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The Problem of the Stone

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: Mark 16:3-6. "They were saying: Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the tomb? ...for it was exceeding great".

This is one of those many human problems which have heavenly solutions. Let us look to see what this stone represented for those concerned.

The Disappointment of Expectations and Hopes

Firstly, it represented the disappointment of all their expectations and hopes. If they had been near when that great stone was rolled into position at the entrance to the tomb and if they had seen (as we are told elsewhere) the seal put upon it, they would have turned away, saying in their hearts, 'That is the end of all our expectations, that is the disappointing of all our hopes'. We know how two of the followers of the Lord went on a journey after that very time, and being interrogated as to the despair upon their faces and in their tones, they said, "We hoped that it was he who should redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21). For them all hopes for the redemption of Israel had gone with the closing of the tomb, and every expectation on which they had set their hearts was finished.

The Power of this World

Again, that stone represented the apparent triumph of the power of this world. The world had concentrated its power upon the One in that tomb and had seemingly triumphed. At that time the world had gained the day; all the evidence declared that its power had conquered.

The Spiritual Problem of Death

But more, that stone represented the terrible spiritual problem of death. Death is a great spiritual problem. I will not dwell upon that now; but in the presence of death you are confronted with tremendous problems, and are always asking all kinds of questions. There is about death such an utterness of helplessness, and demand for something that is beyond our giving. No one has ever come back from death to us personally, literally, to tell us anything of what we want to know. Death is always a tremendous mystery, and it was doubly so for those followers of the Lord; for they were not only perplexed by the general problem but also by the specific problem of *His* death. You can almost hear them inwardly asking questions. That *He* should die, that this should have happened to *Him!* What could it mean?

That stone really was a very great one, viewed from every angle. Indeed, it is true, that "it was exceeding great". And we have to enter as we can into the spirit of what we will call the negative side, the dark side, of its meaning before we can really appreciate the other side - that is, what the stone came to symbolize for them and for us all in Christ.

The Imminence of Another World

In the first place, it symbolized the imminence of another world than this one. That young man in his white robe - we read in another record that there were two in dazzling raiment, but here it says one - was a visitor from another world; and everything associated with this stone and its rolling away, as given in the four records that we have, speaks of the intervention of another world. It declares that this world, after all, is not all that we have to reckon with, or that death or men or our disappointments have to reckon with. There is another world entirely, in close touch with this one, and mightier than it, acting in relation to the purposes of God centred in His Son, and which can never, on any account, be swallowed up in a tomb. That entire other world is interested in this stone, in all the problems that are bound up with it in the hearts of true, sincere, simple, devoted followers of the Lord Jesus. The imminence of that world was gathered into this stone when it was rolled away, declaring that that world is very near and to be counted upon when God's eternal interests in His Son are at issue.

We do not know - for we have no evidence on which to work - but it would not be surprising if from time to time in after years they referred to it. 'You remember our great problem about the stone, how helpless we felt that morning, how utterly impotent, how every hope was gone; that stone represented for us an impasse, an impossible situation. But it was not there when we arrived on the spot! It was as simple as that! It is good to remember that God can do it like that'. There is another world so superior as to make of our problems nothing, as to dismiss the greatest causes of disappointment and despair as simply as though they had never been; to wipe them out so thoroughly that at one time we feel the situation to be utterly impossible and yet when we arrive on the spot there is no situation at all to be faced. Afterward that was how it seemed to those women. God is like that. That is our resource in a day when there is an exceeding great stone. Yes, the imminence of another world.

