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Great Truths and Their Laws

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: John 11:4,40; 12:2,23,24,28.

We are continuing our meditation on Great Truths and their Laws as brought before us in the gospel by John. And now we reach that stage in the unfolding of the truth in this gospel which brings us face to face with the truth of the Church which is the Body of Christ. That is the truth which we shall now consider and then see the law which governs the spiritual, experimental, and living entering into, and enjoyment of, that truth.

It may surprise you a little again to find that subject so precisely brought up again in connection with these chapters, but the more I read this part of John's gospel, especially from this point onward, the more I am impressed with the fact that the Church comes into view here, and that the spiritual principles of the Body of Christ are richly strewn through these chapters. And I think but a surface contemplation of what is here, particularly in these two chapters, will make us aware that that is so. There are certain features of which we should take account immediately and in the gathering together of them we shall find that we are presented with quite an amount of that which directly points to this matter of the Church as the Body of Christ being specifically in view.

I think you will notice one thing to begin with, that here we find ourselves moving with the Lord in what we may term a closing phase of His life. That is, a closing in with His Own. If you look at John 11:54 you will see that something like that is definitely stated: "Jesus therefore walked no more

openly among the Jews, but departed thence into the country near to the wilderness, into a city called Ephraim; and there He tarried with the disciples." And in a sense you may say that from this point onwards His life to the end is governed by that last clause: "with His disciples". Things have closed in now and practically all that follows in this gospel is "with His disciples". It is close, personal relationship to them in a real and special sense. That in itself has a significance. That surely is a first contribution to the truth which we are seeing, that the Church in a special way takes position from this point, comes into view, and what follows will be especially related to the Church on the principle of the Body.

And then at this point in John 11, Bethany takes a special place in the first place; for this is not the first visit to Bethany, but it takes a special place, it takes a central place in things, for movements from this time onward were peculiarly related to Bethany; the last days of the Lord's life here were in and out of Bethany. Bethany from various points of view, with various aspects of meaning, took a place in His life, but here the supreme significance of Bethany is brought in and Bethany very really and deeply is a type of the Church, the Body of Christ.

There are three pictures of Bethany which I may recall to your minds. There is the one which is presented to us in Luke 10, apparently the first visit of the Lord to Bethany: "...a certain woman named Martha received Him into her house". And you remember what took place. Mary sat at His feet and listened, Martha served in a busy, I fear fretful, way; there arose a clash, when at length Martha could bear it no longer and broke out in burning words to the Lord Himself: "Carest thou not that my sister doth keep on leaving me to see to things alone?" The original language is full of strength and full of warmth: "keep on leaving me to serve alone". That is the cause of the provocation, and that is because it is earlier said that Mary took her place at the Master's feet and "kept on listening" to Him. Mary kept on listening and Martha was provoked at her keeping on listening. Now, whatever the Bethany home was of natural beauty, and there has been a good deal of picture-making about the home of Bethany originally, undoubtedly there were elements beneath the surface beauty which were capable of rising at a point of heat; considerable strain breaking in upon the harmony. And so our first picture of Bethany is the coming in of the Master and an almost immediate uprising by reason of His presence of natural elements causing strain, discord, shall we say: division. If we use that word rightly I think we can say that.

You know the Lord's presence does have that effect very often. If things are upon a purely human basis, however good they are, with the coming in of the Lord of Heaven, His very presence drags it out. There were unsuspected things in Bethany that you would never have thought would be there. This is an ideal thing, this Bethany home, a beautiful thing viewed from the human standpoint, but strangely enough the very beautiful, ideal things of human life, when heavenly things come into them reveal traces of something which was altogether unsuspected before. It is strange how beautifully, passively, and happily you can go on in good fellowships and relationships until heavenly things come in, and then all that seems to enter into a realm of strain; you find breakings and divisions. Is that true? I am sure that is true. You can have a church, an assembly, a congregation ordered according to man, getting on splendidly: good fellowship, good spirit, everybody quite happy with the others and things going along well until you bring in a heavenly revelation, and then strangely enough there are discovered deeper subterranean factors and before long all that state of beautiful harmony is broken down, the thing is upset; and that is what happened here at Bethany. The Lord, of course, will not leave it there, never intends to leave it there; we have to wait for the ultimate history.

You can have two walking on in fellowship, getting on splendidly, never having questions or difficulties at all, and then the Lord in some new way of revelation comes in and the first effect of that is to seem to bring up elements of discord and question. All that beautiful harmony disappears and strain comes in, and perhaps for a time misunderstanding and failure to comprehend one another; that beauty has departed. The problem associated with such experiences is why should this be? Why should heavenly things come in to destroy this beauty? But it is so. It is only a phase of a transition, but it is true. Well, that is the first picture of Bethany.

