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Faith and Experience

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: 1 Peter 1:1-9.

We note the movement, the change, the transition that is marked by this passage, so far as those to whom it was written were concerned.

Peter was the apostle to the Jews. That does not mean that he exclusively ministered to the Jews, for we know otherwise. We know that in the house of Cornelius, after some real dealings with the Lord and the Lord's dealings with him over the matter, he quite freely and openly ministered to the Gentiles. And we have other indications also that he ministered to both Jews and Gentiles, and in these very districts mentioned at the commencement of this letter there were Gentiles to whom Paul ministered and Peter went very largely over the same ground and on beyond it to places where Paul had not visited, so far as we know. But Peter is known as the apostle to the dispersion, the Jews scattered abroad. That gives us a clue to the things with which he opens his letter.

"Elect, Scattered Abroad"

There are several things which would very definitely and directly touch Jewish Christians. Take the second clause of the very first sentence, "...to the elect who are sojourners of the Dispersion". Then carry that forward to, "elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father". That word "elect" would touch Jewish hearts very definitely, because the Jews had no question whatever about being the elect, the chosen people. But here we find the elect "scattered abroad", with no city of their own, no temple to which they could come with the same sense as of old in the days when the temple represented the centre of a solid national life; they are scattered abroad, dispersed over the face of the earth, and in these places mentioned.

So Peter carries the idea of the election higher, lifts it completely off the earth, as the context shows, and what he is speaking about to these Jewish Christians is not the chosen race of Israel, but that elect of which they (not as Jews, but as Christians) are a part. The election is according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, which is the greater election than Israel, the elect of which Paul speaks in his letter to the Ephesians. So that Peter carries these Jewish believers out of the situation in which they find themselves as Jews, the chosen people, yet scattered, broken, distributed, and without anything on the earth to indicate their election. It was a poor lookout if this were all that election meant, if it were an earthly people with an earthly kingdom and an earthly glory. And things were like this - they were scattered in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia.

If they are the elect you will have to look somewhere else, and you will have to look higher for the value of that. So we find ourselves on common ground with them, that the true elect has no national home on this earth, has no earthly kingdom, position, honour, glory, but are sojourners; not only in these few places, but in the earth altogether pilgrims and strangers and yet elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father.

That is where we begin, and that is the first touch which carries a familiar idea away from the merely temporal and earthly setting and carries it higher.

"In Sanctification of the Spirit"

The second thing, which also has a like connection is, "in sanctification of the Spirit". The word "sanctification" would be a very familiar word with the Jews, for the same word is "consecration", and we know how their Scriptures, the book of Leviticus for instance, stresses throughout the idea of consecration to God, the people set apart for God, God's holy people. That which is set apart for God is holy. It is not only hedged about as something separate, but it is of a character: it is holy. The idea of being a separated, consecrated, sanctified, holy people would be very familiar to the Jewish mind.

Now the apostle also carries that beyond the realm of Judaism, and carries it into the realm which is far greater and far higher, and says, "in sanctification of the Spirit". The Holy Spirit sets apart the elect for God, consecrates, sanctifies, and makes holy unto the Lord. How much at home they would be with that word "sanctification" yet how contradictory their earthly condition was to it! How everything seemed to deny, so far as their earthly experience was concerned, that they were God's holy people on the earth, God's holy Israel. The apostle comes into their situation. The whole letter is intended to comfort them. It is a letter of comfort to these pressed, tried children of God, and a large part of their trial was the contradiction of their circumstances, the seeming denial of everything by reason of the situation in which they found themselves.

The apostle is interpreting and explaining everything, and carrying things higher and saying there is no denial. Elect? Yes! But with a greater election than that of Israel. Consecrated, sanctified, set apart? Yes! But a much higher one than Israel's separation as an earthly people.

"Unto Obedience and Sprinkling of the Blood of Jesus Christ"

Obedience? They knew something about that. Their great national founder had burnt the word "obedience" into their very bones. Sprinkling of the blood? They knew about that. These are familiar terms to Jewish minds, but it is all now broken down as an earthly thing, destroyed utterly, they are "scattered abroad". So the apostle carries it away from the historical and the earthly, and links it with

Jesus Christ, "unto obedience and sprinkling of *the blood of Jesus Christ*". That is something more than the blood of bulls and of goats.

"Grace to You and Peace be Multiplied"

Now he is coming onto another great thing, which touches them very acutely: "Blessed be the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Who... begat us again unto a living hope... unto an inheritance."

This is the point which would touch them very keenly, "an inheritance". Where are all the promises made to our fathers? Where is the inheritance? Scattered abroad, dispersed, sojourners! As an earthly thing it has gone, but God is faithful, God stands to His promise, and what is lost as an earthly thing through sin, under the law, can be had on a far greater scale under grace, in Christ. So that there really is no loss, but gain when the thing is transferred from earth to heaven, from Moses to Christ, from law to grace, and according to His great mercy there is an inheritance. But what a difference!

