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The Living God and the Battle for Life

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: Matt. 16:13,16,18; John 10:10; 2 Cor. 3:3-6,17-18; Heb. 9:13-14; 12:22; 1 Tim. 3:14-16; 1 Thess. 1:9-10; Rev. 7:2-3.

"As he saith also in Hosea, I will call that My people, which was not My people; and her beloved, that was not beloved. And it shall be, that in the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not My people, There shall they be called sons of the living God." Rom. 9:25-26.

We are very familiar with the phrase - the living God - and it is not the first time in which we have dwelt upon it, but it is the only word that comes to me just now as containing something of the Lord's mind for us in this present hour.

I begin by reminding you that this phrase lies behind everything in God's universe from eternity to eternity - The Living God! And it is not only a designation of God or a title, it implies the entire work of God. The work of God throughout is the work of Life; the work of the living God is the work of Life.

The passages which we have read, as you notice, bringing in this phrase and this title so frequently, relate to the kind of thing that comes out from God, the kind of thing that belongs to God. The first, the Son of the living God, - "Thou art... the Son of the living God" declares "I am the Life", and says, "I came that they might have Life". He, the Son of the living God, is Himself the Life and the mediator of Life.

Then the sons of the living God are not just those people who belong to a certain company, a certain few who bear a certain title, that is, 'sons of the living God'. They are those who share with God His

own Life; they are the living ones in that Divine sense, inasmuch as they have received God's own Life.

The Church is called "the church of the living God" and again the designation is not of some particular institution which belongs to God as differing from others; it is that which, differing from all others, is distinguished by the very Life of God which is in it.

So you go on from passage to passage and you find that it is a discriminating word. That is seen in John 10:10: "The thief cometh not, but... to kill... I am come that they might have Life" - a discriminating word.

So, behind everything, back of the universe which comes in after God, we have the living God, and all the work of God is the work of Life, until you head right up to that great discriminating act at the end when the earth and the sea are to be delivered over to judgment and the final destruction, and there is a staying call to the angel - "Wait a minute, before everything is handed over to destruction and death, there is a seal to be placed upon the foreheads of certain ones!" It is the seal, not of just God, but of the *living* God. These are to be marked as sharing God's Life, marked out by the seal of God, the mark of God, and what is it? These cannot be engulfed in the general destruction, these cannot be involved in this work of judgment, these are distinguished and discriminated from all the rest. They have a seal upon them and that seal has God's stamp. What is the hallmark of God anywhere at any time? It is always Life, just as the hallmark of Satan is death. Those two things stand clearly apart and distinguished - one to kill and destroy, the other to make alive and by that Life to preserve even through all the work of death.

Now this, as we have often seen, is the great issue of all time. It is the issue of Life and death, death and Life. The issue is not first sin and righteousness; that is not the first issue. The issue is death and Life, Life and death. Sin is the ground upon which the issue is decided; sin is the ground of death, but death is the objective, therefore Satan, in order to kill, to bring death into God's universe, must first corrupt it. He must get the condition of corruption in order to get a state of death. His object is not just to corrupt, it is to kill, to bring in death. Righteousness, while it is a matter of great importance with the Lord, is not the first thing. Life is God's first thing, but now, because of sin, God must have righteousness unto Life. He must create righteousness before there can be Life, but the object is Life, just as the object with Satan is death. All accusations from Satan, all condemnation, all bringing under the cloud of an evil conscience, is with a view to death. All the values of Christ our Righteousness to be appropriated and continually held on to by faith are God's provision for Life, not just to make us good, but to make us live.

