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## "Loose Him, and Let Him Go!"

*by T. Austin-Sparks*

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Reading: John 11:38-44.

It is that last verse that we shall be considering especially:

*"He that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes; and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith unto them, Loose him and let him go."*

I would just like to place alongside of that a fragment from the tenth chapter:

*"I came that they may have life, and may have it abundantly" (John 10:10).*

We have said more than once that we are here in the presence of God manifested in the flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, His Son, and, being in the presence of God, we are being made aware of God's mind concerning man. What Jesus says is the expression of the mind of God for man.

### **The Fullness of the Gospel by John**

I think that you have learned that what is written in this whole Gospel by John is more than an earthly story, or a collection of sayings and doings on the part of Jesus Christ. There is in every one of those sayings and doings, and in every part of the story, a setting forth in one way or another of some eternal and unfathomable truth because it comes from God. God is unfathomable, unsearchable, incomprehensible, profound beyond our understanding. He has a depth and a fullness never, never to be exhausted, either in time or in eternity, and anything that emanates from

God in word or deed carries with it that significance. It is not just human language. These are not just the words and works of a man. Every fragment contains the profound depth of God, and this chapter, which is marked out in the organization of the matter for our convenience as chapter eleven, is a wonderful example of what we have just said. Every bit of it goes far beyond the thing that is said or done. It is so comprehensive, so far-reaching, so full of depth and meaning. I have been reading the Gospel by John, and, of course, this chapter, for over sixty years, and I have spoken on it many times, but I am still in the presence of that which is far beyond me. I am not just giving you something that has been said before. The whole Gospel is *always* divulging that which we have not seen or known before. Now that does not mean that you have never seen what I am going to say at this time, but what I am saying is that there is a fullness here, and that, whatever and however much you have seen, there is more yet that God means in the fragments of this chapter.

We are always wrestling with our limitations both to understand and grasp, and certainly to utter what is herein contained. Some of us are very poor at this business, and we know it. A little grandson of mine heard I was going to America and he asked his mother: 'What is Grandpa going to America for?' She said: 'Well, to preach.' He said: 'To preach? He is not very good at that, is he?' And Grandpa fully agrees! So now you know what you have to put up with! Well, that is just how we feel when we come into the presence of the divine stature of God's words.

I think you all realize something of the vastness of this chapter, but I trust that we shall yet see a little more, though by no means the fullness of what is in the passage which we have just read, and especially the fragment in verse 44.

### **The Aspects of the Gospel by John**

Now, before we come to that, let me just say this word that is necessary, I think, and leads up to it. We must recognize the aspects of this Gospel. First of all, it is a backward aspect. That is, John wrote this Gospel long years after all that is in it was completed. The whole thing was finished, as to the actuality of the content of this record, and the Lord Jesus had left this earth. All that is here lay in the past when John wrote it. It was something completed as to history. John was writing it from that standpoint, with the backward aspect. But you will notice that the Gospel itself is written on the forward aspect. That is, it was all written in the light of the day that was to come. Jesus is here saying repeatedly: "In that day... in that day... when... when..." and that relates to the day of the advent of the Holy Spirit. "When He is come... in that day." This Gospel was written for a coming day, and we are living in that day, that is, in the dispensation of the Holy Spirit. Jesus was making it perfectly clear that what He was saying and doing in the flesh related to that day which was yet to be, the day when the Holy Spirit inaugurated the present dispensation. This Gospel, therefore, is written to us precisely because we live in that day.

You, perhaps, are asking: 'Why is he saying this? It is simple and obvious. We know it'. Well, do we? I have said all that in order that we might recognize that this verse 44 belongs to us. It was written for us. In the day in which we live, this very dispensation day, this verse belongs to us.

One other word about that. The backward aspect of this Gospel, written after it was all actually accomplished in history, was the objective side, when everything was outward. All that Jesus was doing was outward. His meanings were put into outward things, ways and means. The day for which all that objective was done and said is the day of the subjective, when it is taken from history without and made history within, when it is no longer something just outside of us, but something to be planted inside of us. That is the real meaning of the coming of the Holy Spirit - to lay hold of everything in the Scripture which is there objectively and place it right within the centre of the life of

the believer, so that it becomes a part of the very inwardness of the believer's life.

If we do not recognize these things we may miss our way in reading the stories, and just think of them as wonderful stories of what Jesus did, particularly this one of the raising of this man Lazarus from the dead. It was done and recorded in order that it might become our inward experience, a very part of our own being. That is the foundation upon which we build what we have to say as to this whole Gospel.

