



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.

The Place and Work of the Levites

by T. Austin-Sparks

Edited and supplied by the Golden Candlestick Trust.

"And David made him houses in the city of David; and he prepared a place for the ark of God, and pitched for it a tent. Then David said, None ought to carry the ark of God but the Levites: for them has the Lord chosen to carry the ark of God, and to minister unto him for ever." (1 Chron. 15:1-2).

"Thou therefore, my child, be strengthened in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things which thou hast heard from me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also. Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus." (2 Tim. 2:1-3).

I do not know whether the connection between those passages is apparent to you immediately, but there certainly is one. "None ought to carry the ark of God but the Levites; for them has the Lord chosen to carry the ark of God, and to minister unto him for ever." The two fragments in the 2nd chapter of the 2nd letter to Timothy, verses 1 and 3: "Be strengthened in the grace that is in Christ Jesus... Take your part in suffering hardship, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus", bring us into the spiritual meaning of that word in Chronicles, that is, into the place of the work of Levites.

The Levites, as you know, are a very interesting people and their history is full of valuable things for the Lord's people in all times. But there is one thing amongst those many things which is on my heart particularly just now, which I feel the Lord would have us consider. It is that responsibility represented by being in the position of Levites. You will remember that this word of David's was the outcome of some history which was full of tragedy. One of the very many snares set by the adversary against the Lord's testimony in the life of David had succeeded in the incident of the cart

which David had inadvertently, forgetfully, unwatchfully constructed to bear the ark. It was a violation of the law of the Lord as here set down, with the result that one man, at least, had died a tragic death, and the whole testimony had been brought to a standstill for many years, for quite a considerable time. Then eventually, after the chastening, the discipline by which David had come to recollection, to remember the Lord's word about the carrying of that ark of testimony, a new spiritual movement was made, and things were adjusted. Now, according to the word of the Lord which David had remembered, the ark was brought out and committed to the Levites, and David says, not a cart, but: "None ought to bear the ark of God but the Levites, for them has God chosen...". Theirs was a peculiar responsibility among the Lord's people, and they had got to take their responsibility and it was not to be transferred to any other means. The responsibility belonged to them, and if they did not take their responsibility, then the testimony suffered loss, tragedy came in amongst the Lord's people and everything went wrong. That is exactly what happened. When the Levites were not taking their responsibility then there was weakness, failure, breakdown, arrest, and the Lord was dishonoured. Now when the Levites are eventually brought into their place and take their responsibility things go on, and the ark of the testimony is brought to a position of advancement.

It is just that word, that thought about taking responsibility for the testimony that is weighing upon my own heart; that which is meant by our place as Levites. It is a place of spiritual strength, as over against a place of spiritual immaturity and weakness. You will remember that the Levites could not enter upon their ministry until they were 30 years of age, and then they had to give it up when they were 50. While the age of 20 was the age for going to war, the entering upon this Levitical ministry in fulness was not allowed until they were 30, and then they had to retire at 50. (Of course, that does not create a precedent for retiring from the work of the Lord when you are 50!). It is a spiritual thing that is represented, and all that it says is this, that for this carrying of the Lord's testimony in spiritual responsibility, full strength is required. It was a taking out of life of the section of the best years, the years of full strength. That full strength was related particularly to Levitical ministry. Now literally it is not carried over, of course, to the work of the Lord now. That is, it does not apply in the sense that we may not come into a place of full responsibility until we reach a certain age and then we must give it up when we reach another age. But it does mean this, that there is required a spiritual strength to take this responsibility, and the Lord calls for the taking of this responsibility for His testimony, for His glory, and therefore He calls for us to be strong.