God has one thing in view finally, and that is Life. He intended from the beginning that that which issued from Himself, represented Himself, and bore His mark, should be that which lives with His own Life. Satan has determined just the opposite, that that which comes from him bears his mark, and that is death, not because he wants to have death to gratify himself, but he wants God to be deprived of that upon which His heart is set. Satan's heart is a heart of malicious spite against God. Remember that! He has, deep in his very being, this spite against God. God has done something to Satan which has turned his heart with the bitterest malice and deep abysmal hatred for God and spite against God, and he wants to deprive God of His end - that is, a universe marked by God's own Life. And so anything whatever that has the mark of God upon it or is in the way of having that mark or that seal, is the objective of Satan's bitterest hatred. It becomes a sharer with God in the spite of Satan. Remember that! Wherever there is Divine Life, then that becomes part and lot with God in the animosity of the devil. The one thing is to bring that Life to an end, to spoil that Life, to bring in death; where Life is, to surround that and try and engulf it in death again. There is only one way in

which he can do it and that is to corrupt, but, strangely enough, it is to get the mind or the heart of the believer accepting corruption.

You see, in Christ Jesus, by faith, we are partakers of the very righteousness of God. It is not a goodness of man, but a righteousness of God which is by faith in Jesus Christ. That is what God is. We share in His nature by faith. We are accounted the same as God by faith in another righteousness. A tremendous thing! That is not what we are in ourselves. No man can ever say for a moment, "I am one with God in my nature!" Who can say that? "I am one with God in His very righteousness, in His very holiness, in His sinless perfection! I, in myself, am one with God in that!" What presumption! But yet, by faith in the Lord Jesus, in virtue of His mighty Blood, we are able to say, "In Christ, not in myself, in Christ I am a sharer in the Divine nature, I am accounted one with God in His righteousness, His nature!"

Now, the enemy's objective is not to make us worse than we are. I do not know whether he can do that, if we knew the depths of our own natures. It is not that, but it is always to work upon what we are to try and bring it up as a cloud between us and our faith and God's righteousness, in order that we shall accept in our hearts and in our minds an evil state rather than that state which is ours by faith. And so, accepting in our hearts and in our minds condemnation and accusation on the genuine ground of what we are in ourselves, so destroying faith in what we are in Christ, to bring us under condemnation and so to smite us with death, to bring about death.

There is that wonderful illustration of this in the Old Testament in the case of Balaam and Israel. You remember how Balak hired Balaam to curse Israel. "Come, curse me Israel". Balak took Balaam up into a great high place and showed him Israel and Balaam was unable to curse. And Balak said, "Come round and look at them from another angle, perhaps you will be able to curse them there!" But he found he could not curse them from that angle. Then Balak tried another angle, "We will get these people somehow!" But Balaam could not curse them, he had to go on blessing. And Balak said, "I called thee to curse mine enemies, and, behold, thou hast altogether blessed them." What is the explanation? Oh, Balaam's utterance contains one clause! You see, he is being compelled to look down on Israel from God's standpoint, from heaven, not along the level of earth, but what Israel is, what Jacob is. Jacob is used there as a title. But he was compelled to look down from above. "He hath not beheld iniquity in Jacob." Why? Because Jacob was without iniquity? Not a bit of it. There is another story in the Psalms about what Jacob was, that corporate Jacob, what they were in themselves, but He hath not beheld iniquity in Jacob! Why? They are out under the Blood. When they are out under the Blood, God has His own view. "He hath not beheld iniquity in Jacob." Therefore it was impossible to bring them under the curse because of the Blood.

Paul says, "Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? ...It is Christ Jesus that died, yea rather, that was raised from the dead" (Rom. 8:33-34).

Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? Well, Satan is always trying to do that with a view to bring under the curse, to death, this great issue of Life and death.