### **Correspondence Between the Gospels and Epistles**

May I add another word, which I hope will have some value to you? It is always necessary, in the light of what we have said, and important to take account of the correspondence between the Epistles in the New Testament and the Gospels, because the Epistles are, after all, only the subjective expression of the objective Gospels. How can I put that to help you? Well, you read your Gospels. If you like, read this chapter. There is the story, the account of what happened; all the parts, the phases and the stages of it. That is very wonderful, but when you come to the Epistles you are told what all that means. It is there that you get the explanation for your own life of what is in the Gospels. The Gospels will remain the history of two thousand years ago until you come to see what God meant them to be in your own life, and you find that out in the Epistles. Always read the Gospels in this twofold way, and remember that this in the Gospels is explained somewhere in the Epistles. Read the Epistles and you will say: 'This is explaining what is in the Gospels.' So read your New Testament in that way. We have to look at the Book of the Acts and the Epistles for the real meaning of the Gospels, and before we can get the real inward value of the Gospels.

Now we have said all that, we come to this verse in the eleventh chapter of John: "He that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes; and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith unto them, Loose him, and let him go." Do you know that you have the vast amount of the remainder of the New Testament (after John) that is exactly in keeping with that? It tells you what that means for us. Here in this chapter is what it meant for Lazarus and his sisters, but what did that mean in God's mind for us?

### **Life, But Limitation**

First of all, it is possible for us to have life by the word of Jesus Christ, resurrection life, divine life, that which is called eternal life; it is possible for us to have that life by which we have been brought from the death of our natural state into this newness of life by the fiat of the Son of God, and yet be limited in every way while we have it. Limited in ministry - 'his hands bound'; limited in progress - 'his feet bound'; limited in understanding - 'a napkin around his head and over his eyes'. Those three things are three of the major things in the teaching of the Apostles.

Let me repeat that, for it is so true, and it is true of multitudes today. It is one of the problems in Christianity that, while through simple response to the Word of the Lord Jesus, many have been born again and are His people, are children of God and have divine life, it is so possible - and is actually so in numerous cases - to be limited in almost every way as to that life, and that life is so limited in them. Here the symbolism is bound hand, bound foot and bound head. The hands are the symbols of ministry, or fruitfulness of life, and are there not many Christians whom believe in the Lord Jesus and have that saving faith in Him, yet whose ministrations and fruitfulness of life are exceedingly limited, bound and tied up? Oh, how many Christians are just tied up in this matter of real fruitfulness, real ministry - and when I use that word 'ministry' I am not just talking about platforms, or Bible preaching, but the ministrations of the Lord Jesus. In the next chapter we read

that Jesus came back to Bethany and they made Him a feast. Martha served and Lazarus was one of those who sat at meat. It would have been a poor lookout for that whole occasion if Lazarus had been tied up in his grave clothes! But, no, he is able to share with the others in this experience, and if you think I am trying to make something of nothing, look again, because it was at that point that the Jewish rulers took counsel to put Lazarus to death also, because by reason of *him* many believed. That is what I meant by loosed hands, ministry, fruitfulness: "By reason of him many of the Jews went away, and believed on Jesus." Is it not true that multitudes of Christians are not in that release of life where many believe because of them? They remain isolated, tied up, bound. They are Christians, but in the meaning of hands of fruitfulness, of service, of the ministrations of Christ, of the testimony of Jesus, they are still in the grave clothes. And that is why Jesus said: "I came that they might have life", but, more than that, "have it abundantly". And Lazarus had the life, but not abundantly until he was loosed.

Now you get into the Epistles with that fragment only, and see how much there is about the life of the believer being an effective life, a fruitful life, and a responsible life, a life that is really producing something. Indeed, we could say that one of the major purposes of all the Letters that the Apostles wrote was to get these Christians (and need I remind you again that more than ninety per cent of the New Testament was written to Christians? That is impressive and challenging!) who had the life to have it more abundantly, that is, to be loosed in this matter of their newness of life.

Well, perhaps that is enough for the moment on that.

### **Life, But no Progress**

And what is true of the meaning of the hands is true of the feet. Lazarus was "bound hand and foot". Again, is it not true that many, many Christians, born-again believers, are making no progress in the spiritual life, are not going on? You meet them once, and three, six and ten years afterwards they are just where they were when you first met them. They have not gone on, for their feet are bound. They are not going on, not making spiritual progress, not gaining ground, not overtaking the course, not - to use Paul's phrase - "attaining". They are in a state of spiritual stagnation, spiritual arrest. Their feet are bound, and that is not God's idea. Jesus, God incarnate said: 'Loose him, and let him go. Release those feet that he may walk, that he may run in the way of My commandments.' That is God's idea for us. That is not only a statement of truth, but a challenge as to where we are.

