



Articles and Sermons :: Attaining to God's Full Thought

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by T. Austin-Sparks

"...that saith of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure, even saying of Jerusalem, She shall be built; and of the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid. Thus saith the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him, and I will loose the loins of kings; to open the doors before him, and the gates shall not be shut; I will go before thee, and make the rough places smooth; I will break in pieces the doors of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron; and I will give thee the treasures of darkness, and hidden riches of secret places, that thou mayest know that it is I, the Lord, who call thee by thy name, even the God of Israel.", (Isa. 44:28; 45:1-3).

"Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying, Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, All the kingdoms of the earth hath the Lord, the God of heaven, given me; and he hath charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah.", (Ezra 1:1-2).

Holding those Scriptures in reserve for the moment, I am going to put before you a case in the form of a proposition. Whether the supposition is more than that, and is actually the case, will remain to be seen by what comes to light.

Sovereignty in Relation to a Remnant

Supposing God had, and has, in His heart and mind a certain fulness of purpose which He has determined shall find expression by means of a people on this earth, and when it comes to the test, that people as a whole and in general fail Him. He never for an instant contemplates giving up one iota of His main purpose, and yet He has known all along that that people in the first instance would fail Him. He therefore resolved that in the failure of the whole people at that time, He would proceed to secure to Himself from among them another company, maybe smaller in number, who would respond to Him in His fuller desire. As He foreknew the whole and called them, so He foreknew these. In His eternal counsels He has His eye upon them and they are to Him - not an elect of the elect but the first ripe fruit of His husbandry, a kind of first expression of His thoughts concerning all the rest. On such a supposition what would you think would be some of the things that He would do in the case of such a company?

(a) Heart Hunger for God's Full Thought

In the first place, would He sovereignly do something inside them, that something being the creation of a sense of need, a right kind of dissatisfaction, of disappointment with the existing general condition, producing an inward longing for something, they may not know what, but a sense that there is something more, and that this existing state is not what the Lord really means for His full satisfaction; that there is reproduced in these people, inside of them, God's own discontent, God's own dissatisfaction, God's own desire for that something more in spiritual measure. Do you think that that is what He would do as one thing? Well, it is most likely.

(b) Provision to Satisfy Hunger

Then do you think that, possessing perfect foreknowledge, He would work sovereignly to provide for that inwrought sense of dissatisfaction and need, to have the provision in existence so that there is no contradiction or inconsistency in His ways - that He creates a desire and a sense of need and has made no provision for it? Those two things surely would go together, God would do that. If you were in God's place, you would do it. Is it likely that that is what He would do, in the second place?

(c) Life Sovereignly Directed and Controlled

Thirdly, do you think that He would act sovereignly, apart from those people, to so arrange and govern their experiences

, their lives, that they were really headed up to that; that in some way, to begin with perhaps not knowing why and what it meant, but in some way to bring them within the compass of that intention of His and that provision of His, and to shut all other doors to them, so that they just could not get outside and go and become absorbed in something else, the more general? I am not saying that is all wrong, all bad, but it does not just meet God in that measure in which He must be satisfied. So for these people He is acting sovereignly, and they find, while they may give some explanation for it, that the fact is they have not been allowed to be absorbed by the general Christian life and outlook and activity. It is not a matter that they are separatists themselves, that they are not concerned in all that is of God and for God in a general way. Very often they would move out into that realm and become a part of it and take up its activities, but somehow or other God has not allowed it and does not allow it. There are conditions which put up barriers, there are things which do not allow it, do not permit it. You somehow are shut up to it against yourself, you are shut up to something more. It seems to be - you can call it fate if you like, however you explain it. Well, here I am, the Lord has not allowed me to get into that, to go into that, I am shut up for some reason. Do you think that is what He would do? Would you do that? Would it be necessary to do that in order to reach your end, to do quite a lot of frustrating of other things and other ways of a more general character, just frustrate it at every turn, cut across it? Hard, difficult, but do you suppose that is the sort of thing the Lord would do? Is it necessary? What would happen if He did not? Everything would become general; we should go out and be absorbed in the whole general line of things.

