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Rest and Liberty in the Spirit

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"I marvel that ye are so quickly removing from him that called you in the grace of Christ" (Gal. 1:6).

"O foolish Galatians, who did bewitch you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was openly set forth crucified? This only would I learn from you, Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are ye so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are ye now perfected in the flesh?" (Gal. 3:1-3).

"My little children, of whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you" (Gal. 4:19).

"For freedom did Christ set us free: stand fast therefore, and be not entangled again in a yoke of bondage" (Gal. 5:1).

The Result of the Spirit Being in Us

The commencement of these Galatian Christians was evidently a good and sound one, so much so that the apostle at one point says, "*Did ye suffer so many things in vain? If it be indeed in vain*" (3:4). They suffered much at the beginning, and paid a great price in persecutions. Their beginning was all right, there was no doubt about that. But then there came a point at which their progress was arrested. That radiant morning became overcast, and the promise which they gave faded. The big question arose as to the whole purpose for which they had paid the price and turned to the Lord. At the moment, we are not touching upon what it was that brought them under arrest. We come to this tremendous re-emphasis made by the apostle upon the purpose of salvation, and in that connection

he brings the Holy Spirit very much into view. You go through and mark the occurrences of the Spirit in chapter 3:2,3,5,14; 4:6,29; 5:16,17,18,22,25. There are all those references to the Spirit, and they have therefore a very great bearing upon this whole matter of the purpose of salvation, and what the apostle is really saying, to sum it up in a word, is this, that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God's full purpose; that is, the Holy Spirit never begins a work to leave it half finished. If we make a beginning by the Spirit, our beginning is the work of the Spirit and in the beginning we receive the Spirit. The Spirit does not mean to leave it there. He is the Spirit of divine fulness. Fulness is a word which so often is associated with the Holy Spirit. Wherever you get types of the Holy Spirit, you get the idea of plenitude, of abundance, of fulness. If it is the river, if it is the fire, whatever it is, you find that He comes with the idea of making up a lack, of taking things right on, and He is God committing Himself, and God is full.

So the apostle here is saying, "Now, your very receiving of the Spirit at the beginning was not intended that you should just be saved, but that you should come to divine fulness, and the Spirit is here for that purpose, and will therefore be present with the mighty urge of God - Onward, ever onward!" It is a violation of the very Spirit which we received at the beginning if we just do not go on. Among the Galatians the Spirit is being suppressed, the Spirit is being grieved, the Spirit is suffering reverse, for the Spirit would take us on to that fulness which is always implied and meant by the word 'sonship', which is another of the great words in this letter; 'sonship' which is spiritual fulness.

Satan's Endeavour to Make Christianity a Legal System

Now at that point things divided. There is the true foundation, the true beginning, and the meaning of the Spirit being in us, but at a point with these people, the thing divided. They moved away from the true guidance, the true constraint, the true movement of the Spirit on to an artificial one, and their Christian lives began to become artificial. The reason was that these Judaisers came along, always on Paul's heels to try to destroy his ministry. They came along and said, "You must be circumcised; except you be circumcised, you cannot be saved" - bringing in again the old legal idea, and making even Christianity into something legal. It is a persistent thing all the way along. It is one of Satan's persistent objects, not to turn us away from Christianity necessarily, but to make Christianity something which it really is not, and to turn the great blessedness, joy, life and liberty of a true Christian life into something burdensome, something difficult and hard. It is so easy just to come to a point where, from what has been a really living and blessed experience and enjoyment of the Lord, Christianity becomes something of laws and regulations, and we begin to feel that the Christian life is a strain. Something has happened. A twist is being given to it, and now the whole prospect is one without real joy, without real liberty. It is a case of, "You must!" It is the big stick kind of thing. "You must, and if you do not, woe betide you!" It is easy for anything in Christianity to become like that, so that the Christian life now has become a burden, and the work of the Lord has become a burden. Then we are more slaves than sons. That is what the apostle is arguing in this letter: "*Thou art no longer a bondservant, but a son*" (4:7).

