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Faith's Witness in a Dark Day

by T. Austin-Sparks

First published in "A Witness and A Testimony" magazine, May-June 1951, Vol. 29-3.

We are going to be occupied with the book of Daniel, but not with any one particular passage in it. You know that in that great summary of faith's devotion and activities in Hebrews 11, some referred to in this book are mentioned (though not by name) as amongst the great men of faith, that great "cloud of witnesses" (for that is what they are called). It seems to me that the message of this book, so far as the men of God in it are concerned, is faith's witness in a dark and difficult day. There are many features in this book of Daniel which correspond to the position in our own time, and the spiritual principles are those of all time. They are fully revealed in the New Testament in relation to Christ and the Church. Some of those features I want to bring again to your remembrance.

The Saints the Focal Point of all That is Going On

In the first place, we are made to understand that the object in view with all that is going on is an elect people in whom the glory, the honour, the rights and the purposes of God are centred. How many times in this book of Daniel do the words "the saints" occur. In chapter 7 they occur six times, and you know that chapter 7 is a consummate chapter. If you glance at it, you will see how everything is gathered into the end of that chapter in the great throne, the great judgment; all is now brought to consummation, and in the consummation of everything those words "the saints" are repeated six times, suggesting that this is the object which has all along been in view and comes out with great emphasis at the end.

Of course, here you are able to observe that "the saints" has two sides. On the one side, it refers to Israel, that elect nation. They are here called the saints, and are such in type and in an earthly way. But it is quite clear also that what is here goes beyond Israel to the Church, and "the saints" are those of the New Testament inclusively - and not now in an earthly way but a heavenly, not in type

or in figure but in fulness. That is what the Lord is concerned with, an elect people with whom He has thus closely and inseparably bound up His glory, His rights and His purposes. For that reason, their importance is such as to explain all that is recorded in this book, and it is a wonderfully far-reaching and comprehensive story; heaven and earth are both bound up with this great concern.

Prevailing Spiritual Poverty in the Saints

But here we find that people in a state which expresses anything but the glory, the honour, the rights and the purposes of God. They are out of touch with those things; a low spiritual life has resulted in a loss of the very testimony for which they existed, the testimony of God's authority. Looking at Israel in the time of Daniel, you certainly have anything but a testimony to the authority of God. They were called to be a witness to God's absolute supremacy in all realms. We know how God did stand by them in that respect in the days when their spiritual life was true, and there was not a nation that was able to stand before them; the authority of God was truly set forth. But now that testimony is lost, and, further, they are in a state of defeat and in bondage to the world. They are having to pay homage to the world, to seek at the hands of the world the very means of their subsistence; they are entirely dependent upon the world for everything. They are totally incapable of standing up in strength, in testimony, without help from the world, and they are in such a position as to be altogether out of immediate touch with what represents the full mind of the Lord: they are away from that.

Now all that is literally true in the case of Israel as seen here in the days of Daniel. I do not think it wants a very great deal of perception to recognize that, speaking in general, there is a state in the Church in our time which very largely corresponds to that. We are not able to say very much about our high level of spiritual life as the people of God. We deplore the poverty, and weakness of it, and while being unspeakably grateful for any and all who are going on with the Lord, we have to say of the great mass of those who fear His name that spiritual life is not on a very high level, not very rich, strong, clear; and consequently the testimony of the Lord's authority as expressed by means of His Church is very largely lost. The Church has not an authoritative message and word and position in the nations today. Surely in these days of world crisis we are feeling, Oh, that a voice might be raised! Oh, that some Divine authority might be expressed! Oh, that there might be something from heaven to make people aware of their state and their responsibility! Oh, that there might be something to halt this rush toward destruction and perdition! We do not stay to speak of how terrible the outlook is unless something happens from heaven. Well might men's hearts faint for fear and for expectation of what is coming on the earth. Truly the word of Christ has meaning that unless those days be shortened, there shall no flesh be saved (Matt. 24:22). Oh, for a voice of authority from heaven! Oh, that the Church meant something today in the nations! But we have to say that it is not so, that the Church hardly counts. Rather is she in a state of defeat and bondage to the world. Is it not true, speaking very generally, that the Church today is dependent upon the world almost for its existence, having to call on the world for its supplies, having to go to the world to maintain it, to keep it going? It is like that. And who will say that Christians are really in closest touch with the mind of the Lord as to His great purposes in the very election of the Church? I think I need not labour that there is a correspondence between Daniel's time and ours.