### **Life, But no Spiritual Sight**

What about this head, wrapped in a napkin about the eyes and about the mouth? We mention the eyes in particular for our purpose at the moment. Again, is it not true that there are many who are the Lord's people but who are not really seeing more and more, and ever more of what He has for them and through them? Many Christians see no further than their hand before their eyes. It is a little world in which they live, a very short horizon of spiritual perception and understanding, apprehension and spiritual knowledge. Their heads are wrapped around and their eyes are covered over. They have life, but that is all.

Having said these things, in order to indicate what we mean by the great fullness that there is here, even in a verse, let us look at it again.

### **The Grave Touch**

Lazarus came forth and he had life, but at that moment when he came forth he was still in contact with the grave. There was still that about him which spoke of that sepulchre, and the limitations of that sepulchre. Again, what are these limitations? Well, we come over to the Epistles. I am not going right through them all, but I will give you just enough to indicate what is meant.

### **Loosing from the Natural Life**

If you turn to the first Letter to the Corinthians, and have any knowledge of what is in that Letter, you will know what we mean by the grave touch still upon born-again Christians. Paul opens that Letter by addressing the Corinthians as "saints", which means those who are the Lord's, but as he writes on and on an awful situation is unfolded, is it not? They have life, but you cannot say that they have it abundantly. The grave clothes are on them, that is, the grave touch is still there, and in the first Letter to the Corinthians it is the grave touch of the limitations of the natural life. They are Christians, yes, but they are bound and limited by the ties of the natural life. That is the word which the Apostle uses specifically: "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God... and he cannot know them" (1 Corinthians 2:14). That is limitation, is it not? You proceed into the Letter and you find that these people are behaving as worldly people behave. In their behaviour, their conduct, their procedure, they go on just exactly as do worldly people. Someone has done a wrong to another believer, and apparently that happened in more than one case at Corinth, and the result was that this believer against whom the wrong was done thought this was criminal and should be set right in the court of law in the world. So he hauled his fellow-believer before the judge in the worldly court to get his rights. That is exactly what the world does, and that is an instance of a whole handful of things that were going on at Corinth. Some were worse than that. 'There are divisions among you, and when there are divisions among you are ye not carnal?' Not spiritual, but carnal.

Well, gather up the whole of that Letter and it is a terrible story of those who are the Lord's and who have the life just behaving as other people do, living in the way that the world does. You find the women behaving as worldly women did in their dress, in their demeanour, in their behaviour, and even in the assembly. I do not want to pick out the women particularly, but I am indicating that there is the spirit of the world amongst believers in Corinth, and (read the Letter again in the light of this) that is keeping them still in this bondage, in this limitation of their spiritual life. It is grave clothes, and you are not surprised that at Corinth the world is not feeling the impact of their testimony, that the church at Corinth is not counting in the world, because the world has got into the church, and into its members individually. In this sense the grave clothes are still on them, by reason of the limitations which come upon the spiritual life when the natural takes charge and governs, controls and directs. It is terrible spiritual limitation. There is life, yes, but not 'life abundantly'. Do you see what I mean? Their testimony is bound. There is still something of the grave, and that Letter to the Corinthians was written in the same spirit and with the same idea, intention and object as the Lord had when He said: "Loose him and let him go". Paul is striving to get these Corinthians loosed as Christians loosed, liberated, set free into the fullness of the life which they had.

### **Loosing from Tradition and Legalism**

We pass from Corinthians into Galatians, and no one who knows that Letter will dispute the statement that here you are in touch with the grave very truly. You know all that the Letter to the Galatians is about, and you know the two prominent words - Liberty - "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage" (Galatians 4:1 - A.V.) - and sonship. Not servanthood, nor slavery, but sonship; the liberty of sons. They are the two great words of that Letter, but what are the grave bands there in Galatia? They are the grave bands of tradition, of legalism, and all such things. You know, dear friends, it is very easy

to get tied up with these grave clothes! The persistent peril through the ages of Christianity is to crystallize itself into something set, something fixed. You have some light, some revelation, something of the immensity of truth, just a fragment of it, and it is not long before you begin to form that into a set system and make it the limit, saying that this is what people must believe, they must come within this horizon, and they must behave like this. It becomes a system again: 'You must... you must not!', and there is no difference between that and the Old Testament 'Thou shalt... thou shalt not!' Christianity has fallen into that peril, and is continually doing it, circumscribing the great revelation, making Christ smaller than He is, crystallizing truth into something fixed and set: 'This is how...', and the meaning of that is: 'This is the ultimate'.

