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## "Ye Are... A Holy Nation"

*by T. Austin-Sparks*

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Reading: Matthew 21:42-44; 1 Peter 2:7-10.

These passages refer, as you see, to that very solemn and, in some respects, tragic thing: the truth that all that could and should have been the inheritance and the vocation of Israel was lost by them and to them because of their unbelief, and was transferred to the Church. The Church is here designated by Peter as "a holy nation".

It is Peter who has taken those Old Testament words, and the words which the Lord Jesus Himself took from the Old Testament and transferred to Himself. Peter has a peculiar place in this transition, an interesting and very instructive place. The Lord had said to him: "*Thou art Peter* [piece of rock], *and upon this rock* [of Peter's testimony, undoubtedly] *I will build my church*" (Matthew 16:18). There is no doubt that in Peter's mind "the stone which the builders rejected" and which "was made the head of the corner" was identical with the rock upon which the Church would be built. Peter was the one who heard that statement from the Lord, and it was Peter who so many years afterward took up the thought here in his Letter - the stone, the rock, the building of the Church thereupon and therearound. The Lord had, in that very connection of the rejected stone becoming the head of the corner, said: "*The kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof*" (Matthew 21:43). To Peter He had said: "*I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven*" (Matthew 16:19), and here is Peter using this very phrase "a holy nation", answering to that which was in the declaration of the Lord Jesus as Israel was set aside: "The kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and shall be given to a *nation*". Now Peter speaks of

"a holy nation" to "*shew forth the excellencies of him*" corresponding to "*bringing forth the fruits thereof*".

Now Peter opens this Letter by indicating that he is addressing the scattered saints of the Dispersion all over the world: the "*sojourners of the Dispersion*" in all these many nations and places, or parts of the earth, and he says: 'Ye saints, scattered in the nations, dispersed over the earth, ye are a holy nation.' Not 'ye are going to be', but '*now*, as scattered everywhere, you are a holy nation in the nations, but you are different from the nations'.

Our present emphasis is upon this one word: "*Ye are... a holy nation*". It was upon that word 'holy' that the tragedy of Israel took place, and the transference of all the divine intention was effected. It was upon that one word that the Church inherited all that. The whole change-over, the terrible tragedy and loss of Israel, and the glorious inheritance of the Church hung upon one word - holy. Everything rested upon that. If Israel's loss of the divine intentions for that people as a nation was all due to this one thing - failure in what God means by holiness - and if the Church comes in only on that ground, then this matter of what the Lord means by holiness is a very governing thing.

The Church is "sanctified in Christ Jesus": Israel rejected Christ Jesus.

We could go as far as to say that there is no guarantee of the Church retaining its inheritance and vocation beyond its holiness. It could very well be said of people, even in this Christian dispensation: 'It shall be taken from you and shall be given to those bringing forth the fruits thereof. Holiness is the only ground. You, no more than Israel, can claim to stand and abide on mere tradition, mere history, mere externals, or practice and teaching.' The basis with God is holiness and what He means by that.

No one can contemplate the awfulness of Israel's tragedy over these two thousand years without feeling that they are in the presence of something very great and important, and, in a sense, of something very terrible - this matter of holiness. And you know that there are other words into which this one word is translated. It simply means - as we often say - sanctified, separated, set apart for God. There are many ways of expressing it, but that is what it is. It denotes something which belongs to God, solely and wholly, and, belonging to God, it is sacred, holy, sanctified, separated from all that is contrary to God. That is holiness.

For light in this matter we have to go, of course, back to the Old Testament, and we begin with the realisation that after man's disobedience at the beginning - and that is the heart of the trouble of all unholiness, as is here stated - the whole world (to use the phrase of an Apostle) fell into the arms of the wicked one: "*the whole world lieth in the evil one*" (1 John 5:19). That is the revelation of the early chapters of the Bible. We need not stay to emphasise, illustrate or to cite. It is there. God beheld, looked down, and saw that all men had gone astray - "the whole world lieth in the evil one". And then God moved to extricate from that world in the lap of the evil one a people of a different kind.