The second picture of Bethany which I bring to you (not necessarily in chronological order) is that in John 11. A death coming right into the very heart of that Bethany position. You know the story, all the details of it, and then the mighty act, the Divine intervention in resurrection. We will leave that for the moment, noticing it as the middle thing.

And then the third picture, John 12: "Jesus therefore six days before the Passover came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus raised from the dead. So they made Him a supper there; and Martha served; but Lazarus was one of them that sat at meat with Him. Mary therefore took a pound of ointment of pure nard, very precious, and anointed the feet of Jesus". That is your third picture, and you have reached something altogether beyond the original position of Bethany, something much higher and more heavenly. You see a natural state regarded by man in his superficial perception as something very beautiful, revealed by the presence of the Lord as having in it secret elements of disruption, even religiously; a death, the eclipse of that; a mighty act of resurrection, and then a heavenly presentation of God's thought. Is that the Church? Does not that represent all the truths of the Body of Christ?

Now let us notice some other features. Notice in the next place the connection between what is taking place here, and the Passover. You notice John 12:1: "Jesus therefore, six days before the Passover..." John 12:12: "...a great multitude that had come to the feast". John 12:20: "Certain Greeks..." and in John 11:55: "...and many went up to Jerusalem"; John 11:56: "...they sought therefore for Jesus". You see things here that are again closely related to the Passover. We saw a relationship to the Passover of an earlier phase of this unfolding of truth, and we then went back to the origin of the Passover, and again we may see as we saw then, that the Passover was God's means and basis of constituting His people Israel - His own House, His own Church, so to speak, the place of His dwelling. They were constituted His people upon the basis of the Passover. And what is represented by the Passover is the abiding basis of the corporate life of the Lord's people in relationship to Himself; the church is constituted by the spiritual values in the Passover. The carrying on of the Lord's Table in relation to the Passover, the eating of the loaf and the drinking of the Blood is that thing which is central and foundational to the Church's life. It represents the Church coming together to the crucified and risen Lord and recognizing Him as its life, and that is the basis of everything, and that is why it is the first act of the Church's worship, and that is why the Lord requires it, because it represents His having the central and prominent place. It is the explanation of worship, that is, recognizing the whole rights of the Lord from the very beginning. We notice that in passing; maybe we shall refer back to it again presently.

Now, that is the beginning. What is the end? The ultimate object in view here in principle, is a vessel of testimony. John 12 brings the vessel of testimony in. At Bethany you have that which is like a vessel, in the midst of which is the testimony of Christ as the Resurrection and the Life: "Where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead" (John 12:1). In that connection the Lord had said: "I am the resurrection, and the life" (John 11:25). Lazarus represented that and everything at

Bethany was gathered, as it were, around that great reality: the power of His resurrection in living form; and Bethany represented a vessel of the testimony of Christ as the Resurrection and the Life. That is the end in view. From the Passover at the beginning to the vessel at the end, everything is related from the one to the other.

What is the Church, the Body of Christ? That is the answer full and complete. It is, according to God's mind, and He recognizes no other, a vessel in which the testimony to His Son as the Resurrection and the Life is deposited in living people. It is that where that testimony takes positive form in representation. You can gather up everything into that; that the Church is called to possess and manifest in the lives of all its members, the power of His resurrection, Christ as the Resurrection and the Life; and the Church is eternally called into being to be the vessel of that testimony and that is its business right to the end, and for that it will find that it has to give everything, even to the laying down of its life unto death.

Now seeing that you are able to put in between the two things the beginning and the end, the Passover and the vessel the Church, one or two other things. Firstly you notice the close relationship between what is taking place here with that end in view, and the glorifying of the Lord Jesus. You notice how often that picture is brought before you in these two chapters. The glorifying of the Lord Jesus: "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified thereby"; "Said I not unto thee, that, if thou believest, thou shouldest see the glory of God?"; "Now there were certain Greeks among those that went up to worship at the feast... saying, Sir, we would see Jesus"; "Jesus answered them, saying, the hour is come, that the Son of man should be glorified"; And then, "Father, glorify thy name." The glorifying of the Lord Jesus is bound up with what, is taking place here and with that object in view. And beloved, while there is a heavenly glorifying of the Lord Jesus, that is, He is glorified in heaven in the presence of God, He has got to be glorified in two other realms. He has got to be glorified here among men and He has got to be glorified among all the disputing forces of the universe. And as Christ's death and resurrection were universal, touching heaven, earth, and hell, the Church is brought into relation to Him in that universal ministry and the universal display of His glory. And the Church is here primarily to glorify the Lord Jesus, or to be the means of glorifying of the Lord Jesus by the manifestation of Him in the power of His resurrection. Oh, if we got hold of that as the Lord's servants and the Lord's children, it would help us a great deal. I think we have put by far the greater emphasis upon the idea that the church is here to organize work and carry the gospel enterprise throughout all the nations. That is a part, perhaps, of its business, to carry the gospel to the nations, but there is something within that and something deeper than that, and something without which that will be simply the effort to put a scheme, a plan into operation and make it successful. Where is the triumph of the gospel? Not in the success of its scheme and plans. The real triumph of the gospel in the saints is a spiritual thing.