We are, then, led to consider Daniel and his friends in Babylon and what they signify, with reference both to their own day and, in figure, to today.

God's Need of an Instrument to Express and Embody His Thoughts

Firstly, they were an instrument of mediation between God and His people in their low spiritual condition, and between the people and God. There those men stood, there they poured themselves out to heaven, there they cried to God: they were the only mediatorial instrument that God had there to bridge this terrible gap between God and His people; to speak for God, and to speak to God about these things.

Much is said that indicates they were men who had intelligence and understanding, men who knew the Scriptures. They were probably the only ones who really had this insight, and together they embodied the mind of the Lord. They were the embodiment of God's mind about His people. Had His people been what the Lord would have had them to be, they would have been like Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and any others that may have been of their type, prevailing with heaven concerning conditions here in this world. These alone were the embodiment of that mind of the Lord for the elect, for His people, for the Church. And then they were standing uncompromisingly for that Divine mind which they knew and of which they were the embodiment; uncompromisingly they stood for it at all costs.

We come by way of them to see what God's need is in all such times, and in our time so very greatly, namely, of an instrument to stand between Him and the poor, weak, defeated spiritual state of His people at large - an instrument that has knowledge of the time, has intelligence about God's thoughts for His people, understanding what the will of the Lord is, to whom the Lord has disclosed His counsels and His purposes as to the elect. He needs a people, an instrument, like that. But more than that, it must be not just as those who have knowledge, but a people who are themselves the embodiment of the Lord's mind, a corporate embodiment and expression of what He wants concerning the Church. That is a Divine principle which applies to all times. The Lord is not satisfied just to have people to preach His truths. He must have a people who embody those truths and express them in a living way - a voice, a corporate instrument. He must have a company or companies like that. It is so easy to speak about the purposes and thoughts of God, to give them out and then to think that is all that is necessary. It is only when the truth has been made known, and the Lord's thoughts have been revealed, that the work really begins. It is from that point that the revelation has to become embodied and expressed in a people, and all the work of the Holy Spirit to get a people according to that revelation has to be done. It has to be like that. The Lord must have a people who embody in themselves what they know by revelation of the Holy Spirit the Lord wants for His Church, and who stand positively and uncompromisingly for it.

Satan's Antagonism

We pass from the vessel itself to what such a vessel has to meet, and it is perfectly clear in this book of Daniel that the men of this kind had to meet no small thing in the matter of antagonism, hostility, hatred, and every kind of evil work. This antagonism, moreover, this cost attaching to their testimony, was universal in character. It embraced heaven and earth. You are familiar with that part of this book which brings out so clearly how that by Daniel's praying and fasting the very powers of heaven were shaken. Principalities and powers were stirred to attempt to frustrate this activity. Yes, that whole realm of spiritual antagonism in the lower heavenlies came into operation because of these men and the testimony for which they were standing. It seems that all heaven was moved, so that when Satan and his angels went out to oppose, God had to put into commission even His archangel Michael to overcome them.

Then of course there was the play of those evil powers upon the earthly forces. Those who could be used by them were all fully employed to destroy this testimony and to put these witnesses out of commission. It is not difficult to see the reflection of Satan in Babylon, of that pride which caused

him to challenge the very throne of heaven. It was there in Babylon, man's glory in the place of God's glory. It is pride which will be found in Antichrist. It is at the heart of all antagonism to God. And when it is the Lord's glory alone that is the concern of His people, there is nothing else for them but a seven times heated fire and the den of lions and such like things. The antagonism against this kind of ministry and service to the Lord is terrific. The cost is great.