We have His move with Abraham - and here, dear friends, with all your interest in the life of Abraham, in your reading and study of that life, remember that the heart of everything where he was concerned was this one thing: to separate him from this world. So the word came to Abraham: "*Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house*" (Genesis 12:1) ...'Get thee out!' This is a literal, geographical movement, but it contains a spiritual principle - a

getting out of that realm lying "in the evil one". So Abraham went out of Ur of the Chaldees. In a typical sense, he went out from this world that was lying "in the evil one".

Then God promised Abraham a son. He made promise of Isaac, and then went away and left him, as He so often seems to do when He has made a promise. He leaves us for a long time - but, you notice, with one object. Why did God promise and then not fulfil His promise for so long, and leave Abraham to be so tested and tried by His word? For this one thing only: that son had to be different from all other sons, He could not come the natural way, could not be like other sons of this world. He must be born peculiarly by God's act. And so God saw to it that, although He promised, the natural way was impossible. It simply closed down. There was no hope along that line. When at length Isaac was born, he was God's miracle, something not of this world but of God. Even so, God was going to ratify and confirm that principle. The day came when the lad had grown to youth and God said to Abraham: "*Take now thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest... and offer him*" (Genesis 22:2), and so Isaac must go to death. All the natural ties were severed and broken and Isaac, being brought back, in figure, in resurrection from the dead, was simply put on supernatural ground again. The heavenly, divine, supernatural ground of things was confirmed by God in that event.

You see what God was doing? He was putting everything on to holy ground. God can give us things, and He undoubtedly does, and we know it at the time, but then we lay hold and impinge upon them, holding them to ourselves: our natural life comes right in on this matter. The Lord takes us through drastic experiences to sever our natural selves from divine things to keep them holy, because even our affections are not always pure and holy. God puts everything on that ground, outside this corrupt, devil-ridden, devil-governed world. And who will say that that is not the state of the world today?

God did it with Abraham, and that is where He made His start toward a holy nation. He laid the foundation in holiness. Then His promise and covenant with Abraham reached the stage of a nation being in existence, and Israel is in Egypt - in the world. There is no doubt about it. They were in the lap of the devil, the evil one, for Pharaoh is a type of the prince of this world. You notice that the Lord takes pains to show what a tyrant he is and how evil he is. I venture to say that there are few people in this world who would endure half of what Pharaoh endured before he let those people go! God went through plague after plague, right up to the tenth, which was death itself, for one purpose. On the one side, He was showing the nature of the evil one. On the other side - well, He met Moses, as you know, in the desert, at the bush alive with fire but never consumed, and this is the man who is going to bring that people out of the power of darkness, out of the bondage of the prince of this world, out of this evil kingdom. God met him there, and what did He say? "*Put off thy shoes from off thy feet for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground*" (Exodus 3:5). The instrument, in figure, in type, must be separated from the evil ground, the evil earth, the evil kingdom. No one who is still in bondage himself can lead another soul out of bondage, and no one who is not separated from this world himself can help other people into a life with God. So the very instrument, Moses himself, has to go on to holy, consecrated, separated ground. With what? *Fire!* Between this world and that, between God and the evil one, there is a fire which never dies, a fire which draws the line of distinction between what is holy and what is not holy.

And so Moses goes to Egypt with his commission and we know the story. Yes, the people are in a kingdom, in a world which has to be repudiated, and they have to be brought out, but it is by virtue of precious blood, the blood of the lamb and the blood of the Passover - by the mighty, efficacious blood of a lamb without spot or blemish. Separated by precious, holy blood - and this is Peter

speaking again: *"Ye were redeemed, not with corruptible things, with silver or gold... but with precious blood, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot"* (1 Peter 1:18,19).

You would think that that had effected it! But they were in the wilderness for forty years, and what is the one thing that came out so clearly during those forty years? Although they are out of Egypt, Egypt is not out of them. Although they are separated geographically, spiritually their hearts are still back in Egypt. They are talking about Egypt, hankering for Egypt after all. And so we come to Jordan, the mighty overflowing Jordan, lying between them and that life as a nation which is to satisfy God, fulfil a holy vocation. They go over - and at last their hearts are out of Egypt.

You see, the principle is working all the time. God is carrying this thing very deep.

