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Our Priestly Ministry

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: 2 Kings 11:1-16; Matt. 2:16.

In this eleventh chapter of the second book of Kings, we have an incident, the significance of which runs not only from its own time to this day, but runs right through the whole history of this world. It is the question of the throne and of the triumph of the Lord's testimony, or the Lord's triumph with His testimony.

The Adversary

Here we have in Athaliah one who so evidently represents that which is wrong and false, one of several women who in history occupied a place of great power and influence to no good purpose, but rather to the subverting of the Lord's testimony. She is so very closely linked with Jezebel, as you will see by the chapters nearby. She is not far on the road of descent from Ahab and Jezebel, indeed, they have only just come under the terrible judgment of God. Jehu has just wrought God's judgment and vengeance upon the house of Ahab and upon Jezebel, and then Athaliah comes up in that evil succession, the wife of Joram, the successor of Ahab; and we recall a word in the book of the Revelation in one of the messages of the Lord to the churches that He had this against them, that they had there that woman Jezebel who taught Israel to commit fornication. This woman Jezebel, in principle, was occupying a place of great influence amongst the Lord's people to the undermining of His testimony, undoubtedly inspired by Satan himself for the total destruction of that testimony.

When Jehu had slain her son who represents her power of succession, in influence, in domination, then the whole thing breaks loose and is manifested in that she rises to destroy all the seed royal, that is with the intent that there shall be no rival to her position and to her son.

Well then, the thing which is here so patently as everywhere, is the survival of the Lord's testimony, and that testimony being preserved unto the throne in the face of a fierce, relentless and evil adversary. We have said that that which Athaliah represents is found running right through the Scripture from the beginning; when Satan inspired Cain to murder Abel, it was exactly the same thing. That seed of the Lord through which the Lord's testimony was to be carried on, and at last come to the throne, was the object then. So it has ever been. The same thing is found in Moses when Pharaoh ordered the destruction of the male children. So it was with Herod. A rival to his influence and power and continuance had arisen, and Satan will brook no rivals. The seed royal is marked down by him, and that devil incarnate, Herod, destroys all the male children of two years and under with the object of getting at that one chosen One with whom and in whom the testimony is bound up, who represents the menace to Satan's kingdom. In Rev. 12 we find the final exhibition of this same thing at work.

It is very interesting to notice one little phrase that recurs. It says here, "*Now when Athaliah saw...*" Then in Matt. 2 it is, "*When Herod saw...*", and in Rev. 12, "*When the dragon saw...*" Three times that phrase is used in this same connection - the recognising of the significance of what was happening, and what it meant to the enemy. When they saw, they were wrath, very wrath, and broke out against the seed royal. I think it unnecessary to deal with each fragment and point at any length. We see what Athaliah stands for in principle, that spiritual thing manifesting itself again and again through persons in history, ever and always out against that seed, that seed which is Christ, and those who are His through the travail of His soul; according to Isa. 53 - "*He shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand*". But Satan is against that, against Him and that seed. Well, we see what Athaliah stands for quite clearly.

The Seed Royal

And we see what the seed royal represents, that line in relation to the Lord for His testimony through history right up to the end, a seed royal. "*Ye are... a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession*" (1 Pet. 2:9). "*They shall be Mine, says Jehovah of hosts, even Mine own possession, in that day*" (Mal. 3:17). Well, the seed royal are recognised, identified, those who really do stand vitally related to the Lord's testimony, which is at last to be found in exaltation in the throne.

But then there is Joash here, Joash the child, rescued, preserved, and the simple details about Joash are significant and helpful; Joash, with whom the testimony is linked and bound up. We might say very truly that the testimony exists very largely with Joash, the young king, but he is very small, very small in this day. The power here in this world, the reign on this earth, is an immense thing, a mighty thing, a far-reaching thing. The Holy Spirit caused the record to include this phrase - "*Athaliah reigned over all the land*", this iniquitous thing against the Lord and His anointed, having great power indeed, far-reaching influence, seeming to possess the throne and the dominion, and on the other hand, that which represents the Lord's interests, the Lord's testimony, is very small, very weak, and what is more, it is very hidden, and what is more still, it is hidden in the house of God. Even Israel did not know of the existence of Joash. A very few knew that he was alive and where he was, very few.

I think we will all draw the significance of that at once. It does not need enlarging upon. We know that that which represents the Lord's real, full interest, that which is the seed royal in the spiritual sense, that with which the testimony of the Lord is really bound up is a small thing, a very small thing and a very hidden thing, and a thing unrecognised by a great mass of people who bear the Lord's Name and are called the Lord's people. Even they do not know, do not recognise, but the Lord has His testimony hidden in His house.