"Incorruptible"

You see how comforting almost every word of this must have been to those people. "We have not lost our inheritance after all! Things seem to be terribly contradictory, but we have not lost our inheritance! An inheritance? What we did have as a nation was a corruptible thing, and it has proved to be so, and has broken down".

"Undefiled"

Think of the defiled inheritance of Israel. Defiled by the Romans, by the heathen who have come into the Lord's inheritance and defiled it. But here is an incorruptible and undefiled inheritance, where no evil can come to touch or to spoil.

"That Fadeth Not Away"

This is the common ground with us. It is the word of comfort for all who have nothing here, and for all whose prospects here in this world are not very promising, who are in a situation where there seems to be nothing. Here it all is in Christ. Everything that Israel ever hoped for, or had promised, is more than secured, is transcended in Christ and that is our common ground with all believers; "...that fadeth not away".

"Reserved in Heaven"

This is the point: "reserved in heaven", transferred from earth to heaven.

"For You, Who by the Power of God are Guarded Through Faith"

That is not only a statement of truth, but it introduces an element of challenge. It states immediately that the new order is a *faith* order. All this that has been said is a faith thing. The good of the election, the good of the sanctification, the good of the sprinkling of the Blood, the good of the unfading inheritance, is a faith matter, or to put it in a word, a faith dispensation has come in, with things in heaven. That declares the truth as to the nature of this dispensation. It challenges.

Then the statement is this, that on the ground of the faith which is the characteristic of this dispensation, God guards by His power. Are they now exposed, no longer protected in their own country, no longer in their own cities, no longer with the mountains around about Jerusalem, that great natural fortification with that sense of security which they had in their own country? No! They are now scattered abroad and exposed to the world and all its forces of antagonism, and also suffering all that this seeming contradiction suggests. All the promises have broken down, the inheritance is gone, all that belonged to them as the chosen people has departed; yet, coming onto the ground of the new dispensation, everything is in Christ, to be had and enjoyed by faith. When that faith becomes the governing law of the new life in Christ, God becomes the guard. You can be exposed to anything, but God guards with power. You can be anywhere, but by faith in God, guarded by His power.

It is a great comfort to know that where faith is in God in the midst of apparent contradiction on every point of Divine promise, God guards by His power. "For you, who by the power of God are guarded through faith!"

"Unto a Salvation Ready to be Revealed in the Last Time... that the Proof of Your Faith..."

The faith order of things is brought into view.

"Being more Precious than Gold that perishes... Might be Found unto Praise and Glory... at the Revelation of Jesus Christ"

The revelation of Jesus Christ has to be linked with that former clause, "ready to be revealed at the last time". The "last time" is the revelation of Jesus Christ, and the revelation of Jesus Christ is the last time. Salvation is ready to be revealed. What is the salvation? Obviously not the salvation that they have already entered into. Is salvation waiting for the last time? Can we not say that we already have salvation, and are in salvation, and are saved? Surely we can. Then this salvation must be something more. A salvation ready to be revealed.

It is first of all necessary to recognise again the change. Everything that they had had as Israel had been seen. It was a visible order of things. Now they see nothing; "ye see Him not" (verse 8). You see nothing, but it is there! The fact that you do not see does not contradict the statement that it is there. It is there, though you see it not, and it is ready to be revealed at the last time at the revelation of Jesus Christ, "Whom not having seen ye love; on Whom, though now ye see Him not, yet believing, ye rejoice...".

"Receiving the End of your Faith, Even the Salvation of your Souls"

The end of your faith is the salvation of your souls, and you receive that now. There are three salvations. One is the salvation you have the day you believe in Christ. Another salvation is this ready to be revealed at the last time; that is, manifestation in glory with Christ. Then in between these two there is the receiving of the end of our faith now, the salvation of our souls. The salvation you receive when you believe is not the salvation of your soul. Perhaps you have always believed that, but it is not so in this sense in which Peter speaks of the salvation of the soul. What is the salvation of the soul? It has to do with this whole setting.

See these people as they are. They are in the fiery trial, they are in the furnace. If you like to change the metaphor, they are in a prison; in a sense they have been flung into the inner dungeon. Whether it be in the fire, in the flames, in the furnace, or whether it be in the dungeon, two things are

possible when you are in a setting like that. One is for your soul to take it all on and say, "This is a fine lookout! This is what we get for serving the Lord!" Think of the Hebrews in the furnace; faithful to God and then flung into the furnace, and saying, "You see? This is how the Lord cares for those who trust Him! This is how the Lord looks after those who try to be true to Him!" What will happen when you begin to think like that? At once you will lose your soul. What is meant by losing your soul? It means being just the opposite of what those men were in the furnace. They had *faith* in the fire. It was faith in God, and not in circumstance. If their faith had been based upon circumstances, and they had thought that everything was going according to what the natural man would expect when he put his trust in God, they would have been bitterly disappointed.

