



The Online Library of T. Austin-Sparks

Published as a PDF by Austin-Sparks.net
Email: info@austin-sparks.net

In keeping with T. Austin-Sparks' wishes that what was freely received should be freely given and not sold for profit, and that his messages be reproduced word for word, we ask if you choose to share these messages with others, to please respect his wishes and offer them freely - free of any changes, free of any charge (except necessary distribution costs) and with this statement included.

I Have Learned... I Know... I Can Do... Through Christ

by T. Austin-Sparks

First published in "A Witness and A Testimony" magazine, Mar-Apr 1958, Vol. 36-2.

"Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therein to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound: in everything and in all things have I learned the secret both to be filled and to be hungry, both to abound and to be in want. I can do all things in him that strengtheneth me" (Philippians 4:11-13).

If there is one statement in Scripture that finds us out, it is this one. It was Paul who said it; but I wonder how many of us could say it, with the same positive affirmation? You will notice, however, that the Apostle is stating it as the result of a life-long schooling. 'This', he says, 'is the issue of my schooling with Christ. I have learned the secret. "I have learned... I know... I can do..."!'

The course of things is learning through experience, and thus coming to knowledge - knowledge which is not theory at all, but which works out in practice: "I can do". That is the meaning for us of life with Christ. If we, His children, want to know the meaning of our experiences in this very exacting school - for it is an exacting school: we don't get away with anything; nothing escapes; we are held to it, severely and strictly, though behind all is wisdom and love - the meaning of our experiences in the exacting school which the Christian life is, and is intended to be, it is that we may *learn*, that we may *know*, that we may *do*. God's end is always a practical end, and the end is *doing*. 'I have learned... I know... I can do!'

And, of course, the way to that end is learning that you *cannot* do, and that you do *not* know. I suppose that that is the truest thing that could be said of anyone in the School of the Spirit. The thing that they are learning is that they cannot do, and they do not know. That is the way. It does seem, on the one hand, a negative process; it does seem to be an undoing experience; but God's ends are always positive. And an absolute necessity to our arriving at the position, "I can do all

things" -a tremendous statement! - which is His will for every one of us, is a deep, fundamental consciousness and realisation of how bankrupt we are of knowledge and of ability apart from Christ. For the all-governing clause or fragment is: 'in Him - that is, in Christ - who strengthens me'.

But, while this is a message of rebuke and correction, demanding adjustment, here is a word of tremendous hope, tremendous comfort.

Self-Mistrust

I was reading recently Boreham's *Oliver Cromwell*. When Cromwell was a young fellow, farming in Huntingdonshire, he wrote a letter to his aunt, in which there occurred the following words:

'I am a poor creature; I am sure that I shall never earn the least mite.'

There is the foundation of a man who hurled kings and thrones from their places; turned a regime upside down; became the terror of evil-doers; and was, if not the greatest, one of the greatest champions of God in the history of this country. *'I am a poor creature; I am sure I shall never earn the least mite!'* You should hear what Thomas Carlyle says about him. Someone said that Cromwell was one of the four greatest men in history. Says Boreham: 'Carlyle would laugh: "Four! The other three are mere puppets compared with Cromwell - they are not in the same world with him!"'

But, Carlyle goes on to say, there was a turning point in Cromwell's life. From the Huntingdonshire farmer, with the consciousness of his weakness, his insufficiency, his worthlessness, there came a turn. Carlyle's way of expressing it, because he did not know in experience what he was talking about, was: 'It was what Cromwell would call his "conversion".' We know what that means. And then, away ploughing in his field, Cromwell heard of the great need: 'Everything in this country', says Boreham, 'rushing pell-mell toward turgid crisis, wild tumult, red revolution, and the cry for a man, a good man, a strong man, a great man.' As he heard that cry, whilst ploughing his field, something inside him said: 'You are that man! The world needs a man, a good man, a great man, a strong man - Thou art the man!'

Cromwell set to weighing up his assets and his liabilities: *'I cannot be that man; I can never answer that call, meet that demand.'* But then, as he was thinking about it after the day's work, in his country home, by the fire, with his wife at his side, and the little child in the cradle, he took down the big Bible, and opened it to read; and turning the pages, he came to the letter to the Philippians, and began to read chapter 4. He stopped at verse 13: "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" - and that was the beginning of the history that we know. It carried him through to the end. When he was at Hampton Court, passing from this life, he called for the Bible, and asked them to read; and they said: 'What shall we read?' And he said: 'Read from Philippians 4:13 - "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me".'

Now, you and I are not going to be Oliver Cromwells; we need not begin to get big ideas! But the principles are the same. 'I am a poor creature' - is that how you feel today? Most of us feel like that! 'I shall never earn the smallest mite.' Our worth, our 'worthfulness', is *nil*. The Apostle Paul, with all his great endowments, was one man who was ever ready to tell us of his own worthlessness: 'Chief of sinners, chief of sinners'; 'I am what I am by the grace of God'; and much more like that.

