

es and Sermons :: The Crisis of Pentecost and the Significance of the Holy Spirit's Coming by T. Austin-

The Crisis of Pentecost and the Significance of the Holy Spirit's Coming by T. Austin-Sparks - posted by sermonindex

In continuing our occupation with this great matter of the significance of the Holy Spirit, there is a fragment familiar (as familiar as any other perhaps, in the New Testament) which we are going to take this evening, to lead us a little further in this matter. It is in the first chapter of the Book of the Acts, at verse 8. Acts 1 verse 8: "Ye shall receive power when the Holy Spirit is come upon you."

"Ye shall receive power when the Holy Spirit is come upon you." I want to place alongside of that some other not so simple, but perhaps almost equally well-known words, from the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Lifting out of verses 17, 18 and 19, these words... Ephesians 1:18,19 and I'd like you to keep your finger in that place until later: "That ye may know what the exceeding greatness of His power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of the strength of His might which He wrought in Christ when He raised Him from the dead, and made Him to sit at His right hand."

"Ye shall receive power when the Holy Spirit is come upon you" ... "that ye may know what is the exceeding greatness of His power to us-ward who believe". There is a sense in which the whole book of the Acts is gathered into that one word: "power". The entire narrative of events in that book (and it is a very full, and comprehensive, and detailed one) is just the story of the working of that power promised by the Lord Jesus, having come with the Holy Spirit. We could rename the book, "The Book of the Power of the Holy Spirit". That's the word that interprets it and explains it.

I have passed you on to those words in the Letter to the Ephesians for two reasons. Firstly, the man who wrote those words was one of the examples of the working of that power in the book of the Acts. Nothing less or other than the exceeding greatness of His power could account for Paul the apostle after Paul the persecutor. Indeed, he is a sample and an example of the exceeding greatness of His power. It's just wonderful to see in his own case the mighty working of that power in his arrest - "apprehension" as he called it - and conversion. It is one amongst many, perhaps outstanding amongst many, of those examples of this great power at work, which leads us to wonder and to worship.

We have said (and you will find it in the next issue of the "A Witness and A Testimony") that just at that point, you stand back and almost gasp with wonder as you recognise the tremendous significance of the young man, Stephen. We have never yet discerned the tremendous significance of that young man. He was the one through whom this same Holy Spirit introduced the meaning of the great change in the dispensations. In that marvellous discourse before the Jewish rulers he takes us right back over the old dispensation; the history of that people, right the way back, and traces it step by step and stage by stage, defining and describing, and brings it right up to Jerusalem there and then. And with a few mighty, deft, touches, says, "That's all finished and a new order has come in, which is altogether different. It is the order of the heavenly and of the spiritual, as over against the earthly and the temporal. That's finished! The temple is finished!" he says. And think of it: in Jerusalem, under the shadow of that temple, with all those so devoted to the temple and its service; right there under its shadow he says, "But God dwelleth not in temples made with hands." Say that outside St. Peter's, Rome, or even St. Paul's, London, declare that and see what the rulers of the church will say!

"God dwelleth not in temples made with hands". He indicated a change in dispensations, the whole character of things. No wonder they gnashed upon him with their teeth. And they stoned Stephen, calling upon the name of the Lord Jesus, and said, "We will have none of that! We will finish that!" And as they cast their deadly stones upon the young man... seeing the heavens opened and Jesus the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God... they thought they had done with that. And in that self-same moment the Holy Ghost came with conviction upon another young man consenting to his death who was taken up very soon afterward, to carry on that great revelation to its fullness all over the world. I say you gasp with wonder as you see the wonderful power and the infinite ingenuity of the Holy Spirit.

That young man is the young man who, so soon after that event, came into an experience of the discovery of the exceeding greatness of His power, and here wrote upon it, or said that he prayed that the whole church might know it. When we allow that man, that man, that example of that power to present to us what it meant to him, as recorded in this whole statement in the Letter to the Ephesians, and to note that he is attributing it to the same Holy Spirit: "That He would grant unto you a Spirit of revelation that you may know what is the exceeding greatness of His power... ye shall receive power... the Holy Spirit coming upon you", by the same Spirit.

When we, I say, allow Him to speak to us about this power, the first thing that meets us, or that we meet, is someÂ-thing that completely disconcerts us.

The Disconcerting Effect of this Revelation

Look at it again, I will just lift out one fragment of this whole statement. We're not dealing with Ephesians 1 and the great prayer of Paul, but just extract this clause, "That you may know what the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints". The riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints. Now, if he had only put it the other way round, we would have no difficulty at all, "the riches of the glory of our inheritance in Him", that presents no problem at all, we can stand up to that! But when a man dares to speak of "the riches of the glory of His inheritance..." in me? In you? Supposing that was said to you, really, personally, those words were used to you, addressed to you personally, "that you may know the riches of the glory of His inheritance in you". What would you say? You'd say, "Oh, look here, look here, what are you talking about? What are you talking about? You don't know me. If you knew me, you wouldn't talk to me like that. You go and tell someone else that! There are some people, perhaps, to whom you might tell it, but don't you talk to me like that. You don't know my depravity, the depravity of my nature. You don't know what I know about myself, my own heart, my sinfulness. If you only knew a little, you would shut the book and go away, and say, 'Now, that doesn't apply there! The riches of the glory of His inheritance... in him, in her...' You don't know all my defeat in the battle, and in the work... how I have striven and failed... how again and again... the forces of evil have got the mastery... and I have been a pathetic casualty in this warfare. You don't know of my secret history of defeats, or you couldn't talk like that to me if you did. You don't know my penury, my poverty of spiritual life. To know only a little of such things about me would send you off in quest for someone else to talk to like that: 'the riches of the glory of His inheritance' in this?"

