, those who have failed most, are offered the highest blessing. So it was with Laodicea. You cannot get any further than to sit with Him in His throne, and that's the offer to Laodicea. All the things that are judgeable are found there, but the highest reward is offered. It is from the very depth to the very height. That's His thought for His people.

Finally, and supremely, we are confronted with that for which the Lord is looking. That's going to be the point on which the message turns: that for which the Lord is looking and, it has to be said, without which He cannot justify the continuance of a vessel of testimony. That is, dear friends, what we have got to focus upon. What is it that the Lord is looking for? Now, many things were thought to be, by these churches, were thought to be the things that the Lord was looking for, and they were not. They were not; turned out that they were just not the things that the Lord was looking for. He had His own object before Him and He could not be satisfied with anything less or other as an alternative to that.

Now, that is the summary of this first section in the first three books. I hope you have been able to grasp it, that I have simplified the interpretation, and that you can see, even if only in the last thing that I have said, the supreme thing, that, that only, that essentially for which the Lord is looking when He has given so much to His people.

From that point we come to:

The Method.

The method employed by the Lord, by the Holy Spirit for reaching the end upon which the heart of God is set. The method employed... that is, of course, comprehensively and inclusively seen in the presentation of the Lord Jesus which we have in chapter one. That is always God's method, is always the method of the Holy Spirit: to bring Christ in His supreme fullness into view.

No one, meditating upon that vision of the Son of Man given in that chapter, could doubt that you have there a presentation of the fullness of Christ. How full! I confess to you, dear friends, that in meditating on this for

many days, for a long time now, I have found my greatest difficulty, my greatest difficulty to be to comprehend the fullness of every fragment. I'm not exaggerating when I say that into almost every fragment of this presentation of Jesus Christ you could crowd a mass of what is in the Bible. What to leave out is the difficulty!

Here the Holy Spirit's method comprehensively is to bring back Christ, not partially, but in fullness. Christ in fullness. And as you look at it, you will find that it is a seven-fold characterisation of the risen and governing Son of Man.

It's into those seven aspects that so much is crowded; that everything is crowded. We may just mention what they are: the garment with which He is clothed down to the foot. The girdle of gold about His breasts. The head and the hair: white as wool. The eyes: as a flame of fire. The feet: as burnished brass. The voice: as the sound of many waters. And the sword: sharp and two-edged proceeding out of His mouth. Who can comprehend all that? The seven-fold characterisation of the Son of Man. That is presented, projected, before, in this case, the churches; if you like, the church in its fullness represented. And this seven-fold characterisation is the basis of the examination which is going to take place, and of the judgement which is going to be declared. It's according to what is here at every point that everything is going to be tested and determined.

These are the features that constitute His quest. You ask, "What is it the Lord is after, is seeking?" The answer is: that which corresponds to these features of Christ. If you can understand what they signify, then you know exactly what He is after.

This presentation of Christ is first of all, personal. And then you find that it becomes corporate: He is holding the churches in His hand, He is moving to and fro amongst them. He and they are, in a sense, identical, and what He is really seeking is that what is true of Himself, shall be true of His church in every place, in every location, in every expression.

Now, in chapter 1 verse 4 you have this phrase: "The seven spirits which are before His throne". And if you pass over to chapter 4, at verse 5 you have another reference to those seven spirits, but in a particular form, "There were the seven lamps of fire burning before the throne which are the seven spirits of God". Seven lamps of fire burning before the throne. Of course, 'seven spirits' is another symbolic way of speaking of the Holy Spirit - the Holy Spirit, we may put it, (and we have authority for so doing) in a seven-fold expression.

A Seven-fold Expression of the Holy Spirit

It is one Spirit mentioned here, as in the symbolism of seven spirits before the throne. The throne, we know and understand, is the symbol of government, of authority.

Lamps of fire... the throne functioning as lamps of fire by the Holy Spirit. We know what lamps of fire are, originally the word is "torches" - we know what that means. The function of a lamp of fire is first to reveal, then to test, and then to determine values. The throne is in action here in that way, quite clearly: to reveal, to test, and to determine. I'll have more to say about that presently.

This is, to come back to chapter 1, the expression of Christ by the Holy Spirit in a seven-fold characterisation. They are before the throne; it is the throne that is here in action, let us keep that in mind. It's the throne that has come into action here by the Holy Spirit in relation to the fullness of Christ in all the main features of His character. The picture is quite simple, even through the intricate symbolism: the throne is the seat of government.