The Ground of Triumph - Separation From the World

We must hurry to note this final thing, namely, the ground of triumph. I think there is one thing that goes to the heart of it. It is an inclusive thing, that is, it touches so many other things, so many aspects. It may be gathered into one word - separation. I am not so fond of that word, but it is the word we need here. You notice that it says in the very first chapter of the book that Daniel and his brethren determined that they would not defile themselves with the king's dainties, nor with the wine from the king's table; and that is how they spoke of it when they went to Arioch, the king's representative, to plead their case. They asked - you would think hardly tactfully or diplomatically! - 'that they might not defile themselves'. It is hardly complimentary, at any rate, to speak so of food from the king's table. They pressed this matter of defilement. They had seen the principle - that by this means they and their testimony would in some way be compromised. It was a link with this world and with Satan's kingdom as in this world, and the effect of it would be - oh, how inclusive and comprehensive this is! - that they would be denying in their very persons the all-sufficiency of the Lord. If they were to go the way of the world and look like the people of the world, where would be the testimony of the Lord? If they did not go the way of the world and were to refuse to have any kind of compromise with the world, there would be great opportunity for the Lord to prove that He can go one better than the world, and is more than all the world put together.

This is the challenge. On various grounds and by various arguments, young people especially are tempted to compromise on this point. They think they will gain influence with people of the world by coming down to their level and doing as they do, thus getting on an even footing with the world; but they do not recognize that such a course so often involves compromise. More rarely still do they recognize that when God's people are going to the world for their sustenance and nourishment and pleasure and gratification and so on, it results in a question being cast upon the ability of the Lord to prove how far greater He is than this world. The bad spiritual state of the people in Daniel's day was wholly due to their being in bondage to the world. Daniel and his brethren would have none of it. They stood apart in complete separation from the world, its standards, its ideas and all its resources, to give God the opportunity of proving that He is better than the world, and His servants, by His grace, better than the men of the world. That is the testimony, and until that is true, we have no authority, no ascendancy, no real testimony. Separation therefore, unpleasant and hard as the word may sound, is a very fundamental matter if we mean by it that we are separated unto the Lord, that He may show by means of us that this world is a poor thing compared with what we have in Him.

There was a deep rooted seduction in that table of the king, and they were alive to it. It was the snare of the good time, as people call it. It was the snare of a lost clearness and distinctiveness of testimony. It was the snare of arguing wrongly, "*I am become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some*" (1 Cor. 9:22) - so often a misapplied Scripture and carried altogether outside of what the Apostle meant when he said it. Do you think the man who gave that phrase to be written in Holy Scripture ever compromised with this world, with sin, with the principles of the Satanic kingdom, or ever lowered his standard?

That was not the Paul we know. With him the words quoted had another meaning. Do not be caught by a catch phrase like that. How many do you win? How many are won out and out for Christ by that

policy of compromise? For after all, it is only policy, and policy is an accursed thing in spiritual matters. It is a low standard. The whole work of Satan is to get us somehow defiled, and then we are put out.

Satan's first effort, then, with Daniel and his brethren was to destroy them inwardly by this kind of compromise; but they refused to be defiled. When he found he could not do that, he turned to outward methods of destruction. Hence the fiery furnace and the lion's den - anything to accomplish their destruction, to nullify them, to quench them. The Lord needs men like this as His instruments. It is good to know how the Lord does stand by such. Read the last verses of the book of Daniel. "*Go thou thy way till the end be; for thou shalt rest, and shalt stand in thy lot, at the end of the days*" (Daniel 12:13). Daniel continued despite fiery furnaces and dens of lions. A true heart meant that the Lord stood with him and he finished his testimony, and no powers of heaven or earth could bring an untimely end to that testimony. The Lord will look after us so long as we are on this line of testimony for which these men stood, the absolute glory and dominion of the Lord, expressed here in a people of this kind.