Then supposing you are in the unconscious sovereignty of God, unconscious of there being any special sovereignty in it, but in the course of your life you had been brought by those two things into touch with something fuller of God. In the first place, by inward sense of need which cannot be satisfied in the general way, and then by coincidence, accident, hap; whatever you call it, nevertheless you find yourself there. In the course of my life, I find myself here, there, and having a bad time because in such a realm things are very exacting. From the divine side, He is not going to accept a general kind of Christian life. There is going to be some real deep work done here: a bad time which cannot always be said to be a purely spiritual bad time. It is people, awkward people, difficult people, things arising which look to be just, after all, things here on this earth. You quit, you go off, and you are away for a time, but after that time you find that somehow you have got out of place, and you want to get back again. You begin to weigh up all sorts of things, what it involves of humbling yourself, and making confession, putting right this, that and the other, but facing it and eventually realising that it is God with Whom you are having to do, not people and things. You get back, and you say, I am home now, I am where I ought to be. Do you think that that is the sort of thing that God would do sovereignly? Do you think that might be an expression of divine sovereignty in relation to His special purpose? Is it not just likely that that would happen if God were in control of His purpose? It looks like a whole set of human circumstances, and yet, when you come to weigh it all up and look at it squarely and analyse it, you see, there is something more than man in this, this cannot all be put down to man, to people, to earthly things, to a teaching, to an interpretation of truth, to a set of people. If God is on the Throne and I really am in God's hands and I believe God is faithful, I have to say, there is something more than the human in this, there is something behind it. There is only one word I can use for it - that is sovereignty.

God's People in Babylon

(a) A Heart-Hungry Remnant

Now that is a suppositional position. You have exactly that thing presented to you in the Word of God in every detail. Here in Isaiah you have that whole ground covered; the Lord taking a people, a nation, Israel, for the expression of Himself in divine fulness, the nation as a whole failing Him, and He knowing beforehand that it is going to fail Him and, foreseeing it, takes action before they fail. This word or two about Cyrus and to Cyrus is a prophetic utterance many years before Cyrus had a being. "Thus saith the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus." Where was Cyrus in the day that was uttered? You will not find him. Here you find the Lord speaking about a remnant before they went into captivity and the instrument which should bring them back, send them back; and the building of the temple before the destruction of the temple. It is all spoken of before anything happens. God has His eye upon that second inner company before the whole company has gone into captivity. God has chosen the instrument of deliverance before there was any call for deliverance at all. And when you come to the captivity, what do you find? Well, the large body is satisfied, quite content with their condition, their position. The majority have settled down in Babylon with no thought of anything else at all, but within that company there is a smaller company who were saying, This is not what God meant, and therefore we know that God meant something other than this, something different from this. This is not what we know is God's will, we cannot inwardly settle down to this, we cannot be content with this. And yet, how can it be otherwise? How are we going to get out? There are those who say, "How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?", (Ps. 137:4); the inward work.

(b) Divine Sovereignty at Work

And then the sovereign outward provision for meeting that need already secured by God. What are these men doing in Babylon? What is Daniel doing, what are these servants of the Lord doing in Babylon? They are maintaining God's full thought in the midst of His people, and, as the result of Daniel's travail and soul exercise, as the result of Daniel being there, holding on day after day, as we know, for the recovery of God's fuller thought, as the result of that the remnant returns. God has got His prophetic ministry operating right on the spot on behalf of this remnant, His sovereign provision of one kind.

Then His sovereign apprehension of Cyrus. "That the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus." "I will gird thee, though thou hast not known me.", (Isaiah 45:5). That is sovereignty. A man who does not know the Lord, girded by the Lord to do the Lord's work; irreligious solicitude for God; sovereignty at work to secure God's end.

Then you have two men, Ezra and Nehemiah. If you have any doubt as to what I have said, you have only to read this book of Ezra. "Then rose up the heads of fathers' houses in Judah and Benjamin, and the priests, and the Levites, even all whose spirit God had stirred to go up to build the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem.", (1:5). That is the inner work. And you go over to the next chapter and you have "Now these are the children of the province, that went up out of the captivity of those that had been carried away, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away into Babylon..." and you get a list of people showing that there God had been working in the spirit of a company. They are not all Israel, but within Israel a number in whose spirit God had been working in this direction, sovereign work in the spirit of these people. All these elements are there, and what you have embodied in Ezra is the sovereignty of God in relation to this fuller expression of Himself in a company. You read that book of Ezra, and you find it just full of divine sovereignty from beginning to end. The very first words show the sovereignty of God. "The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus", and then the sovereign orderings of God to see that this thing is brought about. Ezra is one, and he represents the sovereignty of God.