The ministry of the Spirit is the seven-fold, "what the Spirit saith to the churches". Notice that: seven times, "what the Spirit saith". And what the 'Spirit saith' He is saying as from or before the throne of government. And what He is saying is that this One who is brought into view is this, and is that, and is that. Seven major characteristics of Christ. Christ is that! The throne of government stands by that! The Spirit challenges concerning that. "What the Spirit saith..." seven times over. It's that. The seven lamps of fire which are the seven Spirits of God. It is what that throne is looking for, requires, and demands. So that the ministry relates to those Divine features which are the features of the Son of Man.

Time to hurry on, much as we want to we're brought up short by that title at once: "One like unto the Son of Man". The margin corrects it, because the same writer, the same writer wrote in the gospel chapter 1:51 and there you can't mistake the fact that he says, "the son of man". Jesus saying to Nathanael, "Hereafter you shall see the heavens open, the angels of God ascending and descending upon..." it cannot be a son of man, "THE Son of Man". And so it is here, this One presented.

Does it not impress you, dear friends (I hope I'm not wearying you with too much detail), does it not impress you when you read this description of the Lord? Look at this description in all its detail and then hear what He says about Himself. Does it not impress you that this one is described as, "the Son of Man"? Why, you would expect that of all places in the Bible, that here you would find "the Son of God". He is the Son of God, but that is not what He is called here in this particular connection. Son, the Son of Man. What does that mean? It's a title which comprises firstly, God's original, first thought as to this special creation called "man". When God said "Let us make man..." He was doing a new thing, He was embarking upon a particular kind of creature; a special creation. And in so doing, He had a thought bound up with that, or large thoughts, bound up with mankind. The Son of Man embraces that thought of God originally: man. It embraces, in the case of the Lord Jesus, God's loss as to His purpose, desire, thought, in man. God's loss. Oh, when man departed from the way of God, God lost in that man what He had intended. And in this Son of Man, that is taken up - God's loss! That of which God has been deprived by man's sin and willfulness and satan's interference. But this term also embodies God's redemption of man! "Son of Man", that's related to God's redemption of man and therefore of that which He had lost. Further, 'Son of Man' includes the Divine perfection of the man which God made. Getting very near to the vision now, aren't we? And finally, Son of Man as relating to the Lord Jesus, is God's model for all His further activities where man is concerned. There you have the five-fold component of this title: Son of Man.

Now you know what the Lord is after; what the churches, and the church are intended to be in the mind of God; what God is seeking, what the Son of Man is seeking, what the Holy Spirit in His seven-fold activity is seeking is one thing: correspondence to the Son of Man. That that Son of Man shall be found repeated in character in all men. The church is chosen for that. Seven lamps of fire, they'll reveal how far that is true, and how far that is not true. They test everything on that ground: does this answer to what Christ is like, what the Son of Man is like? And, having found the answer, judges accordingly. That is the quest: to illumine and search; to discriminate between what is Christ and what is not Christ; to purge, if it may be, of all that is not Christ and to establish what is. That's the sum of these three chapters.

Lamp one. Seven lamps... burning before the throne. Lamp one: the first aspect of Christ with which we are met, the ground of the Holy Spirit's quest and activity. What is it? A garment down to the foot.

A Garment Down to the Foot

This is not the priestly robe, and this is not the kingly robe, it is just a garment. It is not described at all, it is simply stated that He was clothed, and with a garment down to the foot. He was clothed, and fully clothed... fully clothed.

Do you remember that the very first effect of man's sin was the consciousness of nakedness? It was sin that brought about that consciousness. We're told precisely, immediately man had sinned they knew that they were naked. The realisation of it. Their consciousness was changed because their nature was changed. And the changed nature was first marked by a sense of shame; shame. Do you notice that the very first work, genuine work of the Holy Spirit toward redemption and recovery is to produce a sense of shame? I'm afraid many supposed, professed conversions lack that, or lack it sufficiently, but any true, genuine work of the Holy Spirit begins there. We cover up our face with shame... the consciousness of our undoneness, our... what the Bible means by our nakedness in the sight of God: shame.

Look here in chapter 3 of this book, at verse 17: "Because thou sayest I am rich and have gotten riches and hast need of nothing and knowest not that thou art the wretched one, and miserable, and poor and blind, and naked..." Few more terrible judgments could be passed upon anybody than that; "You have no sense of need, or of shame; you have no consciousness of how you really stand before the eyes that are a flame of fire... You think you're all right, you think you're covered; 'I counsel thee to buy of Me gold refined by fire that thou mayest become rich and white garments that thou mayest clothe thyself and that the shame of thy nakedness be not made manifest...". This is symbolic language relating to spiritual truths. God immediately proceeded to make clothing for man, to cover him, to put away from His own sight man's sin.