Now you notice that when the Spirit did come, as we have the record in the Book of the Acts, the one thing that these old Jewish disciples experienced was a marvellous emancipation from that bondage of Judaism; and how the Holy Spirit was working all along against any fixed barriers! Peter will argue that he is a Jew, born, bred and dyed-in-the-wool, and that never has anything unclean entered *his* mouth, according to Leviticus chapter 11. All right, Peter. You are just putting your interpretation upon the Scriptures, and you are putting your limits upon what Christ has done by His Cross, and so he is told: "What God hath cleansed make not thou common" (Acts 10:15). The Holy Spirit reacted to Peter's traditionalism, legalism, limitation and bondage, and made him go and do what he would never have done otherwise. Again and again, right to his death, the words of the Lord Jesus to him, in the last chapter of this Gospel, were made good: "When thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not" (John 21:18). That principle was being applied over Cornelius and his house, and Caesarea and the Gentiles. He was made to go whither he would not. He was saying: 'No, Lord', and the Lord was saying: 'Yes, Peter'. "Whither thou wouldest not" is heaven's reaction to this legalistic limitation, these grave clothes on an Apostle. And that was not the only battle that Peter had, but we will not stay with it.

Then John says that when the Lord Jesus said those words to Peter He was signifying "by what manner of death he should *glorify* God". Years afterwards Peter wrote: "Knowing that the putting off of my tabernacle cometh swiftly, even as our Lord Jesus Christ signified unto me" (2 Peter 1:14). We do not know the manner of his death, but tradition says that Peter was crucified. Only Jews could be crucified by Gentiles, for Gentiles dared not crucify one of their own. So Peter went that way, but because Paul had Roman citizenship they could not crucify him, so they beheaded him. Peter was selected for the same kind of death as His Lord's, and he knew it for he said: "As our Lord Jesus Christ signified unto me." He was girded by another and carried the way he would not choose to go, but the way of the Spirit is the way that goes against our limitations, our grave clothes, and takes us along ways of which we would never have thought. Indeed, our theology would not accept that way, our doctrine might be against it, our tradition would forbid it, but the Holy Spirit says: 'This is the way. Loose him, and let him go.' That is Galatians, is it not? I said that we need the Epistles to explain the Gospels, and just one verse in the Gospel by John contains all this!

### **Loosing unto Full Spiritual Knowledge**

I close with one other thing. Look into the Letter to the Ephesians, and you, having come through the loosing of the hands in Corinth, and the loosing of the feet in Galatia to walk in the Spirit and stand fast in liberty, now move to the head. In Ephesians Paul takes the napkin from the head and does it thoroughly. Ephesians has to do with the napkin around the head. What do we mean? Well, Paul hardly begins that Letter before he says: 'I bow my knees unto the Father of glory, that He would grant unto you Ephesian Christians that you should have the whole counsel of God given to you, to grant unto *you* a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, Christ, that the eyes of

your heart be enlightened, that you may know what is the hope of His calling, the riches of His inheritance in the saints, the exceeding greatness of His power to usward who believe.' 'That you may *know*... the eyes of your heart being enlightened' - there is the napkin off the head! This Letter to the Ephesians is a wonderful revelation as to the eyes of the heart being unveiled, unbound, as to the greatness of our calling and vocation, as to the immensity of that for which we have been brought into union with His Son. How great it is! Beyond all our grasping, dear friends. Believe me, it is no exaggeration, and Paul says: "that you may *know*".

There is one little prefix missing in our translation which is the key to the whole thing. The Apostle says: 'That you may know... that you may know', and in the New Testament we have that word given to us in part and in whole. It is not given to us in our translation, but it is just this: Knowing, in itself, is applied to our beginning knowledge of the Lord. To quote John again: "And this is life eternal, that they should know thee the only true God, and him whom thou didst send, even Jesus Christ" (John 17:3). That is the entering into life, the receiving of divine life but when Paul speaks here about 'knowing', he is using a compound Greek word which we do not have in our translation. It is '*epignosis*', *full* knowledge. 'You know', he says to these Ephesians, 'that in the space of two years I ceased not to preach unto you the whole counsel of God.' They knew, and on that initial knowledge they had come to the Lord, but now he is praying, at the end of his life from his prison: 'that you may come unto full knowledge.' It is more than life; it is life abundant. It is more than seeing; it is seeing with a great range of divine purpose and meaning for our calling and our having life.

Will you tell me that all Christians are like that? Are there not many around whose heads there is a napkin, which obscures their spiritual vision, limits their spiritual sight, and narrows down the range of their comprehension of the great purpose of their calling? Real revelation, dear friends, is not just information. It is liberation. To see fully, and more fully, is to be released.

We have often said about this man Paul that there was nothing on earth or in hell, or in a combination of both, that would have changed the rabid, fanatical Pharisee into the greatest friend that ever Jesus Christ had except light from heaven. Nothing could have done it - but light from heaven did it. The napkin was taken off and the man was set free to walk up and down in the greatness of Jesus Christ.

I think we can see that that one verse in the whole of John's Gospel contains the Bible. Is it not true that God's mind for man, God's thought for His people, is: 'Loose him. He has got life, but loose him and let him go!?' "I came that they may have life, and may have it abundantly."