You may go into a place by God's own call and appointment and every effort of yours diligently pursued to extend, to develop, to expand, to increase, may meet with the utmost disappointment and on the face of it be a complete failure, and yet the Lord holds you there. You know that. You cannot abandon that situation without violating your deepest sense of the Lord's call and appointment. Then, while there, all manner of adversities, trials, sufferings, bring you nigh unto death so that along any natural or human life, either for the work or for yourself, there seems to be no hope and you have to regard everything, as Abraham regarded his body: as good as dead. But just there are intelligences looking on who are more intelligent than human forces. And then the Lord will compel men to look on with their limited understanding, and all will have to confess that there is something there more than the working of men, more than human endurance, something

more powerful than man. There is an endurance which is not man's endurance, there is an effectiveness here which we cannot account for, we cannot send reports home about it and tabulate it, which is spiritual, if only they used the right word. There is the working of the power of Life triumphant over death in a spiritual testimony.

The true testimony is not that which men can look on, admire, be impressed by, write about and talk about; that is not the testimony of Jesus. The testimony of Jesus is the mighty power of a life which death cannot quench. Death may be allowed a tremendous amount of liberty, the powers of the devil may be given a good deal of liberty, and yet Life unquenchable, indestructible when tested out by every effort of Satan, along every line that he can pursue; maybe physical sufferings and fears as with Job. It may be along the line of treachery and false friends, it may be ostracism leading to isolation. It may be misrepresentation, lies, suspicions, questionings, false reports, open persecution and subtle temptation, all caused by the devil. In your own heart you are conscious that if God does not hold you, you will not hold on your way; the insinuations of the enemy to your own mind are so terrible sometimes that it almost seems you are wrong. And you really do not know how you are wrong, and yet there is a hold, a grip that is not your grip on the Lord. And in your determination more than once you have said you would give up, let go, but the Lord has held, maintained, and carried on. And when all those forces have had so much liberty and used all the power and means at their disposal, the thing survives and then quietly in spiritual power begins to grow.

That is where the glorifying of the Lord Jesus comes in; that is the glorifying of Christ. That is the testimony to the fact that Christ has swallowed up death. That is, that the full range of death has been measured by Him and conquered and that full range is being manifested as conquered in the measure in which that is possible in the church. We cannot swallow death as He swallowed it, but there is a residue of the sufferings of Christ which are implicit, that is the little measure given to us to share His sufferings; there is a testimony to the greatness of His victory. The part represents the whole. The glorifying of the Lord Jesus is always along the line of His absolute and universal victory over the power of the devil and all that that means, and you and I are called into that testimony to be a vessel for that, and that is the Church His Body, the means of glorifying the Lord Jesus.

Why, when certain Greeks came up to the feast at Jerusalem, did the Lord say; "The hour is come, that the Son of man should be glorified"? Then why immediately, as a very part of that utterance, did He say: "Except a grain of wheat fall into the earth and die, it abides by itself alone; but if it die, it bears much fruit"? Here is an expansion to the Greeks outside of the immediate born Israelitish circle, it is an expansion of the Gentile world. How is Christ going to make of Jew and Grecian one body? By dying, and in resurrection, from the one corn producing the ear. It is the productiveness of His death as the transition from a single, isolated individual, to a Body. That is the way in which He is glorified. In effect it is: I as one, suffer and die alone. That looks like loss, defeat, shame and weakness. Wait a day or two and you shall see whether that is so. You will see a host possessing a Life which can never see death, and this picture of shame, loss, defeat and weakness, will change into a picture of absolute indestructible victory and triumph. That is the way in which the Son of man will be glorified. It is in that ear, in that Body. You want to know what the Church is? That is what the Church is according to New Testament Scriptures, according to the mind of God. We have to reconstruct our ideas of the Church entirely according to that truth, and the church which is not that, is not the Church which the Lord has in mind.