The Priesthood

But then there arise some other things here. That which takes responsibility for the testimony or the vessel and instrument of the testimony, is the priesthood. It is the High Priest who assumes responsibility for Joash, that is for the preservation of what is of the Lord in truth, in purity, and again the intimation and lesson is very simple. We need not think about priests and priesthood and priestly ministry as related to certain people of a certain class and order and ordination. We have only got to see what work priests do and then we can decide who the priests are, and if you and I, no matter how weak, ignorant and despised we may be, if you and I are really doing what Jehoiada did, then we are priests, and priests of tremendous value and significance to God, for priesthood is shown by its ministry and not by its caste - by its effect and not by its office. And priesthood is just this: that it takes serious and solemn responsibility for God's testimony in purity.

Are you a priest? Am I a priest? It has ceased to be an official matter, it is now a spiritual matter. True priests unto God are those who, like Jehoiada, step forward in a day when the people of God are spiritually estranged, in spiritual uncleanness - shall we say, contamination - when the influence of Jezebel and Athaliah are so strong, even over the people of God. They have been brought into alliance with this world. Priesthood is that which steps forward and takes solemn responsibility for the thing which is of God in purity and in truth, though it be small, though it be hidden, though it may not be recognised by many, nevertheless priesthood stands for that.

It is not easy, not easy at all, to stand for something that is not recognised and not known, something which the majority, even of those who are called the Lord's people, know nothing about, cannot see, cannot appreciate. In a day when another order is in the ascendancy and holds sway, something that is against, really against, the true testimony of God has the power amongst the Lord's people, it is not easy to stand true and faithful for what you know to be God's thought. But priesthood does that. If He has made us priests unto Himself, let us remember that that means He has bound up with us the solemn responsibility of His testimony. It is that which constitutes us priests. Priests always had to do with God's testimony in purity.

The greatest charge that ever the Lord had to level against Israel was with regard to their priests. Their priests were defiled, they no longer ministered in purity, and when the priesthood became defiled, we know that the nation also became defiled. So it was in the days of Eli when his sons the priests fulfilled their ministry in a corrupt way. Well, we ask ourselves: are we priests? Priesthood, beloved, is something which takes us right on to the innermost things of the Lord's heart, always remember that - the innermost things of the Lord's heart, and that in a day when the general situation is one very different from that desire of the Lord. Standing against something - Jehoiada knew quite well what he was up against. He knew the days in which he lived, he knew the perils that he ran. Nevertheless, here you have a courageous priest, a militant priest, who is jealous for the Lord's testimony, even though it be represented by something very small.

That is the priesthood precious to God; this is a priesthood necessary to the Lord in a time of crisis, and shall we not say that this is such a time? Indeed it is! Priesthood girded for the preservation of what is wholly of the Lord.

Priesthood and Sonship

It is very interesting to note how right through the Scripture, the Old Testament in type and in the New Testament in direct teaching, priesthood and sonship always go together. The priests, the *sons* of Aaron. Now it says here, "*the king's son*". Jehoiada and the king's son are found together. When you get into the New Testament, especially in the letter to the Hebrews, you find that sonship and priesthood are so tremendously together, "*has at the end of these days spoken unto us in His Son*" (Heb. 1:2). Then there is all that about His Son, and then the sons - "*bringing many sons to glory*", and then, "*My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord*". Sonship! And then, alongside that, all that there is in that letter about priesthood. We know that priesthood is something which has to do with the innermost things of the Lord's heart, and we also know that sonship represents that maturity which can take responsibility as being something more than a child: a son taking responsibility.

Well, what is maturity? Let me say to the youngest believer, the youngest Christian here, that you have not to wait until you get to thirty, forty, fifty or sixty years old before you reach spiritual maturity, before you come to sonship. I believe that Samuel had attained sonship when first we read of him as ministering in the house of God. He was head and shoulders above Eli spiritually. He was above every other man in the land spiritually, as a youth. What is spiritual maturity or sonship? It is that energy of the Spirit which takes responsibility for God's fullest interests and has no compromise with that which is at work against those interests of God to subvert the Lord's testimony. Jealousy for the full testimony of the Lord - that is a mark of sonship and maturity, as it is a mark of priesthood.

Priesthood and the Throne

Then there is this other truth which shines out in the Word, that priesthood and sonship are always bound up with the throne, so that we are not only priests, but a kingdom and priests, or kings and priests, if you like. The Lord Jesus is King, and He is Priest. He has called us and chosen us to be priests and kings, but this is spiritual. It simply means the testimony is our jealous concern. We take responsibility for it to see that it comes to the throne, to ascendancy, and when it is there, we are found there also in that place of spiritual government.

Well, what have we got? Athaliah, great, powerful, a far-reaching order of spiritual influence which is working against the pure, full testimony of the Lord. The seed royal, small, weak, hidden, antagonized. Priesthood which takes responsibility for that small and hidden thing which is so precious to the Lord.