Now our point is just this, that the hallmark of God's work is Life, the hallmark of Satan's work is death. The great objective of Satan is to bring us into that state of heart - it is called 'conscience' in Hebrews - which will be a suitable ground for him to bring about his reign of death, but God has made His full provision of another ground upon which Satan has no standing, where he cannot come - iniquity cannot come on that ground, unrighteousness cannot come onto that ground, sin cannot come there. Satan therefore cannot stand there on the ground of that provided righteousness in Christ who is made unto us from God's righteousness, sanctification and

redemption. Satan cannot come there. Stand then on the ground of Christ and satan has no stand, no power, and death is vanquished. But that does not mean that satan accepts his defeat. It does not mean that the battle is at an end, for our battle is not to get our ground, it is to keep it. We may get our ground and stand on it, but that is not the end of the conflict. It may only be the beginning of the conflict. We have got to hold that ground, stand our ground. "Stand, therefore... stand, withstand, having done all, stand". The battle for Life so often resolves itself into a matter not of gaining some position, but holding it. Remember that! To get us moved away - that is a great apostolic word - being moved away, by any means to get us moved away. Now, satan stands at nothing to bring that about, that moving away.

I am not going to begin to touch on the means, the ways by which satan seeks to get that moving away, but I have the present situation very much in mind, and here I head up everything and stop. I cannot get away from the strong feeling that what is happening today is something very much more than just a phase of this world's history as such. I do not think that needs arguing. I think we all feel that. We are all convinced, even people who profess very little faith in the Lord Jesus have a strong feeling and strong conviction that this is more than merely an earthly, international conflict, that this is something, as they say, satanic. There is something more in this. We are quite sure about it, but what is the meaning of it? Well, I believe, beloved, that it is heading up to its end, the end of that particular phase of the sovereign ordering method of God which is called "the times of the Gentiles". The end of any dispensation takes the spiritual features of its beginning and repeats them.

Now, if you do not know what I mean by that, let me illustrate. The times of the Gentiles came in with Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. God took the rule of this world away from Israel because of Israel's unfaithfulness and breaking of the Covenant, and committed the rule of this world and its kingdom into the hands of Gentile rulers, the first of which was Nebuchadnezzar. Now, one of the first things you find about Nebuchadnezzar taking the rule of the kingdoms of this world as the great head of gold is this. It came into his head - that is the way of putting it, it seems almost a fancy, a chance, but no. Things come into men's heads, but where do they come from? We will see in a minute. It came into his head to do something. What came into his head? Well, he had dreamed and it came into his head to put all the wise men throughout his dominion to a test and to say this: "Unless you pass the test, you will be destroyed!" - and that, from satan's standpoint, was a foregone conclusion. They would be destroyed. It was their death sentence, because they were not going to pass the test. The thing was altogether beyond them, and they would not pass the test, therefore all the wise men were sentenced to death before even they were given the test, virtually. They had got to interpret, and if they could not, they would be destroyed, for he was an absolute despot - whom he sentenced to death were killed; whom he kept alive were kept alive. That is what is said about this one.

Now, what is the objective of satan? Where did this thing come from? There is one man in Babylon with whom the interests of God and heaven are bound up. The testimony of God is bound up in one man's life - Daniel. He is one amongst the wise men. Get all the wise men killed, and you have got Daniel included. Now you see why. Daniel carries things right on to Christ. The testimony of Daniel is the testimony of Jesus; his prophecies lead right on to today and afterward. Everything of what is precious to God through the history of this world is bound up with that one man in Babylon. He is in touch with heaven. His prayers influence the heavenly powers, principalities. Yes, what is of God is bound up with that man. The living God, the living testimony, the living interests of God are bound up with one man, therefore Satan does not mind if he has all the wise men throughout the kingdom of Babylon killed if he can only get one man. That is the beginning of this dispensation of the times of the Gentiles.

My conviction is this, that today satan is standing at nothing in the wholesale slaughter on this earth in order to get at one corporate man, that man child of Revelation 12, that company with whom the heavenly and eternal interests of God and the testimony of Jesus are bound up, and this is it - life or death? And the pressure to corrupt will be intense, the pressure to destroy faith in the living God will be terrible, the pressure to move us away from our ground of confidence in God will be unspeakably great in order that that testimony of the living God, that Life over which satan has no power, shall be brought, so far as the instrument is concerned, into a neutralised state - God must have an instrument. He has done this thing again and again. The whole generation of babes of a certain age destroyed in Israel in order to get one - that Babe of Bethlehem.