The School of Christ

We have said that Paul arrived at this position through a long and difficult schooling. We have some catalogues given us by him as to what he encountered, in that School of Christ, of opposition and adversity, of trials and difficulties, of suffering and affliction. He is telling us that that was the nature of the school; they were the things that made up his schooling. But what he is saying is not: 'I have arrived today at this conclusion, after all that' - but: 'It was in the schooling, when I was in persecution, that I discovered this. When I was in hunger and nakedness and peril, my reaction to my situation was such as to make that experience yield a secret; to wring a knowledge, a secret, out of the very situation itself.'

Now, when you and I are in trouble, going through a difficult time, having a difficult experience, perhaps our first thought is to pray that we might get out of it, be delivered from it. We groan in it, and long for a change of the situation, some way of escape. That is usually our reaction. 'How long will this last? when will the Lord deliver me from this? when will He change this whole thing? when will it pass?' But I gather, from what Paul says, that his was another reaction. He took in this situation, and he said to himself: 'I have something to learn in this - something that is going to make me able for more later on. There is a secret buried in this, and I am going to extract that secret. I am going to make this yield something for the Lord and for the future.' With Paul it was not, 'How can I get out of it?', but, 'What can I get out of it?' We usually say, in the presence of very real difficulties, sorrows and trials: 'I cannot... I just cannot go on; I cannot bear this any more. I just *cannot!*' Paul was saying to his situations: 'I am going to make you teach me how I *can!*'

A Positive Attitude

You see, it is a question of a positive attitude toward things, is it not? It makes such a difference, the attitude that we take. "*I have learned...*": I have learned the secret; I have made everything yield something of a positive character. The result is: "*I know...*": I know how to be abased, to be set at nought, to be walked over, trampled upon, ignored, regarded as worthless; I know how to take hold of that - how not to go down under it, but to make it serve spiritual ends. I know how to abound: when people are kind and good - when, as you Philippians, they send me gifts, so that I can say, "I have all things, and abound" - I do not get proud and uppish, and conceited and self-sufficient, and think myself something: I know that is ruination! I have learned the perils of prosperity just as much as the perils of adversity; I have found the secret. And so, come what may, for or against; be as I may be - and I am today in prison at the end of my life - *I can!* I do not say - After all this, I cannot bear any more; but - I can do all things, through Christ who strengtheneth me.'

I pass on this message, not as an elaborate address or discourse, but as a word from my heart. It is a challenge to us all as to our attitude. Our natural condition - which is not mere imagination, but undoubtedly something very real - would so often argue: 'I cannot! The situation is utterly disconcerting, utterly devastating, both inside and outside. Naturally, it is the end: it is paralysis: I cannot, I just cannot.' That is the situation, if we just look at ourselves: if we in ourselves represent the sum-total of everything. If we look at the situation, that argues finality; we may as well give it up and say: I cannot, I cannot! But what about Christ? Is there not another off-look from ourselves to 'Christ who strengthens me'? This is not a question of a psychological effect upon ourselves, in trying to be more cheerful, and to make ourselves believe something that is not true. There are the facts - in ourselves, and perhaps in our circumstances: they *are* the *facts* - they are stark facts: and there is no getting away from them.

A Greater Fact

Nevertheless, there is a greater fact than ourselves, and than our circumstances: the fact of Christ. And so you and I will have to seek from the Lord this grace, morning by morning, and day by day, perhaps even hour by hour, as we face our own inability and disability, our own utter futility and helplessness - the grace to say: Nevertheless, I can through Christ. I say again, it is not just a psychological reaction, or fillip, which will make us ignore facts. No! this is the act of faith; this is the link of faith; this is the plank of faith, across which we pass right over from ourselves and our condition to Christ. And today, when we are as weak, as helpless, as overwhelmed, as perplexed, as distracted by things as ever - nevertheless, today, and tomorrow, and all the days, *I can - I can through Christ!* If it is real faith in Christ, you will find that the Spirit comes in, and enables you to do what you never would have done, or could have done, but for that positive attitude. May we be helped to find the way of deliverance from the 'I cannot... I cannot... I cannot...' into the 'I can do all things through Christ.'

No doubt, with many this represents a very practical situation. As we look on ahead, we dread some things, for we know that those things are beyond us altogether; but we have got to take this position. We must look at our situation today, and say: 'This situation holds something. The Lord is not answering my prayer and getting me out of it; He is not changing it, He is just not doing all that I am longing for, and praying for, and craving for, and waiting for - changing my position and circumstances, and getting me right out of it. I pray, and there is nothing; there is no getting through; He is not doing it. Therefore, I must look at it in another way. There is a secret in this, and I have got to get hold of that secret. What does the Lord intend to teach me and to give me in this situation, that I can bring out of it as fruit, as stock-in-trade for the work in the days to come? What is it? I must get it!'

If we take that attitude toward things, I think we shall probably find that that is our way of deliverance, our way out, our way through. Let us ask for grace to do this, not only now, in our present situation, but as to everything that the Lord may require of us in the future - perhaps things that we never thought of. I am quite sure that that young fellow of twenty-three, in Huntingdonshire, pushing his plough, never, never thought of himself as becoming the Lord Protector of England, the ruler of this whole country, the changer of the whole constitution, the one who overthrew the mighty system of evil. Cromwell never saw himself as we see him, and know him to be, but his life was built upon this: 'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.' While we may never rise to such eminence, or become great historic figures, nevertheless, through Christ things can be, which would go far beyond any dreams that we ever had, more than we ever thought.