(c) Human Faithfulness in Response

Nehemiah is the other man, and he represents the other side, and do not forget there is always this other side. It is the side of the faithfulness of man to God's things. It is one thing to recognise the sovereignty of God, but it is a very important thing to recognize that that has to have its parallel, its counterpart, in the faithfulness of man, and Nehemiah is the embodiment of the faithfulness of man as to God's thoughts. One is God taking responsibility, the other is man taking responsibility. Those two things must go together, even when God is going to do a thing so sovereignly, when there is so much that is of God. Our inner spiritual history - we did not make ourselves like this that we cannot settle down and be satisfied with anything less than God's full thought. We had no idea of these things at one time. Certainly they were not of my conceiving. But there came a time when in me there rose up a tremendous sense - there is something much more that God is after; and that casting, divesting and shedding of all sorts of things that were less and moving under an urge that I cannot put off - it is not myself at all, it is in spite of myself, an urge for something more than the normal, the average, the usual, the general, of Christianity. I did not make that. Where did that come from? God has done that, His sovereignty at work within.

And then the hedging up of life. I would have gone into this and that and I would have become a part of this and that, but God has shut that door and that door, and although I have tried to move sometimes, there is no way, and I have had a bad time about it. Why does the Lord not allow that? But He does not, that is all, and to go and force the door would only be to do serious damage to one's relationship with God. Have you anything that answers to that? Then a bad time in which, either actually or inwardly, we drop out, we give it up, we turn aside, we go off at a tangent, and what a time! It is not as though we had just lost something; we have lost everything. For us it is the Lord, it is not the thing at all; we have lost the Lord. Not given up some teaching, some place, not just gone off and left some thing; we have lost the Lord, and we come to realise that the Lord has not come with us, we have to go back to find the Lord where we left Him. And that is not a matter of salvation and eternal life: it is something more than that. Have you any experience of that kind? Perhaps you have not. I hope in one sense you have not, but this is sovereignty girding us for some purpose, and while that sovereignty is at work in these ways, holding us, frustrating us, hedging us up, not letting us go altogether, and if we go a bit, having a wretched time; oh, that we could get back to where we were! That is sovereignty with us, in us.

There is the other side. What about our faithfulness? It is the corresponding thing: God's sovereignty, man's faithfulness. To reconcile the two things is not easy, but they are there. So God not only has an Ezra to express His sovereignty; He has a Nehemiah to express man's faithfulness, and Nehemiah was faithful. See him; read again the book which goes by his name. You highly esteem that man. I have a great respect for Nehemiah. He is a man who has seen what God wants, and he is committed to it up to the hilt. See him using every kind of resource, wisdom. His first move as he comes to J

Jerusalem is to keep the thing in his heart, and take his ass out after night has fallen and go round Jerusalem, the broken-down walls and burnt gates, to survey the whole thing and say nothing yet. Sometimes it is the greatest of wisdom to say nothing because there are plenty of treacherous people about and plenty of enemies who only want to get hold of what you are thinking about to start frustrating before you get a chance to begin. Nehemiah is wily with higher wisdom and from that start all the way through you see this man's faithfulness to this purpose. Oh, to recognise what God is after and to see the meaning of His dealings with us. It is not just hap and accident if we are committed to the Lord.

A Challenge to be Faced

Do you not think really that a major issue is raised - I think the major issue, one I have had to face again and again in the midst of the problems, the perplexities, the sufferings and all the seemings to which Satan gives his own explanation; I have to raise this ultimate, basic question. Well, is God God, and does God accept a life when it is given to Him, when it really does mean business with Him and He knows, with all its difficulties, with its flaws, with its weaknesses and foolishness, nevertheless, it really wants to be utterly for Him? Does He allow that life to get into all sorts of messes which are a contradiction of His faithfulness, a contradiction even of His righteousness, to say nothing of a contradiction of His love? Can that be if God is God? Surely not! Then all these things are not incidents, they are not just haps. Somewhere behind them there is a sovereignty at work; yes, frustrating, shutting doors, holding up, not allowing, bringing into difficult ways, deep perplexities; but there is a sovereignty at work in relation to some purpose. It must be so, if God is God.