Now you see exactly that element in this passage in Timothy: "You therefore, my child, be strengthened in the grace that is in Christ Jesus"; there is your spiritual strength. What is it for? Well, so far as Timothy was concerned, it was that he might take his part in suffering hardship. So far as others were concerned he was to commit to faithful men these treasures which had been committed to him. You see the whole background is Levitical. Timothy and the others, faithful men, who have come to a place where they can take responsibility; and the necessity for that is spiritual strength. So, "be strengthened in the grace that is in Christ Jesus".

Very simply this says to us that there is a tremendous need for people to take responsibility for the Lord's testimony, and not always to regard certain others as being the people who are solely responsible; not to remain babes, to be carried and nursed, and to have all our own personal feelings considered, being always so sensitive and open to take childish offences, leaving the weight of things spiritually to others. Such can never take responsibility, such will never take their share in suffering hardship, such will never be good soldiers of Jesus Christ; with such the testimony will never be safe. Perhaps one of the greatest spiritual tragedies of our time is the fact that so few are

in a sufficiently strong spiritual state to be able to shoulder the responsibility for the Lord's testimony themselves. They belong to the great camp which follows. Yes, they are prepared to follow where others take the testimony, but they are followers; they are not taking responsibility.

I feel quite sure that it was because Israel had not recognised spiritually the meaning of the Levites in their midst that they failed so constantly through the wilderness. The Levites had been chosen to take the place of the priestly firstborn in every family. The firstborn in every family was the natural priest of the household, and took responsibility in the household in priestly matters. Now the Levites as a tribe were chosen to substitute the firstborn and became the tribe of the firstborn ones. If all Israel had recognised that, and abode by the spiritual truth, that in those Levites was their responsibility, that what the Levites were doing was only as them representatively, and that the responsibility resting upon the Levites was their responsibility, and that they were vitally linked with that testimony being borne by the Levites, there would not have been that detachment which meant so much weakness and found the general company constantly drawing back, wavering in uncertainty, unsettlement, in a place where they were as people who had never seriously taken responsibility for the Lord's testimony. They were in a detached state of mind; the Levites carrying the ark were one thing, and all they had to do was to follow. And so they followed very often murmuring and complaining, and they were not taking the responsibility that was resting upon their representatives.

I feel that today we have something very much like that. A large number of those who belong to the Lord are just in the camp, in the throng of the Lord's people, and leaving the main responsibility with others. They are not regarding it as their first concern. They are ready to follow, but they are not ready to take responsibility. They like to see things going on, but for themselves they do not care to be responsible for things going on. Now the Lord would say to us, 'Take your share, take your part in the sufferings as a good soldier, be strengthened. Do not be as those Corinthians, always babes, carried about with every wind; not as those Hebrews who, when they ought to be teachers, still needed that someone should teach them the first principles. Take responsibility spiritually, let the testimony of the Lord Jesus be your personal business. Take the attitude - in a right way - that if you fail the whole thing might fail.' I think we should be quite justified in taking an attitude like that, that this thing, after all, does very largely depend upon us individually, that this is our business, our responsibility; that we are not just one of a crowd, but a responsible member. Levites are not a separate class of people from all others; they are those who have spiritually taken responsibility. That is the only difference between Levites and the rest of the people. The Lord has found them to be His responsible people. Be strengthened unto taking your share in the hardship, come up to that state of spiritual strength, reaching out to the Lord, in order to take responsibility. I do believe that if we recognised that we were called to the responsibility, and, at the same time, were so deeply conscious of our own weakness, for the Lord's sake, for the sake of His testimony, if we reached out to Him, He would give us more strength. So often we are not reaching out for the glory of the Lord and the maintenance of His full testimony. The way to get strengthened is to take on more than you can carry.