The apostle deals in superlatives. He says some tremendous things, immense things, that you just cannot cope with... you cannot stand up to them. You have to say: "Yes, that may be true, if it is, it will be true of better stuff than I am, better people than I. It cannot possibly be true of me. I cannot obtain unto that. That's far too high for me... altogether beyond possibility where I am concerned. 'The riches...' and I am so poor. I am a beggar and you are talking about the riches of His inheritance in me? 'Glory' for Him, in me? I'm daily ashamed of myself. My more common attitude about myself is 'Wherefore I abhor myself in dust and ashes'. No feigned meekness; real, genuine expression of a heart that knows itself at all, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner'. And you talk to me about the riches of the glory of His inheritance?"

You see, it's, it's over-powering, it's disconcerting, it is almost paralysing. But he said it! He said it, it is here in the Holy Writ. It's Scripture. But you see, you've got to go on, that only prepares you for something, that only leads you to the next thing: "What is the exceeding greatness of His power to us-ward..." To that-ward, the exceeding greatness of His power to that poverty, to that shame, to all that! "The exceeding greatness of His power... that you may know that! That change the picture, doesn't it?"

We will all admit that nothing short of the exceeding greatness of His power will do it, but that's it: "You shall receive power, the Holy Spirit coming upon you". And as we have read this evening, and this was the purpose of that reading, the Lord Jesus said that, "When He, the Spirit is come, He will guide you into all the truth". He will reveal. The Holy Spirit coming upon you will make you know. Make you know; that's what the Lord Jesus was saying, He'll make you know what you don't know now, He'll make you know. And so Paul prays, "That you may know what is the exceeding greatness of His power to us-ward". Then, if that, if that exists, if that is available, if that is true, the picture changes from one of hopelessness to marvellous hope. Then it's possible that out of this rubbish-heap, out of these ashes: riches... glory... of His inheritance can come. How, I don't know. But here it is: there is the power sent from God to do that in you and in me.

It's not my intention to follow that through, to try and show how it works out, but this man, this man, this example of it, you may think he was a very wonderful man before his conversion. From some standpoints, he may have been a very fine fellow. But you cannot read Paul intelligently after his conversion without discovering that he had a very poor opinion of himself. He spoke of himself as "the least of all saints", and as one who ought never to be called an apostle: "Unworthy to be called an apostle... the least of all saints... because I persecuted the church". Paul never got away from it, he never got away from it. It was something that was like a thorn in him to his death, this that he had done, the kind of fellow he was, and what came from him. He never forgave himself, he never got over it. It was a wound ever open in his soul. You read him again, and I repeat: he had a very poor opinion of himself, indeed he had. "The least of all saints". Do you hear that? That is not pretence, that is not just mock meekness and humility... "the least of all saints". Now, put over against that "the riches of the glory of His inheritance in...", yes, "the least of all saints". How? "The exceeding greatness of His power toward us". Toward us!

Paul is praying out of some experience of that power in such as he knew himself to be, that all saints might know that. K now it, "That you might know" he says. And dear friends, there is one thing about power, that is that you can never know it other than in experience. You can talk about power, you can have all your ideas of power, but you can never really know it only in experience, in an inward way. We have the theory of power, but that is not:

Knowing Power.

Some long time ago, when I returned from my last visit to America, I told you a story. I'm going to repeat that again, you may have forgotten it, but it is very, I think, apropos of what I am trying to say now. I was at a conference and one of the other speakers was the son of a very well known servant of God in America, a man whose name I had known, of whom I had read much, and I was very glad to meet his son and to ask, like the king asked Gehazi about the works of Elisha, to ask for first-hand information about this great servant of God. He told me quite a lot of things, amongst them was this. His father was very interested in the American Indians in a certain settlement, and the government were very anxious that that Indian settlement should be developed and modernised, and provided with all the up-to-date accessories of civilisation, modern life. And they asked this man what he thought would be the best way of introducing these things to these people who were ignorant, and very suspicious, and unbelieving, not prepared to accept anything at its face value. They wanted to be very sure of everything.

The man said, "Well, I think the only way in which you'll do it will be to get one or two of the most influential and intelligent of the Indians, and bring them out into city life here and let them see it."

"All right," they said, "Well, you go and find the men."