But what has brought about this change? We have begun to take on something which for us is not living; it is not for us a matter of life, it is a matter of something that we have to measure up to and try to attain, of trying to be something that we are not, and so the thing becomes a weight and a burden. It is an artificial kind of Christianity. But over against that, the apostle is saying this, that immediately things begin to get like that, something has gone wrong. If ever the Christian life begins to appear like that and become something like that to you, things have gone wrong; you have ceased to move in the Spirit, you have got on to some other ground.

The Spirit is the Spirit of life and of liberty. What do we mean by life and liberty? Well, the spirit of rest - just the opposite of burdensomeness.

Our Responsibility and the Holy Spirit's Responsibility

How does that work out? If the Spirit has got the matter in hand, if He is the Spirit of divine fulness, all that is necessary where we are concerned is to keep in fellowship with the Spirit, walk in the Spirit, to keep in spiritual fellowship with the Lord, to have our own life truly in union with the Lord and the Spirit will take responsibility for seeing that the whole divine purpose is reached. If we are not moving away from the Lord, pulling away or in the other direction, if we are having no unbelief, no rebellion and no stubbornness of our own, the Holy Spirit will take up this matter of God's divine purpose, and all the time we will be moving in that direction.

That can be proved as true in many ways. If you and I have really made a beginning in the Spirit, if it has really been a true spiritual history at the beginning where the Holy Spirit has really come into us, we may many times fail, even deviate, sometimes go away from the Lord, but we will come back. It will be wilderness, it will be disappointment. As Francis Thompson put it, "All things betray thee who betray Me". "You betray Me and all things will betray thee." It is Christ speaking. It will be wilderness. The Holy Spirit, who started a work, will quietly work back again to the point where we deviated. If we get so pressed in the work, so strained, that we say, with Jeremiah, "I will not speak any more in this Name. It is too costly, I am not going to talk any more about it, it is far too painful. In the future I am just going to be silent." Then, "*there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with forbearing, and I cannot contain*" (Jeremiah 20:9). You see the reaction of the Holy Spirit. Paul is saying that - "*My little children, of whom I am again in travail*" (4:19). The reaction of the Spirit is that working within which brings us back and urges us on, even when we are resolved that we cannot go on. He does not accept that at all. He is going on, and only as we definitely resist the Spirit shall we neutralise His direction, His object.

We can rest - without passivity which is a wrong kind of rest, a false rest; without that kind of fatalism which says, "What is to be, will be". But if we are definitely seeking to move with the Lord, we can rest. The Holy Spirit has this matter in hand, and every deviation of ours will find the Holy Spirit reacting to it and bringing us back. Every time we feel we can go on no longer, we find we come back again, we just cannot stay there, back we come again. We know that it is not just our persistence, but there is a persistence of God. He has this thing in hand, and that is liberty.

These others were coming in and saying, "You must, and unless you do...!" The apostle said, "There is no must about it; you walk in the Spirit and you will." You can take it for granted, you can rest in this: the Holy Spirit has come to take charge of this matter, and if you will seek to be in real fellowship with the Lord, you will be free from all that terrible bondage of all the time being beaten by what you ought to do and ought not to do. You are at liberty in Christ, you are at rest. All I have to do is to have no rebellion in my heart, to have no resistance to the Spirit, to seek to be open to the Lord. The Holy Spirit has the whole thing in hand if I will keep in the road; He has come to do this - I can rest. That is liberty in Christ from the terrible bondage of law. It is the work of the Spirit.

I put it very simply because we must never come under a strain in the Christian life. Sometimes there is presented to us some view of the great purpose of God, some presentation of truth that is altogether beyond us; something from the Word of God which we would call deeper or higher or fuller is brought to us, and we have it explained and all its laws and principles set forth, and then the

whole thing becomes a strain. How can I get into that, how can I attain to that? The thing is so big and it seems so terribly beyond us. Well, if that is of the Lord, if that is the Lord's will, then, Lord, I adjust to that, I accept that, and I say, "Lord, I am committed to that; if You see there are those things that would get in the way, I am prepared for You to deal with those things." And you rest in faith, you apprehend, you lay hold. Then the Lord has got that, the Holy Spirit has come to do that, and, being like that, you do not make a great burden of it. We need not make a strain of it at all. The enemy would like us to make a terrible strain of this whole thing, and so the 'Christian' life becomes something that takes the joy and rest out. It is just the opposite! The Holy Spirit has come to do this. All that we have to see to is that the Holy Spirit does not meet positive obstruction in us, that we are going on with the Lord as He shows us, and He will work the whole thing out.

