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Taking Responsibility for the Testimony

by T. Austin-Sparks

First published in "A Witness and A Testimony" magazine, Jul-Aug 1932 Vol. 10-4.

"Now about that time Herod the king put forth his hands to afflict certain of the church. And he killed James the brother of John with the sword. And when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. And those were the days of unleavened bread. And when he had taken him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four quaternions of soldiers to guard him; intending after the Passover to bring him forth to the people. Peter therefore was kept in the prison: but prayer was made earnestly of the church unto God for him. And when Herod was about to bring him forth, the same night Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains: and guards before the door kept the prison. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood by him, and a light shined in the cell: and he smote Peter on the side, and awoke him, saying, Rise up quickly. And his chains fell off from his hands. And the angel said unto him, Gird thyself, and bind on thy sandals. And he did so. And he saith unto him, Cast thy garment about thee, and follow me. And he went out, and followed; and he knew not that it was true which was done by the angel, but thought he saw a vision. And when they were past the first and the second guard, they came unto the iron gate that leadeth into the city; which opened to them of its own accord: and they went out, and passed on through one street; and straightway the angel departed from him. And when Peter was come to himself, he said, Now I know of a truth, that the Lord hath sent forth his angel and delivered me out of the hand of Herod, and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews." (Acts 12:1-11).

We will not read more for the sake of time, but there is a word that has been very much on my heart of late which I feel the Lord would have passed on to you; a very important message, I feel, for the Lord's children today.

It is with regard to our privilege and responsibility for the testimony, especially in relation to the ministry in the testimony of the Lord. Very briefly, what we have in this chapter is this.

The Lord was doing things through His servants, the Word was going forth in power; then, as always is the case, there is a mighty reaction of hell to the work of God, and the adversary stirs up his instrument, his emissaries against the testimony, and Herod is taken hold of and turned against the testimony of the Lord. And he slew James and then proceeded to take Peter also. This whole object of the enemy is to curtail this testimony and to limit the spread thereof, and to shut up this ministry. Thus we find as a result of his second move, Peter in an inner prison with two chains on him and two guards beside him, and within a large number of other limiting things. That is the position, we may say, of the testimony at the moment. The testimony and its ministry brought under very severe limitations, brought under a captivity, for the moment checked, under arrest. Then the Lord reacts to that situation.

It is always very blessed to see the throne of the Lord coming in and the sovereignty of the Lord being put into operation: the Lord reacts to that situation, but He reacts along two lines. First of all by the Holy Spirit in His own people. And that is a very important side of things for us: and of course that is where our main emphasis is placed this morning. The Lord's reaction through the Holy Spirit within His own people, within the Church or within the assembly. And the Holy Spirit constrains them to prayer, so that here the assembly is found praying stretched-outedly to God. The position in effect is this, "Lord, this testimony and the ministry of this testimony is being crippled, is threatened with limitation, with bondage, with restriction, with curtailment, even with an end, and we cannot find it in our hearts to accept that situation. Rather do we find it borne in upon us that this must not be, that this testimony must be liberated and the ministry in relation thereto set free. We believe that is the registration of God's will in our hearts and so we are against this thing, and we are stretched out against this thing in prayer." And when the Lord, by His Spirit, gets His people to that position of intelligent co-operation with His throne in relation to the testimony and its ministry, then He acts sovereignly on His own part.

The sovereign acts of God do not operate, beloved, independently of the spiritual exercise of God's people. We must bear that in mind, for so often in a situation we sit down and say, "O Lord, do this thing," and in a kind of folded arms attitude wait for the Lord to act sovereignly for a deliverance, when the Lord first of all would energise in us unto stretched-out co-operation with Him before He would stretch out His hand in sovereign activity. But then He did act sovereignly by the angel, but the angel worked in fellowship with the Holy Spirit Who worked in the people of God. Now, beloved, the word for us this morning is on that other side, our privilege and our responsibility. Of course, there must be a position, a condition in us which provides the Holy Spirit with a ground of operation in relation to the Lord's will. I mean that we must have a very lively concern for the testimony, and that necessitates our having a clear apprehension of what the testimony is, and of the absolute importance of that testimony; how indispensable it is.