So he went back to the Indian settlement, and stayed there a little while, watching and talking, until he found a man who had more influence than anyone else, and seemed to have more intelligence and was at least willing to come and have a look for himself. So he took him away up country to one great city, took him into a hotel, a modern American hotel. And it was night, late in the evening, and getting dark quickly. And as they went into their room, the man who was conducting the Indian put his finger on the electric light switch and on came the light.

And the Indian was startled, "How did that happen? What did you do?"

"Oh," he said, "I simply put my finger on that little button there."

"I don't believe it. I don't believe it. Do you mean to tell me that all that is just in that little button? You have only just got to touch that little thing and all this comes on? I don't believe it!"

"Very well," said the man. Switch off. He switched it off. "Stand on that table." And he took out the bulb.

He said, "Put your thumb up inside that socket."

And he went to the door and the next moment the Indian was picking himself up from the corner of the room, very shaken and very bruised.

The man said, "Do you believe it now?"

"Oh yes, I believe it now, I believe it now!"

Now, perhaps there's some humour in that, but you see the point. You don't know power, only in experience. This power is not a doctrine, a theory, a subject, or theme; it's a Person! The Holy Spirit is not a topic in the Bible, or a doctrine of the church; the Holy Spirit is a Living Person, and an experience. Now, the difference, of course, in the truth, or a large degree of the truth of our experience and that of the Indian's is just this: it doesn't always work like that with us.

This power doesn't suddenly come upon, or take hold, and rend us and throw us about and do that sort of thing so that we feel it. But, dear friends, dear friends, if you live long enough, and some of you have lived long enough, to know the immense forces that are set against the Christian life, the forces of this world, the forces of the powers of darkness. How, and it is not an exaggerated word, how terrific are the forces that are set against what is of Christ in this universe. If you have any knowledge of that, it is nothing short of the miracle of the exceeding greatness of His power that you're a Christian today, and that you have continued in the way thus far. Paul put it like this, "having received the help which comes from

om God I continue unto this day". He would have put it the other way: "But for the help that comes from God I would not be here today." Do you know something about that? What is it that has kept? What is it that is behind your going on in spite of yourself? For it is in spite of ourselves, it is in spite of ourselves. Left to ourselves what should we have done? It will not bear thinking about. In spite of all the forces of evil in this universe concentrated upon the smallest fragment of Jesus Christ, we go on! We don't feel it, indeed, more often than otherwise, we feel the weakness, we feel our own unworthiness and helplessness, perhaps wonder if ever we shall be able to continue. But there you are, there is the fact. This power is not like the power that that man met, coming suddenly with a shock; it is a mighty, mighty working power day by day that keeps us on the road.

"That you may know the exceeding greatness of His power." But there's a bridge... there is a bridge between all that which we are and that which we are not, and that which makes us hear such words with consternation, amazement, and even doubt. There's a bridge between that and the exceeding greatness of His power. What is it?

"To Us-ward Who Believe"

The two are brought together and joined by that word "believe". Believe. We have been very interested recently in that marvellous feat of engineering, the great St. Lawrence River by which the mighty ocean and the Great Lakes (and I don't know whether you all realise how great they are, you could take out the British Isles and drop them in and not know where they'd gone) the linking of the mighty ocean and these Great Lakes with this canal was all effected, made real, actual, brought into operation, by the breaking down of a little gap. There's the ocean, there's the mighty lake, there's a channel between the two. They have had to keep for a time, while they made the channel and the canal, keep just a barrier to keep those apart while the work was going on. And then the day came to blow it up, get rid of that gap, that hold-up and when it was gone, the mighty fullness at both ends met. We may have the barriers that are keeping this fullness unexperienced, unknown, unrealised, ineffective: the barrier of unbelief, the barrier of unfaith. It's to us-ward, but it is to us-ward who believe - who believe. All that, listen again: "That you may know what is the hope of His calling" and you'll dwell upon that for all eternity, for all eternity is going to be required to show what that is; the hope of His calling, what the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what the exceeding greatness of His power to us-ward. Vast oceans, mighty fulnesses, all held up because we do not believe, waiting for release. It is to us-ward who believe.

I can say no more. We can only say, "Lord, help our unbelief, help our unbelief." But the answer of the Lord: "Ye shall receive power when the Holy Spirit is come upon you". How important it is that we receive the Holy Spirit, give the Holy Spirit His place, for His place is that of Lordship. Paul says: "The Spirit is Lord, and where the Spirit is Lord, there is liberty". Release!

Well, may we be granted this opening up faith, this releasing faith, this apprehending faith. It's not in sensation, or in conscious power, there's the paradox ever and always in this connection, that the man could speak like this, again and again refer to it, "The exceeding greatness of His power", "according to the power that worketh in us" and so on and the same man to be talking just as much about his weakness, his weakness, his dependence, his conscious weakness. It's a paradox. No, this power works deeper than our consciousness, deeper than our consciousness. It's at work when we are least conscious of it. The Holy Spirit goes on with His work even when we are in the grip of fears about ourselves. And when you and I at last are in the Lord's presence, like Him, because we see Him as He is, there will be nothing to say but, "This is the exceeding greatness of His power", His power!