Paul was the great personal example of the way of spiritual fulness as to its beginnings. You notice that in the beginning of this letter, Paul takes pains to present his own spiritual history. He is reinforcing his argument by a good deal about himself. He tells us of his beginnings, how it came to him. "*Neither did I receive it (the Gospel) from man, nor was I taught it, but... through revelation of Jesus Christ*" (Gal. 1:12). "*It was the good pleasure of God... to reveal his Son in me*" (Gal. 1:15-16). Then he tells us various things about himself, but his point is that his whole spiritual life was based upon a firsthand, living knowledge of the Lord and not something second-hand. And that is the first key to spiritual fulness, that this is a living spiritual matter that is firsthand, and not something that we receive from books, study, conferences, messages, other people, but for us, whatever there may have been of help towards understanding, the thing has become a personal living thing, and it is like that all the time. That is the key to spiritual fulness.

The Holy Spirit's Urge in Ministry

But then you notice the apostle here is not only the example of the basis of spiritual fulness, but he is the great example of this principle that I have been trying to set forth - the urge of the Spirit. If the Lord had been content with anything less than fulness, if the Lord had been satisfied that these people had been saved with a good conversion from paganism to Christ, then Paul would not have been worried. You would never have words like this - "*...of whom I am again in travail*". What is this travail? What is this thing that Paul is talking about as to himself - "*striving according to his working, which worketh in me mightily*" (Col. 1:29). "*That we may present every man perfect in Christ*" (Col. 1:28). Paul is the personal example of the Holy Spirit's great concern for the spiritual fulness of the Lord's people.

I speak from our own case as those who need to be on this ground ourselves, this ground of rest, this ground of confidence that the Holy Spirit is going to do the whole thing while we are walking in the Spirit. If we are called to be ministers of the fulness of Christ, that is, of greater measures of Christ to others, if we have been apprehended by Christ with a view to bringing the Lord's people into a greater fulness, we can take it that the Lord will never let us settle down to something less. May we take our own experience? I cannot tell you how many times in the course of these good few years now, I have been personally tempted to take a lower level of ministry, to be content with just so much and not go any further, because this reach for the Lord's fullest thought is so costly. It brings us into such suffering of almost every kind, in the spiritual realm and among men and among our brethren in Christ. To stand for God's ultimate, complete thought and intention involves us in such a lot, and the temptation comes sometimes, under extreme pressure, not to go so far, not to be so utter, not to stand for so much. The temptation is, if only you would come within a smaller compass, a lot of this trouble would be lifted from you. And sometimes we have almost felt, "Well,

perhaps we are trying to go a bit too far, and so on. Next time we are going to give a much simpler message!" But oh, we cannot, it just does not work. The Holy Spirit will not let you, and you come to a real crisis. Did the Lord call you to that? If so, you are going to do a terrible injury if you do not go right on with it. I mean this: the Spirit of God within just will not let you come down; He reacts, and you have to go on and go on. He has this thing in hand, and the issue is that you have to violate the Holy Spirit in order to take a lower line or level, and who will do that?

The apostle raised a very serious question with these Galatians. He said, If you accept this alternative, "ye are fallen away from grace" (5:4); you have got out of the realm where grace obtains and put yourself on another basis. That is exceedingly serious.

My point is that, if the Lord has in His sovereignty called us into the work, the ministry, of His fullest desire or His fuller desire for His people, the Holy Spirit will not allow us to argue ourselves out of it and say, "Well, look at all these other Christians. They are happy with something less, the Lord blesses them, and why this and why that where they are concerned?" When we say, "What of this man?" the Lord says to us, "*What is that to thee, follow thou Me.*" He does not allow us to argue ourselves out on the ground of other Christians. The Spirit brings us back again. What He does in the matter of our Christian lives in bringing us back if we withdraw, if we get away, He does in the case of the purpose for which we are called into service. He makes us know that, whatever others may be called to, this is our calling and we cannot get away from it. He expects nothing less, and we shall find our rest, not in an easier way, but in going on with the Lord; we shall find our life in the way of the Lord's calling, and any other is the way of death; not liberty at all, but bondage.