There is another thing. The connection of what is taking place here in the securing of this vessel, and the incurable state of man. It is the connection between the Church the Body of Christ and the

incurable state of man. That is John 11. In its first half Jesus heard Lazarus was sick. What did He do? Did He rush off at once? We are told quite clearly that He loved Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. No, He abode in the place where He was and then leisurely, apparently indifferent, with a seeming contradiction that there could be any real, genuine love in His heart for these people, He said: "Let us go unto him". And notice the delay marked: "And He abode at that time two days in the place where He was". "I am glad for your sakes that I was not there." Lazarus has died. "I am glad for your sakes that I was not there"(John 11:15). Delay. "Bethany was nigh unto Jerusalem about fifteen furlongs off." "So when Jesus came, He found that he had been in the tomb four days already" (John 11:17). You see this? Well, why? For this reason, that it is not healing here, it is resurrection. There is a great, deep truth of reality embodied in this whole matter. This is to be the sign of the Church, and the Church is not something that has been healed, the Church is something that has been *raised*. What this says in effect is that man is incurable by nature. Even at his best, a Lazarus, a Nicodemus fatally afflicted. Yes, God is not going to elevate the natural man. He is not going to give the natural man medicine to make him better; He is not going to heal the natural man in the sense of healing, He is going to let the natural man die, and let him die thoroughly. He will let him go to corruption; He will not save a bit of him. Four days in the tomb: "Lord by this time the body decays (or stinks)". God had come to that conclusion about the natural man long before this. That is the state of man by nature in the nostrils of God; man at his best.

Man is hopelessly and fatally sick. The Lord's attitude to him is: "Let him die; he is dead as far as I am concerned and I have been entirely without care to save him in that state. My whole attitude is that he should die". Well, we know that the Epistles teach us that so clearly. "I have been crucified with Christ." "Ye died." All these words are so familiar to us, but here is the truth: the Church is strangely linked, and yet not linked, with the incurable state of man. That is, the Church, His Body, is to be something new and not the old, repaired. The new Life of resurrection is not going to be put into worn-out garments of natural life; the new wine of resurrection is not going to be put into old wine skins. There must be a new creation in Christ and the Church the Body of Christ is to be the vessel of that resurrection Life which declares God has done a new thing in its very being, and declares on the other hand, that here the old natural line of things has disappeared, has gone, has been cut off. The Church must, in its very nature, declare that man as such is ruled out, put away, and that it is the "I am the resurrection and the life" which is seen and known and met in it. That will explain all the Lord's dealings with us of course, to bring us to that place where more and more we disappear, on the principle of our once having altogether disappeared in the mind of God in the cross of Christ; where Christ as the Resurrection and the Life appears more and more on the principle that He, and He alone lives in the eye of God, and there is nothing in the eye of God which lives that is not in Christ in risen reality.

Then there is another thing. You notice this transition from an old and natural level of human life to the new resurrection Life level; the old Bethany to the new Bethany, which is from the old man at his best and most beautiful, to the new man in Christ. Then note the occasion between the vessel of this testimony of Christ in resurrection and the positive antagonism of the enemy. You see immediately you get the vessel of John 12 constituted now in the power of resurrection, this beautiful picture firstly of Christ the centre, the honoured Guest, the Head of the feast: "They made Him a supper", everything is unto Christ. He is there, and Lazarus, the principle of Christ's presence, the power of His resurrection, he is present in the power of His resurrection. Then Martha served, but so different now from the human level; her service is now adjusted and there is none of that feverish excitement that takes the real spiritual joy out of it and makes for fret and worry; all is adjusted, no complaint now from anybody. The Master does not have to point out to Martha that her sister has chosen the

better part; neither does Mary have to say anything to Martha. You read it and follow the language. It breathes the spirit of peace, all difficulties settled. And then Mary took the ointment, and represents the spirit of worship. All these as elements and features brought together tell you what the Church is in essence, and as soon as you have got that you get a 'but'. And there is always a 'but' when you get anything from the Lord's mind, a 'but' from beneath: "*But* Judas Iscariot...". That is one feature of it.