Perhaps you are working the other way. You say, When I am stronger I shall be able to take responsibility; when the Lord gives me more strength then I shall be more serviceable to Him. I will ask you if the Lord has ever done that with you. What is your experience? Has the Lord come to you and started by giving you, in the first place, a great deal of strength and enablement in order that you may be able to take the responsibility, or has He come to you and called you to take the responsibility? Your experience differs from mine very much if it is not the second way. I have found

all along that the Lord makes demands and calls for an exercise of faith, and then meets the demand. We must not wait until we are such wonderful people before we do anything for the Lord and begin to take responsibility. We must recognise that the Lord says: Take your share, and then, recognising your responsibility, you may take your strength. Strength comes not along the line merely of consciously needing strength, but along the line of recognising that for which we need the strength. It is the object of the strength that brings the strength. We must have a motive for it. We say, 'Now Lord, here is this interest of Yours. I am unequal to it, but because it is Your interest I must be strengthened unto it, and I come for strength for Your interest, not just because I want to be stronger.' That is the ground upon which the Lord works.

The Levites ought to bear the ark. It is their responsibility, and none but the Levites ought to bear it. It is the responsibility of those who have come to a place of recognising how tremendously the Lord's interests are bound up with their life. That is priestly ministry. You see, the tabernacle is the place of the crowned King. The King Eternal, Invisible is in the tabernacle in the midst. All that relates to His glory, His honour, His majesty, as invisibly dwelling among His people is put into the hands of the Levities. They are as it were the bodyguard here on earth of the King invisible. They have to keep things for Him, watch His interests, maintain His testimony in strength, guard against the encroachment of those things which would pollute. And that is just where we are. The Lord is in the midst of us, the Lord is with His people, but things have got to be maintained in accordance with the Lord's presence, and some have to take responsibility for that. It is not just to be a latent and passive fact, things have got to be kept in accordance with the presence of such a One as the Lord. He is holy, then the work of holiness is committed to the Levites. He is in power and majesty, then the power and the majesty of the Lord is the responsibility of the Levites. It is responsibility for what is related to the Lord as present, the testimony of the Lord, and that is our business. We have to be faithful: "...the same commit to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also." It all speaks of a position, a standard, a life that is not just the Bible; not just the scholar. We shall always be that in a sense to the end but, "able to teach others also", taking responsibility for the testimony.

The Levites were divided, as you know, into three sections. They had three departments of responsibility. One section, the firstborn, had the vessels of the sanctuary, all the holy vessels; another section had all the curtains and the tapestries; and the third had the bars, the heavier work, or the heavier side of things. We may have our different aspects of work. There are those Levites whose ministry is, shall I say, more essentially spiritual; it may belong to the vessels of the sanctuary. There are others whose work is in another direction. Mine it may be to mainly minister in the Word of the Lord, what a lot of people would call 'the spiritual ministry', (I repudiate that suggestion that spiritual ministry is bound up with people who preach - that is not spiritual ministry only.) There may be others who minister in other spheres such as business life or household work. The Levites were divided into sections of different kinds of work. Some had the rougher work, the heavy bars and boards of the tabernacle, more physically strenuous than the carrying of the pots and the pans and the golden vessels and implements; but it was all Levitical work, they were all one people, one tribe. Responsibility rested upon all equally, for all these parts made one ministry. And so your sphere, your work and mine may differ, but it is one ministry, one calling, one responsibility, one testimony. This emphasis is upon taking it, assuming it, regarding ourselves as being responsible people in the testimony of the Lord.

I am sure the Lord's heart must long for that. I am sure that often He has had, in looking at me, to say, Oh, I wish I could trust him more! I wish he were more reliable, more responsible! And I know that as I have looked at many of the Lord's people I have said, I wish that they did not need so much

looking after; if only they would begin to stand on their own feet, and take responsibility, so that we need not worry about them any more because we know that they can be trusted! They need urging and encouraging; and all the time following up and putting right, because they have taken offence, and so on. If only they would take the responsibility and go right on in these things and not need to be looked after. How much more progress the testimony would make!

Now may the Lord give us the grace to take our share in the sufferings as good soldiers of Jesus Christ, to be strengthened with the grace that is in Christ Jesus, to bear the testimony of the Lord.