The Triumphant Power of Life Over Death

Further, that stone became the symbol of the mighty, triumphant power of life over death. We are so familiar with phrases like that that perhaps they have lost their point; but is not God constantly solving our problems along this very line? We are looking for things to happen, and yet all the time the power of His risen life is silently working and solving so many problems. We look back and remember how often we felt that we could not go on any longer, that we could not survive very much more, that we were at the end of our resources - the situation was really beyond us, and some tremendous thing had to happen. The tremendous thing we expected did not happen. The fact is that we are going on today after many such an experience of trial and helplessness; we have quietly been kept going on, and we are going on; we are not yet submerged and overwhelmed and put out. That is the miracle of His Divine life silently solving the problem, dealing with so many things that seem to say, Death, an end! The power of His resurrection is the answer to many of our problems. We look for acts; He proceeds along the silent course of life, the mighty power of life overcoming death. "It was not possible" says the Word, "that he should be holden of it (death)" (Acts 2:24). They were saying, 'It is impossible for us to deal with this stone, this situation!' He was saying, 'It is not possible for death to hold Me'. There are two ways of viewing the impossible. Everything depends upon where you put the impossibility - on the thing or on God. The things which are not possible with men are possible with God (Matt. 19:26). And He answers these impossible things in the normal way - for it is the normal way; the abnormal would be by signs and wonders and extraordinary happenings: demonstrations to our senses; but the normal way in the Christian life is the way of the continuous transcendence of His life over the working of death. That miracle is far more general than we recognize. You have to live your life and do your work in a sphere of spiritual death where everything is against spiritual life, and there is nothing to support you at all, and yet you go on there in the Lord, and are not swallowed up, engulfed and destroyed by that atmosphere and by those conditions. That is the miracle of Divine life working silently. Yours, then, is a life - as is the life of everyone - set in the presence of the great stone of death, spiritual death. We know it, and yet we are preserved alive spiritually and we go on. That is the great miracle. It is the miracle of every day. That is the testimony that God raised Him from the dead.

The Transcendence of Former Hopes

This stone became the symbol of the transcendence of all their former hopes. It was not that in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus their former hopes were resuscitated. Their hopes had to undergo a transformation, their expectations had to be greatly changed. The point is not just the raising of their hopes again with the rising of Christ, but the absolute transcendence of all the hopes that had been disappointed. They were looking for the temporal redemption of Israel: they had to see the redemption of Israel in another light. In the resurrection of the Lord Jesus - or let me put it this way - in union with the risen Christ our hopes are far greater than all our worldly hopes. We may in His death have to lay our treasure in the dust, we may have to let go much that is very precious to us of hope and expectation and ambition and outlook. Our world may have to be placed with the stones of the brook (Job 22:24). In resurrection union with Christ something more is given back than what we formerly wanted. God is like that. You may say that is language and sounds very beautiful, but is it true? Well, I appeal to those of you who have any spiritual life and history at all. You have doubtless gone through a time of deep and dark trial in which you have had to hand everything over - you have come to a crisis where you have had to place on the altar something that was very precious and let it go to the Lord. If the Lord has not given that back to you, have you not come into some spiritual wealth, some spiritual good, something more in a spiritual way that makes you say,

'Well, it was worth it!?' The answer of God through the Cross to all disappointed hopes and expectations is, and in the very nature of God must be, something more than that which was laid in the grave. It is the very principle of Christ risen. He was a far greater Christ in resurrection than He was before - if I may put it like that without being misunderstood. He became universal and not local, spiritual and not limited by the physical. Yes, they would say that they had come into a greater Christ. He was not, of course, in actual fact a greater Christ. They had come into greatness that was always there, but which they had never before appreciated. It is the law of death and resurrection - always increase, always something more. One corn falls into the ground and dies, and many corns result. The transcending of former hopes comes that way - in the coming back again, but the coming back with something added. The stone which seemed at one time to say, 'there is nothing left' became the symbol of increase immensely greater than ever they had thought of.

Rebuke Unto Instruction

But with it all, that stone became the symbol of a rebuke, which is always, with the Lord, instruction. The Lord never rebukes in a dead way: He always rebukes instructively. I can imagine them saying to one another in their elation, 'Why did we spend all night preparing those spices? What were we up to, after all? We were going to anoint His dead body with our spices. Ours was a prospect of utter despair. We worked in unbelief'. If you work in unbelief it is always despair. They were rebuked by the stone rolled away. Very likely in after years, when they were contemplating a situation that was humanly very difficult or impossible, the reminder would come back to them - 'Remember the stone! Do not go down that street again; death is that way!' Thus the rebuke would be unto instruction.

