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## The Strategy of God

*by T. Austin-Sparks*

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Reading: Job 23:8-14.

"He hideth himself" (v. 9).

"He knoweth the way that I take" (v. 10).

"He performeth that which is appointed for me" (v. 14).

### **The Initial Move with God**

This is one of the most remarkable books of the Bible for quite a number of reasons, and we may well be thankful that God had it written, placed it in His Book and has preserved it throughout all these generations. It has a very great purpose to serve in His thought, and when you come to the remarkable things in it, the first is that in this whole drama - for it is nothing less than Divine drama - God took the initiative. It is important and helpful to remember that. I think a lot of people have thought that the Devil took the initiative, but it does not say so; it says, "When the sons of God came to present themselves before Jehovah... Satan also came among them. And the Lord said unto Satan... Hast thou considered my servant Job?" (1:6,8). God took the initiative; God drew the attention of Satan to this man; God drew out what Satan thought about Job. It was the initiative of the Lord, not the initiative of the Devil. I say that is a very remarkable and forceful thing when you

see all that follows. Evidently to the Lord Job had a very great significance, and He drew Satan's attention to that significance and then allowed it to be submitted to Satan's onslaughts.

I am not going to follow that in any full way, but I do believe that in some measure it is true of every child of God and of the saints as a body who stand upon true spiritual ground, that there is a great significance to the Lord bound up with them, and that He allows - I was almost going to say submits them to - the onslaughts of Satan for the bringing out of that significance to His own glory.

Before we come to the particular phrases which we have underlined, we might just indicate one or two aspects of the great significance of the life of Job.

### **God's Object in His Strange Dealings with His Children**

First of all, God was intending to establish and reveal a ground upon which Satan is undone and worsted and brought to the end of his power. It is interesting to note the disappearance of the Devil from the book of Job. He is very much in evidence in the beginning. You hear no more about him after a while and in the end, while he is not referred to, everything indicates that he has been completely put to flight and to shame.

Now I have said I am not going to follow that through, but that is absolutely true with regard to the Church. The final issue of the Church after its time of tribulation, trial, suffering, affliction is this, that Satan is cast out; and the object of God's strange, mysterious, deep and sometimes almost unbearable ways with the Church (the true Church, His people) is to bring about that issue. Some people think that when you come to the book of Revelation, Chapter 12, Satan is cast down from heaven in order to make room for the saints. That is just the wrong way round. The saints reach there and he is cast out; he is never cast out until the saints get there. When the Man-child reaches the Throne, Satan is cast out. That is the point. That chapter is a chapter of travail, the culmination of suffering. The Church comes to the glory and Satan is forced out of the heavens. And that is one of the big issues here in this book of Job, explaining everything.

### **God Deals with His Children According to His Knowledge of Them**

As to Job himself - and this brings us very much nearer to this chapter - God is clearly seen here as dealing with His servant according to His Own deeper knowledge of the man, a knowledge deeper than the man had of himself. Job had a certain conception of himself, and outwardly he was right. God's summing up of him to Satan was that he was not wrong so far as outward things were concerned. He was a perfect and upright man (Job 1:8), there was none like him in all the earth if it were a matter of outward righteousness and good acts, and that was the realm in which Job lived. But God knew him inwardly in a way in which Job did not know himself, and dealt with him according to that deeper knowledge. All that I am going to say about that for the moment is this, that when the Lord really does get us in hand and deal with us, when He does allow Satan to assail and almost torment us, the result will be seen, not only finally in one great ascent, but in this - that progressively and from time to time we recognise and acknowledge that the Lord has dealt with us quite rightly and in the only way suitable to us, and that we have been coming to see what we did not know or believe about ourselves. He does not standardize His methods and deal with all His people in exactly the same way. What to one would be acute agony, to another would be very little trouble at all. The Lord knows us, He knows the secret pride of our hearts, the conceits about us which we would never believe about ourselves and would never allow anyone else to point out - and if they did, we would

be untouched. He deals with us according to His knowledge; and in the end, in honesty of heart we have to say, The Lord's way with me was the only way in which He could deal with me and get me where He wanted me. That is, we have come to see that we had certain tendencies, propensities, certain perils in our makeup, and these had to be met and dealt with in a peculiar way. The way in which the Lord has dealt with them was the only way in which they could be dealt with.