You notice that before very long there is a seeking to slay Lazarus because by reason of him many believed. And why? Because this heavenly system is set over against this earthly system. I think this whole thing is betrayed in advance in chapter eleven: "The chief priests therefore and the Pharisees gathered a council, and said, what do we, for this man does many signs? If we let him thus alone, all men will believe on him and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation". Oh, this thing then threatens the existing system; this heavenly thing would put out the earthly. The devil has great store by that earthly religious system; he has got more gain out of it than most things; the caricature, the false thing, the imitation which is not the true. And they were shrewd enough to see that unless they took deliberate and definite steps, their place would be lost. And so hell rises up with a determination to slay the testimony to Christ in resurrection, and Lazarus becomes an object of that direct antagonism, that if he as the principle of resurrection Life, could be slain, then the testimony has gone and they have saved their position. It is an awful thing to think that is really what it meant for them. But for our purpose at the moment the point is this, that a true representation in life of the testimony of Christ in risen power, triumphant over death, is the object of the direct antagonism of the enemy. A spiritual thing is always assailed by the enemy; a traditional thing is not. He does not attack his own. He attacks that which is against him, and there is nothing more against the whole system of Satan than the power of Christ's resurrection; it will eventually destroy everything that is not of God. Well, it is important for us to recognize, for this is only anticipating Ephesians. Ephesians brings in the church raised together with Christ, seated together with Him, and then closes with its life up against principalities and powers and the rulers of the darkness, its conflict with the naked forces of hell in the heavenlies. I think at least we have established the fact that the Church is very much in view here. You see the nature of the Church: its calling, its condition, its vocation.

One further thing. The Church is brought in in this way, on this principle, on this basis as the means of the vindication of the Lord Jesus after His rejection. Notice the context. It is the time when His rejection comes to its culmination. It is just here when He can no longer walk openly among the Jews because their refusal of Him has assumed such a strong and intense form, and you see they take up stones to stone Him, and they laid hold of Him; He escaped out of their hands. He is, in their hearts, fully and finally rejected. Then comes in this wonderful eleventh chapter, and in the raising of Lazarus God indicates the way of the vindication of His Son after His rejection.

What has been the vindication of Christ crucified from man's standpoint? How has God vindicated Him? By the instrument of the testimony of resurrection. The book of the Acts is the grand ingathering of that, that Christ crucified is vindicated in what is taking place here now in His church, the power of His resurrection. Do you want Christ to be vindicated? Well, look at that. He is vindicated up to the hilt. The Church is to be the instrument for the vindication of the Lord Jesus in His rejection. What a calling ours is! What a lot there is bound up with our knowing Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings. He is vindicated by our knowing the fellowship of His sufferings because by that means we know the power of His resurrection. Well, we

cannot stay for any more of the truth of the Church which is His Body. We will say a word about the law of the Body of Christ. We have really said it all but it needs to be recognized as the law.

The law of the Body of Christ is death and resurrection - the law of the "Church" (if you prefer the other word, which I always feel is a bit misleading by reason of our mentality) is death and resurrection. That law stands at its threshold, and in God's mind no one ever gets into the Church by any other way.

There is no such thing as a membership of God's Church, Christ's Church - only through death and resurrection. It is the law. The Church is something which has died in its old creation connection and life in every one of its members, and the Church is a new Body of resurrection. The old creation is regarded by the Word of God as an organic whole represented by one body. The Church we know is regarded as an organic whole and also represented by one Body. The one has died and been buried; the other has come into existence in the power of an act of resurrection. No longer the relationship to the flesh voluntarily, knowingly, but an entire repudiation of everything that is of man by nature; that is the law of the Church. In so far as that is not so, and the law of man by nature operates, the truth of the Church suffers and is destroyed. The world has been died to, and the world has died to the Church. In so far as the Church has anything whatever that is of, or related to the world in it, it ceases to be according to God's mind, His Church. At that point the Divine idea of the Church is arrested.

The testimony of the Church against the enemy demands death and resurrection. We have seen ravages made by the enemy because of the non-operation of the law of the Church. The truth of the Church and the truth of the cross has been apprehended, talked about, preached, and there has been no corresponding death to man by nature, or death to the world. There has been a contradiction either in the life of those who held that truth, or in that which was supposed to be the Church with which they were connected voluntarily and officially; a contradiction: that is the world. The result has been the devil has simply scattered, broken, destroyed, and triumphed. You cannot meet the power of Satan in the strength of the flesh, in the power of the world, and cast him out. It is in the power of Christ's resurrection that he will be overcome, and is overcome. Therefore the testimony against the enemy demands first of all a resurrection position in the heavenlies in Christ spiritually, and a resurrection Life resident within its members.

So familiar are these things that we take the assent to them without much ado, but oh, they are *tremendously* important things, growingly important. They challenge our position, but they surely bring before us a vision of our great calling, the call to vindicate God's Christ, called to be unto the praise of His glory, the means of the glorifying of the Lord Jesus; called to show what God's new thing is, called to be a weapon for the overthrow of the power of Satan. It is a great calling. It has its laws. They must be recognized and applied, but this is the way.

Now I will stop there. May the Lord just take fragment by fragment and explain and make clear to our hearts what the Church is, what its calling is, and what its governing law is, and may we be found of that Church which is His Body.