It is this thing that is my conviction. I am not thinking in physical terms now - our destruction physically included in this that is going on today. That is a mere incident; whether we live or whether we die is not the question just now. I hope that we have got over that, that we can sing from our hearts, "The fear of death has gone forever" in so far as the physical side is concerned. That is not the point. It is our faith, beloved; if we lose faith, we have lost our Life; if we lose our confidence in the living God, we are engulfed in that spiritual death, that is, we are put out of our functioning place for God, with God. The true sons of God by faith in Jesus Christ, those who share God's Life through regeneration in virtue of the Blood of Jesus which has dealt with the sin question, those who have become sharers with God in His Life through His righteousness, are the objective of Satan today. It seems a terrible thing, but then what is going on in the earth after all may only be limited to Europe and we say, all of us, is it not a terrible thing to think that one man in a continent will bring millions to death just to get his own end, but take the whole world, and not only the whole world, the whole course of time, and satan has repeated it again and again to get his own end. It does not matter to him if he throws all the nations into the fire of destruction if he can get his end. What is his end? It is that elect instrument, God's elect, with which all the purposes of God are bound up, to get at that, to get at the faith of that, not to destroy it physically, but to get at its faith.

He may get at our faith through physical conditions, and we know that he does try that. While these things are going on, we know what is going on inside of us. There is a battle going on. We have to hold on to the Lord with both hands, to trust the Lord. What for? Oh, just to be spared death, injury, destruction? Oh no, there is a *spiritual* issue in this. We feel it deeper down than that. There is a spiritual issue in this. There are eternal factors bound up with this, and we know that the blow is always there. How can you believe in God when things are as they are? How can you believe in God ruling, God being supreme, God being all that you have claimed that He is; how can you hold on to that position? If you and I let go there, it is worse than physical death. We know it. Something has happened. It would be better to die than that that should happen. Better to lose all than to lose that, for, losing that, what is the good of anything else? We know that today. People who have not got that have nothing. They may have all in this world. What is the matter? What is the value of possessions now? What is the value of anything here now? That is their position. But we have something more. We have the living God.

Let me remind you of how that phrase came up so early in the Word of God. You remember, in the book of Joshua, "Hereby ye shall know that the living God is among you... Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth passeth over before you into the Jordan" (Josh. 3:10,11).

Then a little parenthesis in brackets, "for the Jordan overfloweth all its banks all the time of harvest" (v.15). Jordan, the symbol of death, death at the flood, overflowing everything, the mighty power and deluge of death and the ark of the God of all the earth goes over into Jordan, and what happens? The waters are thrown up; the mighty power of death is cleft and made to stand back. What is that ark? It is the testimony of Jesus. Death is overcome, death is swallowed up in victory. If He Who is the

Life is with us, death has no power. "Hereby ye shall know that the living God is among you...". Why? His Son is with us and in us, and He is not in us as the man of Nazareth, of Galilee, as the child of Bethlehem. He is in us as the risen and ascended Lord in the power of His Spirit, One Who has overcome death.

"Therefore, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58).

Why? That exhortation follows upon this - "O death, where is thy sting? ...thanks be unto God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Wherefore be ye steadfast...".

Work in the risen Lord is not in vain. If death is swallowed up in victory, there is nothing in vain. If death is still unconquered, everything is in vain. "Hereby ye shall know that the living God is among you".

Let us see what the issue is right at the heart of things, and see it is all a colossal, unspeakably iniquitous attack upon a faith, the faith of the Son of God in us. If satan can destroy faith, the day is lost, he is victor. But to come back and finish on the right note - "Thou art the Son of the living God". "Upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." *The Living God!*