That is one of the secrets of this book of Job. Job did not know himself inwardly, good man though he was, and you notice as the Lord puts him through the fires he is beginning to acknowledge things that he would never acknowledge before. In the end, this man, who had earlier told the story of his own goodness, and stood so strongly on the ground of all the kind things he had done - how he had never failed to answer to need where he saw it - in the end he says, "Wherefore I abhor myself" (Job 42:6); and although it is not so stated, it can be concluded that Job would have said, The Lord has taken the only way by which He could bring *me* to the place where He wanted me. The Lord had to deal with him according to His Own knowledge of him. That is what He is doing with us all.

I wonder how many of us here are now able to say, with a little knowledge of ourselves, as we begin to know our own peculiar makeup and perils and peculiarities and weaknesses, that the way the Lord has been dealing with us is the only way in which we could be dealt with effectively? It is a very great thing as we are able to come to that position, because the heart acknowledgment is just this - He is faithful and true! He is faithful with us because He knows us, and He is true to us because He knows us. That is, in faithfulness and truth He is dealing with us according to what He knows of us which we do not know of ourselves, and which we can never accept from anyone else. That is an issue of this book, and it is a great issue to come to the place where we justify God even against ourselves.

### **God Working to Produce Eternal Spiritual Values**

But then one other thing in general. God was making something of tremendous spiritual value for posterity in His dealings with Job. The story of this book is the story of God's producing something which for all ages was going to be of great spiritual value. You cannot fail to recognise how universal this book is, and how almost timeless it is. It is evidently a patriarchal book - that is, it belonged to the time of the patriarchs, probably the time of Abraham. Job was a Gentile living away somewhere by the Euphrates. He is a mysterious man. How did he come to know God and offer sacrifices? Those sacrifices were never on the Levitical basis. He offered sacrifices lest his sons should have sinned. This is not the mediatorial sacrifice of the Lord. There is no reference whatever to anything like the law of Moses and the sacrifices we have later. It is much earlier than that, it goes right back to the beginning of things. How universal and continuous it is! This scene in the heavens comes into view again and again. Right up to Ephesians you have it, warfare in the heavenlies, an interest in this earth in the heavenlies; and that great universal, spiritual realm, covering all time - not just the life of a man in some remote place on the earth - God was doing something to produce values for His people right on to the end.

Who is there among the Lord's true people who has never been helped by this book? The more you look into it and think about it, the more powerful is its ability to help you spiritually. This book of Job is of tremendous value to the Church. All I mean to indicate by that suggestion is that in these dealings with us by God, He is producing something of lasting spiritual value to serve others. It may be that some of us are going through something in a spiritual way like that through which Job went - disappointment, deprivation, so that God seems to be against us and the language of our hearts is

Job's - "Oh that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his seat! I would set my cause in order before him and fill my mouth with arguments" (23:3,4). This is the common complaint of the heart under trial. What is the Lord doing with us when He handles us like that, so deeply, so terribly? He is producing something spiritual to be of service to others. This is to be stock in trade for the saints - and not only in the short duration of this life here on earth. "His servants shall serve him, and they shall see his face" (Rev. 22:3). There is work to be done, and the spiritual measure to which we attain here is the measure in which we are going to be of use to the Lord afterward, and so the fires become very intense for some; but He is producing something of abiding value for others. That is one of the issues of this book.

### **God's Hiding of Himself**

Now right in that setting come these words which we hardly need to dwell upon. Firstly, "He hideth himself." I doubt whether there is one of us who does not know something of the poignancy that lies in that statement. "He hideth himself." That is one of our greatest occasions of suffering, the fact that the Lord hides Himself. Our cry all the time is that He will show Himself, come out into the open, let us see Him and see what He is doing. But "He hideth himself." He was enshrouded in the mystery of His ways with His beloved servant. In all the values of this book, this is not one of the smallest, that God could say of a man that he is perfect and upright and there is none like him in all the earth, and then could hide Himself from that man. You see the point. Oh, the misrepresentation of God and of Job which this book brings out! This is one of the things which God set Himself to destroy out of hand. This misrepresentation came through Job's friends. They were pious men, in their way godly men, who said some very lovely things - and yet they were used by the Devil as instruments against this choice servant of God.