The Day of the Showing

What next? The day of the showing! At length the day comes when the king is brought out and presented and acclaimed - the showing of the testimony or the vessel of the testimony in God's own time, and really all the trouble in the world is waiting for that. Paul has told us so clearly that it is the explanation of the travail of the whole creation - waiting for the manifestation of the sons of God. In due course, that which has been small, nursed, protected in secret, hidden, so largely unknown, is by

the Lord brought out and by the priest brought out. It comes to challenge the Lord's people, challenge God's spiritual Israel as to where they stand, and in God's time when the false reign has been such an evil thing as to create a state amongst the Lord's people which they feel it almost impossible to endure, when within them there has been, by the very conditions of that evil reign, produced a revolt, an inward revolt, and a longing and desire for something more, then the Lord has got that something more all ready. He has been keeping it secret, hidden, preserved, protected unto His own time, and when the hour is ripe and He brings it forth, the people say in effect, "This is what we want! This is what we need! Long live the king!"

Are we to expect anything like that, or is not that the very thing for which we are holding on in our priestly work? Oh, I do feel that this gets us right to the heart and point of everything. You see, there is today a false system of power and influence, even over the Lord's people in a general way, when really, if you were to bring to the mass of Christian people today the full thought of God, the testimony of Jesus, they would not have it. They will not have it. The fact is, beloved, and it is not a pleasant thing to say at all, but the fact is that the antagonists of God's thought are Christians, not the world. It is the Christian church of today as it is in its present system, which opposes what is God's deepest and fullest will.

You never know how terrible is the power of that Christian system until you get up against it. You find it is a terrible thing, and Athaliah - that is, the link between the Lord's people and this world, and this world system, that is what Athaliah is, the link - Athaliah has terrible, awful power over the people of God, and the further fact is this: that the people of God are not ready for anything more. Very largely, they are content, they are satisfied, they are not ready for anything more. That is not a pleasant thing to say, but it is true. There is no doubt about it, it is true. Go to the Lord's people with a full message and you find that they do not want it. What do we find? Well, this is what we find, that they regard it as something they can take or leave, and you know when you are in that state, you are like a spoilt child; when you can say, when something is offered to you, "I don't want it!" that means that you are in no desperation.

So the Lord allows Athaliah to go on, but Athaliah's reign will, under His sovereignty, produce amongst the Lord's people more generally a sense, a growing sense, of dissatisfaction and disappointment, and that all is not well, a deepening sense that things are not right, there is something other. If there is not, then everything is a disappointment, a failure. There must be something more! And the sovereignty of God allows the false reign to produce that, and then in His own time when the need is felt, the way is prepared. He has had in secret, in keeping, guarded, that which is to come out and to which there will be a response by a large number of His people. I trust that this is not wishful thinking, that I am not reading into this story what we hope will be the case, but it does seem to me that this is how the Lord has worked and does work, and in His own time out from the secret, when things are ready, (He knows when they are ready), He brings that which He has got and to which there will be a response.

Now, whether that is going to be so generally or not, we have yet to see, but you cannot get away from this, that it is happening all the time in certain cases. You have been jealous for the Lord's testimony in its greater fulness, but you know quite well that it is not going to be generally accepted, it will not be accepted generally, and so you have to fulfil your priestly ministry in faithfulness very largely in secret and there seems to be no way for it generally and it is a very trying time, but the Lord is working here and there amongst His people creating disappointment and dissatisfaction and a sense of need. And then, just in His time, if you are led by Him, if you are in the hands of the Spirit,

He will just lead you out in that direction and He knows that there will be a response there and there. He has been preparing and He knows the moment in which there will be a response, in this direction or that direction, to that which He has been keeping and guarding in secret, for which you have been watching in your priestly ministry. That is a fact, and a very comforting fact.

The Lord knows where there are prepared ones. To be led of the Spirit means to be led in that direction, and while at large the people may not be ready and may not be able to accept and it may be even dangerous to talk to them about these things, only to stir up more antagonism. Being led of the Spirit - He knows where there will be a response, and when He brings that moment in and that contact, at once there is a jubilant cry in the spirit of this - "Long live the king! We have got what we want! This is the thing for which we have been longing!" That is a blessed day when that comes about and He is doing it. So we have not to wait for some day when the thing will be general.

Fulfil our ministry and we shall discover that, in faithfulness, in priestly ministry to the Lord's full testimony, and we being led of the Spirit under the anointing, from time to time here and there a contact will be made, and those with whom the contact is made will say, "This is what I have been looking for, waiting for! You have got the thing I need!" There is nothing more blessed than that. So let us be faithful.

We cannot close without one more terrible and yet joyous contemplation. The day comes when Athallah will be destroyed. It is a terrible day, but it is coming. "*Yet once again, says the Lord, I will shake not the earth only but the heavens and the desire of all nations shall come*" (Hag. 2:6-7). God is going to shake the Athaliah system out of His people and bring in the desire of all. Well, Athaliah will be destroyed eventually, and God's King will be on the throne, and God's testimony will be in the place of universal power, and be something very much better than even Joash, and Joash's reign was a very feeble reflection of the great truth which he illustrates. But still, he points on to the day when Athaliah and all that Athaliah represents, Jezebel and that whole evil tendency and influence will be broken, and He shall reign alone whose right it is and if we suffer with Him we shall reign with Him. The Lord keep us faithful, then, in our priestly ministry!