The natural man thinks, "Oh, if you are going to trust God, God is going to look after you, no harm will come to you; your children will never suffer, there will never come affliction into your home; your business will go on straight, and if it does not, there is something wrong with you!" They think that if you are going to be true to God, everything will go well. That is faith in God based upon circumstances. These men put their faith in God no matter what the circumstances were, and said that their God was *able* to deliver, "*but if not*" their faith in God was unalterable. What was the result? They were loosed in the fire and walked about. They were not under the fire, they were on top of it. Their souls were not lost in the trial, but were saved in the trial through faith.

Take the prison idea, and look at Paul and Silas. They had seen a vision in which there stood a man of Macedonia saying, "Come over and help us", and with the understanding that God had called them, they went. They had not been there long before they were lacerated with stripes, and flung into the inner dungeon, with their feet in the stocks. The reaction could have been, "Oh, well, we must have been mistaken in our guidance! The Lord has forsaken us!" Where would that have led them? Their souls would be lost in the situation. But because they believed God, in the prison they sang praises to God at midnight. Their souls were saved through faith. They were on top of the thing, full of joy, and it was not simply that they said, "We will make the best of a bad job! Let us have some singing!" No! The song was coming up from inside. Their souls were filled with praise.

It is necessary to have a soul. Do not think that you have no right to a soul and your soul has to die, and go about talking of "souliness". It is a very good thing to be soulful, provided the Holy Spirit has got hold of your soul. Soulfulness in an evil sense is when it is purely exerting itself on a natural level apart from the government of the Holy Spirit, but a Spirit-governed soul is a necessity. Our souls must magnify the Lord, and these men's souls were filled with singing. Their souls were saved through faith. They received the end of their faith, the salvation of their souls. What is the end of our faith? It is the salvation of our souls. What is the salvation of our souls? It is the soul incapable of being submerged; it is the soul triumphant. The opposite of that is simply going down in black moods of despair. The soul becomes darkened and pressed under. The salvation of the soul is all your soul borne up in the fire, in the fiery trial.

We are in a day of faith, which involves us in situations similar to those in which these people were; that is, everything on the outside contradicting that natural expectation that if you are true and faithful to God, everything is going right and there will be no trouble. To put it the other way, God does not always, but only rarely, break in to change our circumstances and to do big things on the outside of our lives, to keep trouble away or to take trouble away. He very rarely does that. The experience of His people is that God does not come in and remove all our troubles when we ask Him, and change our situation, but He allows painful situations to go on, difficult things to continue, and all these things constitute a fiery trial.

Are we going to say that because the Lord does not come in and change situations and remove difficulties and put things straight and give us everything just as we would like it to be, that things are wrong? Of course, we know there is wrong somewhere, but are we going to take the attitude that faithfulness to God must work out in the clearing up of all the messes in our lives and the removing of all the difficulties, and the straightening out of all the tangles, and we should go on a straight way without any of these things? If we come to that conclusion, before very long our souls will be under, because things will not happen that way.

I do not want to depress you, but I promise you that you will to the last be up against things on the outside and in your own experience which will be altogether beyond your natural idea of what should be with a life devoted to God. Somehow or other we think that because we are given up to God, because we have let everything go for God, God is going to put everything right in our lives; all these difficulties are going to be removed out of the way. Please do not believe that. If you do you will lose your soul, because it will not be. We shall be in problems, and perplexities, and seeming contradictions to the last hour, but it is possible for us to receive the end of our faith, the salvation of our souls now, and get above the contradictions, to be free in prison, to walk about in the fire. That is what Peter means when he says, "put to grief in manifold temptations, that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold that perishes, though it is proved by fire, might be found unto praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ". That is salvation, that is at the end: praise and glory and honour.

In the meantime there is the receiving of that in a spiritual way. It is praise, and glory, and honour now in a spiritual way. That is the soul saved now in the midst of the fire literally, because it has been out of it spiritually before. All the ultimate things have to be spiritually entered into and possessed beforehand. "Guarded by the power of God through faith". The power of God operating in the midst of the fire, co-operating with our faith, so that we receive the end thereof, the present salvation of our souls. That is the purpose of the fire, and that is why the Lord does not stop the flames and quench them and alter the situation.

We are living in the day of faith, in which everything is of faith; and faith brings the end into present experience: the salvation of the soul.