Now you come to the Son of Man, the last Adam. Here He is clothed down to the foot. He, in other words, has a fine, keen sense, and sensibility of what is fitting to the presence of God. Don't you feel that's searching? In so many instances and matters in these churches, that was just the trouble. They had not that due sense, that fine sense, of what is suitable to God, what is right for God, what becomes God. They're putting all sorts of things forward, but no, no, this one thing was so often missing.

Now, this is capable of very wide and manifold application. See, clothes, clothes are usually the expression of

the person who wears them. Untidy clothes, unbrushed clothes, careless clothing... betrays the person. Oh, we could go over that whole ground couldn't we? What a searching word for the whole question of clothing or not clothing in these days, before God... but here is the symbolism; it's spiritual, it's spiritual. It is what we are in ourselves before God as producing shame, self abasement, but then - thank God - what the Son of Man has secured and provided for us in a garment of righteousness that we can stand in the presence of God.

I said to you a little while ago friends, that you could crowd into every one of these fragments a mass of the Bible. Into that one word, "clothed" you crowd the whole of the letter to the Romans, and again the letter to the Galatians, and much more. It is this question of the righteousness which is through faith in Jesus Christ, the righteousness of God. "I counsel thee to buy of Me white, white raiment..." and the white raiment is the righteous acts of the saints; it is the righteousness of God given to us in Christ, the Son of Man.

You see what a large realm that opens up: how do we stand before God? Are we projecting ourselves before God? Are we standing as before the Lord, amongst His people, or alone, or anywhere in this world and obtruding our natural life in any form upon the eyes and the consciousness of those around? What a lot of that there is, even, even in our religion and even in our feigned spirituality; making an impression of meekness or what-not. And behind it, it's the impression of ourselves! Oh no. We are right at the beginning of the foundation of everything here.

What is our standing before God, what is our standing before our brethren; our standing at all? It can only be what we are in Christ. It must never be anything other than that. What we are in Christ! What Christ has been made unto us as Wisdom and Righteousness and Sanctification and Redemption. Clothed... "Put ye on the Lord Jesus." "Ye have put off the old man..." the figure there, quite clearly in the original languages are the garments being put off, one garment being put off and another being put on. You have put off that garment of Adam, the old man, and you've put on Christ. Another garment, another clothing.

The first challenge of the Holy Spirit is this: How much of a view of us is appearing? What we are? Making an impression? Oh, God save us from wanting to make an impression... being outstanding and singular and different in order to draw attention or to register something that brings us into view. The Lord have mercy on us... It is Christ our clothing, the only fitness, seemliness for the presence of God. And believe me, dear friends, the ultimate question of all these searchings is: the presence of God, standing in the presence of God, that you may stand before the presence of God. We can't do that in our natural condition because that is nakedness and shame. You know how much the New Testament says about this matter, when we appear before Him and when He appears, whether we shall be naked before Him in that day.

Well, again, it's a symbolic word, but oh, how searching it is, but how blessed it is, how it will drive us again to our most blessed of all blessings: the clothing of a righteousness that is not our own, but the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ. But I say again, it deals with all, all this: every aspect of Self coming into the picture, it does; every aspect of ourselves coming into the picture. The Spirit is a lamp of fire... exposing, searching, determining. And that with this One in view.

I close at this point for the time being with this: The Lord lead us to seek more and more, that we may have this fine sense of what is proper to God. You see what that means in the natural, coming into the presence of a person of honour. I remember reading the Seer of Chelsea, Carlyle, going on a visit to Queen Victoria. And being what he was, a philosopher and the recluse, he never bothered about how he dressed and he appeared most shabbily at the palace, most shabbily. And what a scandal it was to Queen Victoria! She never got over it; all his philosophy and all his genius and everything else went for nothing; the man hadn't any sense for what is fitting for the presence of a queen. Well, that's only a sideline, you know it works like that in the natural, but how much more for the Lord! When we come together, what is fitting for the presence of the Lord? And we would always be in His presence...

May the Spirit check us up continually on that which is not suitable to abiding in the presence of the Lord, and say, "Now, that's not consistent with the Lord, you'll have to change your clothes a bit in this matter..." you see what I mean? Well, is that practical? Is that just teaching again? A subject, a theme? I say, beloved, very little could be more searching than that.

The Lord lead us to this same quest as is in His own heart, for on this matter, remember, He puts on the one side the highest value, on the other side the most scathing denunciation. Listen to Him with the Pharisees, their fine clothes, their garments, their pretences, their outward adornments... He saw right through to their nakedness. Oh, how scathing to hypocrisy, pretence! God sees. God sees. No, that won't do, but here is a blessing for those who will seek continually to cultivate that sense of what really belongs to the Lord; the

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honour, the glory. The Old Testament fragment comes back to us with new force, "Worship the Lord in holy array".