You pass on to the later history of that nation, when they go into captivity and exile, and a remnant comes back. Do you remember that crisis in the Book of Ezra, when the remnant comes back and the house is being restored, beautified? It was over one thing - the people had married foreign wives, and the whole work was spoiled and came under arrest. It was as though God said: 'We are not going on with this'. You read again what Ezra did over that matter! He brought everything up short on this question of mixed marriages. Again, all this is a figure of spiritual mixture, which God will not have: it is unholiness. The mark and line of distinctiveness between what is of God and what is not of God is drawn hard and fast.

Well, what are we going to say to all this? That is a very brief and imperfect survey, but, dear friends, do you see that the very beginning of the Christian life rests upon this one historic law of God, which He cannot overlook? The beginning of the Christian life is called 'being born anew', or, more correctly, 'being born from above'. What does it mean? It means all that Isaac's birth and resurrection meant in figure - that by our very new birth we are "delivered out of the power of darkness, and translated into the kingdom of the Son of his love" (Colossians 2:13). Our birth, our conversion, the very beginning of our Christian life is an absolute separation of two kingdoms, the transference from one to the other. The one is an unholy realm into which we are born and to which we belong by nature. The other is a holy realm - "Ye are... a holy nation", a nation separated from this world unto God.

New birth means that, and, oh! that that should be made clear to all! What an utter thing this is, at the beginning, right through! The Lord Jesus left no doubt about this. There must be a cleavage, utter and absolute. He would take risks with people. You would say. 'Why put people off? Why run the risk of offending them? Why discourage them, saying Except, except, except... all the time?' He was taking all the risks necessary over this because of its awful reality. You cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven while you cling in any way to this kingdom which is inimical to God. The two things cannot go together. The one is unholy and the other holy. At new birth we cross a line, a line as broad as the Red Sea and the Jordan, and as broad as the Cross of the Lord Jesus. At new birth we have entered into a life of holiness, of complete separation unto God. It is to be a walk in holiness - and how much the New Testament has to say about this! We are to be separated unto God in heart, spirit and life from this world, and, if we knew it, a very large degree of our spiritual education and our discipline in the Christian life, under the hand of the *Holy* Spirit, has to do with those things in us which are mixed up. We are trying to make the best of two worlds, trying to keep together in compromise things which do not belong before God and which are going to spell disaster for us as truly as they ever spelt disaster for Israel. We are going to lose the kingdom. It is a tremendous thing! The Lord calls for distinctiveness of life and destiny. Is our life, dear friends, in this world, in

our connections and associations, quite distinct? Is there no mistaking to what realm and to whom we belong? Or are we mixed up, compromising, keeping on good terms with this world and its people under the devil's hand? If so, we stand to lose terribly.

What sort of testimony have you where you work, in your business and its associations? What sort of testimony have we in the church? Are we really registering and making our mark in the church? Do we count, or are we passengers? Is there something about our lives which says: 'This man, this woman, is utter for God. There is no doubt about it. You see it all the time. He, or she, is not playing at things. There is no compromise in him or in her.'?

This sounds hard, but it is necessary. You see what is involved - the secret of power is holiness. If our lives are powerless it may be due to a lack of this utterness for God, separation unto God; due to compromise somewhere, somehow, with the prince of this world who is robbing us of our spiritual power and vitality on his own ground. The secret of power is holiness. The secret of a testimony that counts is a holy life. It is not our teaching, our truth, our practice, religious ordinances, our forms, in the first place. Our real testimony is the testimony of a holy life. It counts far more than all our words.

And remember - this is the secret of divine support. The Lord will commit Himself to His own ground - holiness. The Lord will stand by those who stand for Him in His nature. The Lord will look after such. Mark you, whatever we may have in this life, in this world - and we may have a lot - if we have not got the Lord with us at the last it is no gain, but a terrible loss. Israel had the ordinances and the oracles, the tradition and all that. They had a mighty lot, but at the last they lost the kingdom. It was no gain.

Well, now, what are we concerned about? I can focus it all down to one thing - the Lord being with us and committing Himself to us, and I am concerned about a testimony in power, a life that counts for God, leaving a mark for God, being remembered for what was of God. This is the only justification of our having come this way at all, and, as I see it, all that depends upon this utter separation unto God, gathered into this word: holiness. "Ye are... a holy nation."

May we answer to the description, and to us will be the preciousness.