I put it to you again as a proposition. Must it not be like that? If we have committed ourselves to God thoroughly, really meant with the Lord that we want His full will and we do not want our own, and by His grace we will go the way that He leads and shows, whatever it costs, if we have done that and then situations have arisen which look terribly complicated and seem to contradict the faithfulness of God, what am I to conclude, what are we going to conclude? We have to conclude one of two things - that God cares nothing for all our devotion and consecration, and just lets us get into any mess, or else this is all under His eye. That is ultimate. We have either to believe God or not to believe Him. You have all this here in the Word, and it all bears down upon this, that people who are related in divine foreknowledge and divine sovereign action come into situations like that, but in the end that sovereignty has been shown to relate to something unusually precious to the Lord, "and they shall be mine, saith the Lord of hosts, even mine own possession, in the day that I do make.", (Malachi 3:17).

The Lord is after something more than ordinary and He needs a people for it, but such a people will have unusual experiences, inside and out. It will not be the ordinary, normal course where everything goes well and straightforwardly. It will not be like that for these people. They go through ways that are tortuous and exceedingly difficult, but there is a sovereignty at work.

That is my way of analysing and summing up the situation as I see it in the Word, and I can only say to you that it is not foreign and strange to God's special purposes to have experiences like that. Whether it be the remnant of Israel, whether it be the reactions of God in this Christian dispensation, in the book of the Revelation, the messages to the churches which are just on this ground, it is all like this. Nothing seems normal with a people like that, because God is not going to have anything that is just normal, as we call the normal. It is something more, something extraordinary, and our experience therefore is extraordinary.

God's Sovereign Provision for Times of Declension

If I were going to add anything, I would just indicate something. As I read the Word, I have a habit of standing back from my Bible, seeing what is there in general, standing back and saying, Now, what is the implication of all that? What does all that signify? I get a lot along that line, and here is an example. I read certain letters that were written by an apostle at the end of his life and at a time when Christianity, as to its primal beauty and glory and purity, was breaking up. I see that the first early conditions as we have them in the early chapters of Acts changed, things all seem to be going wrong. I find all sorts of marks of a change for the worse; the purity of things, the heavenliness of things, is going. The church is becoming an earthly thing, and I know from church history that before the apostolic age was past, before John himself died, they had started making what they called "bishops" - not in the New Testament sense of that word - ecclesiastical bishops, and it will not be long before they make a pope, and this whole thing has been brought down to earth - and it started before Paul was dead. He at the end with those conditions coming about writes some letters, and no one can suggest that these letters are a compromise, accommodating to the situation which has come about and is growing. They are the most drastic and utter contradiction of what is creeping in, what is growing up. They are such a full revelation of the heavenly thought and mind and position.

What is the significance of this? All I can say is this, that God has sovereignly made His provision for all times of declension in those letters. That is God's sovereign reaction in which He says, in effect, whenever declension sets in and things begin to lose their purity, Here is your provision, I have secured it for you, it is there, everything is provided to meet the situation. You are not left without guidance; you are not left without light in a dark day. You can take hold of these later letters and say, "Arise, shine; for thy light is come.", (Isa. 60:1). Darkness covers the earth, and gross darkness the peoples, but here is your light. The sovereign act of God has made provision for what He saw was coming, and in every age here it is right to hand. God does not accommodate Himself to the situation and say, Well, we must make the best of a bad job, we must be content with a little. He has taken sovereign precaution against that by giving us letters like Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Timothy. That is the implication of that, that is the significance of that - the sovereignty of God again in relation to His full thought.

The Implication - God's Full Thought is Attainable

What about the faithfulness of man? It would be unfaithful, thoroughly unfaithful, if we take the attitude: Well, everything has gone wrong, there is nothing today which represents the original; we had better accommodate ourselves. All right - you will have to cut out those letters and put them in the fire. You cannot possibly take that attitude and leave the New Testament intact as it is. What a bad time you would have every time you read Ephesians if you did take that attitude of compromise. For a long time those letters were lost in their real value in the church. It is only within comparatively recent times that the value of Paul's later letters has come to Christians. They were too deep, abstract, heavenly. The Gospels were practically the Bible of the church for a long time, and then Luther got hold of Romans, and that made a break. Then another movement got hold of Ephesians, and that made another break. It is there in the sovereignty of God, the faithfulness of man.

May the Lord make us faithful. It is going to be costly, a lonely way, but the sovereignty of God is there. "The eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him.", (2 Chron. 16:9). There is sovereignty toward those who will not compromise.

If there is one thing that I trust will result from our meditation more than another, it is that we shall get new faith, that our faith will revive, we shall be stronger in determination and recover from the weaknesses and the bruising and the paralyzing which so much suffering in the way may have brought. The Lord help us.