And does not the Lord use our experiences like that? I am not saying that we never do go down that street again, and I am not saying that the Lord never allows us to come up against further impossible situations - He does; but in the second test we should derive something from the first, and in the third from the second, and so we go on building up. "*God... delivered us out of so great a death, and will deliver: on whom we have set our hope that he will also still deliver us*" (2 Cor. 1:10). We have learned something of Christ. Rebuke - and yet we need that rebuke. So often when difficulty arises we go down, we throw up our hands, we are overcome by it. We do not say, 'But remember, we were up against a difficulty once before, and the Lord saw us through, we did not go under'. We are slow to do that.

The Need for Subjective Exercise

What is it, then, to which this heads up? It is interesting, and I think it is instructive, to note that of the four Gospels Mark's is the only one in which the subjective exercise associated with this incident is mentioned. The other three only record the objective, the external, incidents of the resurrection. One says that there was a great earthquake and behold, an angel! John goes as far as to say that, coming to the tomb, Mary Magdalene "seeth the stone taken away from the tomb". But none of them mentions what Mark records - that they were questioning one with another as to who should roll away the stone. Here was subjective exercise. It amounts to this. Something has got to be done in us as well as *for* us. We want to proceed on the line of having things done *for* us, heaven intervening *for* us, our difficulties removed *for* us, having a straight path made *for* us. Heaven may be ready to come in, the Lord may be prepared to work for us, but it is not sufficient for Him - and it would not prove good enough for us - if that were all. The very principle of spiritual growth and maturity demands that He keeps the objective and the subjective balanced; that is, that something is done *in* us as well as *for* us.

It is the principle of the Cross again. He died for us - that is the objective. We died in Him - that is the subjective. Here are two sides in spiritual experience. He keeps the balance of things. We have to have this balance wrought in us, and to be delivered from this tendency of allowing our problems to obscure the Lord, this inveterate habit of ours of viewing the position merely objectively instead of saying, 'What does the Lord want to teach us about this? What does He want to do in us in this matter? There is something He is after in us.' He has something to do *in* us before He can do it *for* us. How often we have found that when we have come to a new position with the Lord, when the thing has been done in us, then there has been outward movement. So the mention of the subjective exercise suggests that we have to take this matter to our own hearts as something which requires a change in us. I am quite sure that is how they must have felt when they were able to sit down and go over it all again. 'We were terribly obsessed with our problem and were asking who could solve it for us. The Lord has made us to see that we must be inwardly different about these things, we must have a position of faith, of rest, over them, we must believe God.' We must gain inward ascendancy over the stone before there is any ascendancy to be known over it outwardly. The stone is really not outside of us in the first place. It is inside; it is in our faith, it is in our spirit, it is in our minds.

When the Lord moves for His own Son's sake, and has those interests governing, and when those interests have brought us into such a relationship with Him that we can say there is no stone so big to be removed, no problem so great for solving, no difficulty so intense, but the Lord will do what is necessary for His Son's sake - when we have come to a position like that, the Lord is free to do a lot of things very quietly. As we say, they just 'happen'. Ah, but they have been the objects of the exercise of exceeding great power - "There was a great earthquake" (Matt. 28:2). But here, in this aspect of the situation, it does not seem to be an earthquake at all. It has just happened. We must recognize that there is an aspect of activities in which the secret, quiet working of His immense power dismisses the greatest difficulties as though they had never existed. Sometimes He may bring us into the presence of the working of His power that is manifestly terrific, but not often and certainly not always. For faith it is more like this: there is such power at work as to make possible the setting aside of the obstacle very quietly, so that we afterward wonder - "And they were amazed". And the angel said, "Be not amazed". It is good to have amazement, but let us recognize that a certain amount of our amazement is because we have not sufficient faith.