A problem arises here, which we make no attempt now to answer. Were the things spoken by these men Divinely inspired utterances? Can we take them as Scripture? "Lay thou thy treasure in the dust... and the Almighty will be thy treasure" (Job 22:24-25) - is that an inspired utterance, can we take our stand on that? That is something to be fulfilled as the Word of God, and yet that - and many another equally lovely thing - was uttered by men of whom God said in the end "Ye have not spoken of me the thing that is right" (42:7.) Here is a man of whom God can say that he is perfect and upright. *Naturally* He can never say that about you and me, or about any one of us - though thank God He can say it of us *in Christ*. Yet He could say it of Job naturally as to outward life. He could say finally of Job that he had said the thing which was right. "Ye have not spoken of me the thing that is right, as my servant Job hath." God could speak so at the beginning and at the end about this man, and draw Satan's attention to him as the most perfect man on the earth, and then hide Himself from him in the time of his anguish. I say the precious thing about that is that God's hiding does not always mean that God is against you; it does not mean what these men interpreted it to mean, that God had a controversy with Job and that there must be some deep, awful, secret sin in his life which he was hiding or to which he was blind but which the eyes of God could see. That is all false, says God: this man is perfect and upright; and yet under the accusation of pious men, under the assaults of the devil to this man's anguish, God hid Himself.

Have you had one boil? You know the misery and the pain. Job was a man covered from head to foot with these things. That was only one phase of his suffering. Children gone, flocks and herds gone, camels gone, his home gone, his friends gone, and his wife turned against him saying, "Renounce God, and die." Job was left like that. And God, affirming this man's perfection and integrity, still hides Himself. "He hideth himself." What is our case compared with Job's? The Lord deals with us in the

same way; He hides Himself. He must have an object which far outweighs all the dangers of the possibility of His being misunderstood and misinterpreted. His servant was given plenty of occasion to say, God is unfaithful, unloving, unrighteous; He has turned against me; and so on. But God ran the risk of it because He saw something of value which far outweighed all that. He knew that in the long run He would be justified and not condemned. "He hideth himself." Do not think, my beloved, tried, pressed brother or sister, that the fact that Satan assails and things are so difficult and hard means of necessity that you are under judgment. Even if you are standing on the ground in Christ of righteousness from God, and are not persisting in a known course of wrong over which the Lord has a controversy with you; even if you are able to say, I stand not on any ground of my own, but on the ground of His righteousness through faith, and I repudiate all known, habitual sin: even then it does not mean that God is necessarily coming out to you to show Himself always very wonderful. He may hide Himself, and those who mean well may interpret that fact the other way. It is one of the most difficult things to bear when calamity falls; people will come along and say, The Lord must have some cause for judging you, you must lie under some condemnation for Him to allow that. "He hideth himself."

### **God's Knowledge of our Way in Spite of His Hiding**

The verses with which we began suggest a picture. Here is Job, as it were, going along a road. It looks to him like a road through a forest, and the Lord is somewhere in the vicinity and Job is looking for Him. He says, The Lord has hidden Himself somewhere in this forest, He is deliberately keeping out of my way; I sometimes seem to see an indication that He is doing something, and I immediately turn first in this direction and then in that, but I cannot find Him. He is hiding in the wood and He will not be found by me, but He is watching from His hiding place. "He knoweth the way that I take." While He is hiding, He is not disregarding; while He is hiding, He is not ignoring; while He is hiding, He is not forgetting.

### **God's Sovereign Working**

Nay, more; He is not only hiding and looking out and knowing all about me, but He is instigating it all. "He performeth that which is appointed for me." He is not only a hidden watcher, He is a hidden actor, the prime actor, because the cause, the author, the perfecter. "He performeth that which is appointed for me: and many such things are with him." Oh, the faith of Job in the sovereignty of God through it all! "He hideth" - yes; but "He knoweth" - yes; but more, "He performeth." Let us take all the comfort these words should bring to us as individuals and as the Church as we pass through the time in which God is doing things of which we have no knowledge. He is answering a whole universe in His dealings with us, getting through to issues of tremendous account. May our faith be sufficient to believe it and to hold on to this - that "When he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold."