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God's Standard of Values

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"For who hath despised the day of small things?" (Zechariah 4:10).

"Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? and how do ye see it now? is it not in your eyes as nothing?" (Haggai 2:3).

"Then they that feared the Lord spake one with another: and the Lord hearkened, and heard, and a book of remembrance was written before him, for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon his name. And they shall be mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in the day that I do make, even a peculiar treasure; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him" (Malachi 3:16,17).

"Who hath despised the day of small things?" This is one matter, among many, concerning which it is very necessary for us to be clear in our hearts and to have our mentality adjusted. Just as a ship, after a long voyage, spends time in having its compass adjusted, because of interferences and variations, so it is with us, on our way. It becomes necessary for us, from time to time, to stop and think again; to get our minds corrected; and to be freed from those influences that upset the balance and the poise and a right appreciation.

This matter, then, of greatness and smallness is an important one. There is a good deal of confusion about it and that confusion can result in our missing the way and being found in an altogether false position. We need to know what we mean by 'greatness' and what we mean by 'smallness'. It is quite evident, from the Scriptures that we have read, that, in the case of that remnant of the Jews which had returned to Jerusalem from captivity, a certain kind of appraisal, a certain kind of observation, had resulted in a false judgment, which brought the people perilously near to calamity. The Lord, reading their hearts, used this word as to their attitude and their reactions - "despised"! "Who

hath *despised* the day of small things?" And if you look carefully into these prophecies, you will find that an altogether different point of view about the matter was possible, and that the 'day' was not as small as they thought.

Bigness and Greatness, Littleness and Smallness

We have a way of confusing 'bigness' with 'greatness', and they are two entirely different things. 'Bigness' may be a matter of bulk - of outward physical dimensions - the impression that a thing makes upon the senses. 'Greatness' is a matter of moral qualities. You may not be able to take its measure, or even to see any measure in it at all, from human standpoints. Yet from God's standpoint it may be very great. There is a lot of difference between bigness and greatness from God's standpoint. In the same way, there is a great deal of difference between 'littleness' and 'smallness'. A 'little' person is one whose nature is petty, paltry, mean, despicable - little! But you can be quite small, and yet of tremendous value. You would sooner have an ounce of gold than many pounds of iron! It is a matter of intrinsic value.

You may have read the life story of Madame Curie, the discoverer of radium. If you have, you will remember how tons and tons and tons of byproducts from the gas-works were unloaded in her backyard. Working on this mountain of 'stuff', she obtained out of it the smallest particle of radium. That is a comparison of what is 'big' and what is 'great'. In that almost imperceptible speck of radium lay immense qualities, values, potentialities, all extracted from this great mass of stuff. There is certainly a difference between 'bigness' and 'greatness'.

'Smallness' we may judge merely in an objective and outward way. We may say of something: Oh, but it is so small! and 'despise' it. And yet, a 'day of small things' may be a tremendously potential day. "Fear not, *little* flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32). Here, of course, we have 'little' used in the sense of outward size. There is something outwardly small which is immensely potential. You have only to run your eye through the Bible, to see again and again what God made of 'small' things, that would have been despised, scorned, overlooked, set aside, by those who had this mentality of 'bigness'.

A Despised Remnant, Precious to God

Now, if you look at these passages that I have quoted at the beginning, you will see that there was something there that was very precious to God, although the people, in their natural judgment, were calling it so small. The last passage that we read, from the 'end-time' of the Old Testament, finds God saying: "They shall be mine... in the day that I do make, even a *peculiar treasure*". "They that feared the Lord" - just that little company that feared the Lord, and thought upon His Name, and were occupied with Him - represented something of such value to the Lord, that our translation does not convey how precious it was to Him.

You notice those two words: "The Lord *hearkened*, and *heard*". That is not just the repetition of the same word in two different forms. The first word signifies: The Lord 'bent down', 'inclined'. The Lord said: 'Here is something to take note of! Here is something to which to listen! Here is something to draw Our attention' - *God's* attention! The Lord inclined, listened, heard. And the picture is: The Lord said: 'Fetch the book, the great book, the Book of Remembrance, and put down the names of these people in it.' "A book of remembrance was written before him, for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon his name. And they shall be mine, saith the Lord... in the day that I do make, even a *peculiar treasure*". And that, as you know, was right in the setting of this section of the Bible that includes Haggai and Zechariah.

What was it which made for this 'greatness', over against that which people were calling so 'little', and despising as such? What does the Lord look for? Well, here it is quite clear. This little company was, comparatively, a disciplined and chastened company. They had come out of the fires of Babylon. They had been through all the discipline of those years in exile. They were of those who had hung their harps upon the willows, and said: "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" (Ps. 137:4). "The Lord's song" - you can see where their hearts were. And then the day came when the proclamation was made: You can go back - you can all go back to Zion! The vast majority, feeling that their present position was a very much more comfortable one than it would be back there in Zion, decided to stay where they were. And this little company, with all the hardships, difficulties, sufferings, toil, and much more, that was involved in going back, went back, because their hearts were in Zion, and Zion was in their hearts. It was a matter of the heart relationship to the Lord, and of that which was dearest to His heart. And so they were always thinking upon *His* Name, talking together about *His* interests.

They are a little company, comparatively, a despised people. I expect that most of those who stayed behind thought them fools. Well, be it so. What did the Lord think? That was the point. Malachi tells us what the Lord thought. A chastened, a disciplined people, whose hearts were for the Lord. Small? If you like. Read the prophecies of Jeremiah: what a book that is! What a time it takes, and what patience it takes, to work your way through the whole of Jeremiah's prophecies! Malachi and Haggai - we call them 'Minor' prophets - what little books these are! But what have you got for the Lord (where the nation is concerned) in Jeremiah? He is a 'Major' prophet, if you like, but, in his time, there is nothing for the Lord. The others may be little, 'Minor' prophets, but there is something now very precious to the Lord.

The discipline has taken place; the chastening has been carried out; the heart has been searched: the Lord has got something. You say 'small'? Oh, no, not in the eyes of the Lord - it is something very great. That is what is precious to the Lord; that is what He is looking for, and that is what He calls 'great'! Although, looking at it with natural eyes - and the eyes of man always judge by the outward size and appearance - men may despise: from the Lord's standpoint there is much intrinsic value. And, with Him, everything is a matter of 'intrinsic value', not of bulk!

The Lord Jesus puts His finger on that matter in another connection. 'If salt have lost its saltness, what is the good of it?' (Matt. 5:13; Luke 14:13). You may have bulk - tons of it! - but it is useless; you had better throw it out in the street. A teaspoonful of salt with its savour in it is of more value than tons of savourless salt! It is a matter of intrinsic value. It is the Divine element, the sting of God, the vital quality! And, for that, there has to be suffering; there has to be chastening; there has to be discipline; the heart has to be searched; the work has to go very deep, in order to secure a people in line with God's abiding intention.

Concern for God's Eternal Thought

This people had one object before them: God's Home. The Temple represented God's heavenly, eternal, abiding thought - the place of His dwelling amongst His people. Before the world was, it was in God's mind to dwell with men; and all the way through the Bible it is just that. Right at the end of the Bible it is - "The tabernacle of God is with men, and he shall dwell with them... and be their God" (Rev. 21:3). That is God's everlasting thought concerning His House, His dwelling-place in the midst of His people. We know the *reality*, the spiritual reality of that.

Here, then, are people in line with God's thought. In Babylon God's thought did not obtain at all; that was not His place.

The Lord always calls it spiritually great, when you are wholly centred on that which He has ever had in mind. When God has a people right in line with His eternal thought; a people right in touch with Himself as to that which He ever desires to have: when He has got that - let that people be 'small' from outward standards, and 'despised' by men of distorted judgment - God says: 'That is great! and you are not to despise it.' "Who hath *despised* the day of small things?" There is a rebuke in that interrogation; a correction. It implies: 'Pause! Adjust your judgment and your standards!'

Here is a people still with the vision in their hearts of what God intended and would have. They may have been greatly discouraged and disheartened; greatly perplexed as to the possibility of it, and very very tried as to the realisation of it. Nevertheless, it was in their hearts. They wept! - look at the context of this statement (Hagg. 2:3; Ezra 3:12). They wept over the situation! They were distressed that that which was, was so much less than what they knew the Lord wanted; they were troubled about this. And their perplexity and their distress even led them to drop their hands in despair, and, for the time being, to suspend operations (Ezra 4:23,24; Hagg. 1:2).

There was plenty there as a ground for discouragement; plenty there to give point to saying it was hopeless. But - you never feel hopeless if you have never had hope! A person who has never known what hope is, does not know what hopelessness is! They are just dead things. You can only know *hopelessness* if you have previously known *hope*. These people were troubled, heartbroken, distressed; and if they despaired for a time, and said: 'It is no use, it is no use!' - that was simply because they were, in their hearts, deeply disappointed. And you cannot be *disappointed* unless you have had some kind of appointment!

There, deep in their hearts, was the vision; and they were suffering in their hearts in relation to the vision. That is what God is looking for! People who, in their hearts, through all trial and testing, still have the vision of what God is after, and are suffering in their hearts concerning it, represent something precious to the Lord. He as it were lights on that, and says: 'We take note of that! Put that down in the Book; don't let that be forgotten; have that in remembrance. It is going to come up in the day that I make - I shall have *that* then!'

Pointing to the Lord Jesus

So we must revise our thoughts, and get away from these temporal ways of viewing things to the eternal standards and standpoint. For all this leads us to - what? To the Lord Jesus!

Here, in this very fourth chapter of the prophecies of Zechariah, is something that has a recurrence in the book of the Revelation: the two olive trees, standing before the Lord of all the earth (Zech. 4:3,11-14). You know where that comes in the book of Revelation (11:4). There is something here of *eternal* significance. The Lord Jesus is brought into view in these prophecies.

In Haggai (2:6,7) we read: "Yet once... and I will shake the heavens, and the earth... and the desire of all nations shall come". That is quoted in the letter to the Hebrews (12:26). 'The things which can be shaken' - the temporal things; the 'big' things, according to man's mind - they will be shaken to their foundations. But the things which cannot be shaken shall stand. The letter to the Hebrews is all centred upon the Lord Jesus, and His heavenly kingdom. "Receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken" (12:23). That comes out of Haggai.

As for Malachi, he dwells much upon the Lord Jesus - the very Messenger of the Covenant (3:1) - and His forerunner (4:5). Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, introduces the Lord Jesus in a very real way; it is all focused upon Him. And when God sees things focused upon His Son, He is alert and

alive, listening and watching and recording. It amounts to this: that, from God's standpoint, 'value' is always a matter of how much of His Son is present anywhere. The test of everything is how much it represents Christ - how much of Christ is there; not how 'big' and impressive it is, from man's standpoint. We need to find the right balance.

Of course, God is a great God, and we expect a great God to do great things. At the great Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910, a slogan was introduced: 'Attempt great things *for* God: Expect great things *from* God'. Yes: but be sure that you know what 'greatness' is from God's standpoint, and that you are not confusing 'greatness' with 'bigness', intrinsic value with outward bulk. What the Lord is after is the values of His Son. They are the eternal values.

"Who hath despised the day of small things?" *But* - "they shall rejoice, and shall see the plummet in the hand of Zerubbabel, even these seven..." (Zech. 4:10). From that point you are moving on the positive line of recovery!