I do just wonder how far we are in that place, that position, that condition which is a lively concern for the Lord's testimony in an active way. How much we are concerned for our own testimony, for our own spiritual life and state, and we circle round ourselves very largely, spiritually. That may mean bondage, that may mean depression. There is nothing so strengthening, so emancipating as to be occupied with the Lord's testimony at large; and there is nothing so depressing, so paralysing as to be occupied merely with our own personal spiritual life. And I think that probably nine out of every ten of the frowns and unhappy looks which we carry are because we are occupied with our

own spiritual condition; whereas if we were emancipated out into the Lord's great world testimony, we should be very much freer and a happier people. We want to be delivered from ourselves spiritually by all the Lord's universal interest.

Now are we out in that? Have we an intelligent, a lively interest, concern for the Lord's testimony in the earth; that which the Lord is after and that by which the Lord is going to get what He is after; the end of God and the means to secure that end? That is being in the testimony, and that specifically at any given time. Are we in that? Do we recognise what it is the Lord is seeking, what He is aiming at, what He is after at this time in the history of the world; this that we call the end time? Has it come to us? We have heard it a good many times; heard it with the ear, but has it broken upon us? Has it come to you, are you livingly in it? Has what the Lord is after at the end time gripped you? Are you intelligently in that thing, spiritually in that? Well, if you are, that is bound to issue in a real concern that that testimony and all the ministry in that testimony shall be absolutely free to go on, and that all limiting things, all binding things in that realm shall be broken, and that concern must be to stretched-out prayer; and, of course, the praying is the betrayal of our concern and intelligent understanding. You can always tell from how people pray just how much intelligence they have spiritually, and just how much really they are in the thing. You cannot pray really in a thing if you are not in it. If you are in it you cannot help yourself. That is a test, isn't it?

Well now, in just a very few moments, let us sum this up in a two-fold practical proposition. First of all, from the standpoint of concern for the Lord's testimony, do we recognise limitations which exist within the realm of that with which we are associated in the Lord? Do we see a handicapping within that circle, a limiting? Do we see that if only certain things were dealt with how much more could be realised for the Lord. Let Peter represent any one, or any thing that is of interest to the Lord. If only it were liberated it would mean that the testimony would come out and the Lord would be able to get so much more. Are you alive to the limiting elements in the testimony with which you are connected immediately? That is a realm for investigation, for prayerful contemplation. We must pray intelligently, we must pray in a living relation to the situation. We cannot pray theoretical prayers, abstractions.

We have to recognise where loosing is necessary; where those things which are crippling need to be dealt with, and we have to come right in fellowship, stretched out on that. You may think that is calling you again into strenuous, laborious work. Believe me, you will find your liberation, your joy in that. This assembly here would not believe their prayers were answered, but do not let us altogether blame their unbelief, let us give them credit for something else as well. Credit for the Lord having done more than they asked or thought. (Perhaps they asked for or thought of an acquittal at the trial.) And you know; when the Lord does things like this you are always a little incredulous, sometimes you cannot believe it has happened. Everyone of us has been there, have prayed with all our might for the Lord to do a thing, and when He has done it we have rubbed our eyes! Is it true?

Oh, that the Lord would find Him an adequate company of men who are free in the Lord spiritually, from every shackle, from every chain of system, where they are free in the Lord with a sovereign work of God at their back and an open way before them, and who can say: Now I know that the Lord has done this, no man could have done this, the Lord has done it, brought me out here! We need men and women who stand in that position and say the Lord has wrought a great emancipating work for them; and in relation to ministry, whereas hell rose up to bring an end to that ministry, God acted because He had chosen, He stood and delivered. But remember the sovereign act of God in that direction is in conjunction with the Holy Spirit-energised prayer of the assembly. This is our

ministry, our privilege, our responsibility. What must that assembly have felt when Peter went on in his ministry and travelled far and wide and wrote his letters to the saints scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Aria, and Bithynia. That little assembly could have said, "The Lord used us to liberate that ministry, to make that ministry possible: if the Holy Spirit had not led us to pray and we had not been obedient, what a lot would have been lost." You do not know, beloved, how much the mighty world ministry of the Apostle Paul and the Apostle Peter, not only in the days of their flesh (it has gone on ever since in the 2000 years) is due to the Holy Spirit prayer of the Lord's people. There is a need along that line today:- the liberation of ministry, the destruction of limitations imposed by the enemy upon ministry. Do enter into that. Ask the Lord to give you the privilege of fulfilling a great world ministry along that line and making possible what hell is out to make impossible.