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## The Strength of the Church

*by T. Austin-Sparks*

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### **Precis of Address**

John 14:25-26, 16:25; 2 Cor. 3:2-3, 7:18; Eph. 1:17, 3:16-20, 6:10.

### **"Be strong in the strength of His Might."**

There are one or two things on my heart to say which I feel are of very great importance to us and to the Lord at this time.

The letter to the Ephesians is not simply a presentation or conception of the Church as to its nature and existence. It presents tremendous and intensive activity concerned with the building of the Church. A very energetic process is seen to run throughout the whole of this short epistle.

This word has mainly to do with "*Strength*" - the strength of the Church: do trace this through the Word, it will open up much both as to the nature of our calling and the character of the conflict the Church is in at this end-time of the age.

When the Lord Jesus first introduced the thought of the Church, He said: "Upon this rock I will build My Church and the gates of Hades *shall not prevail* against it," the predominating element seen here is a mighty *strength*. Yes, all these counsellings of Hades *shall not prevail* against this mighty rock strength and this thought of strength is connected with the Church all the way through. It is spiritual

strength in view, inward strength. It is the strength of Who and What the Lord Jesus is as very God, Almighty.

It is very necessary and most essential to recognise the inwardness of the new dispensation after "Pentecost"; everything now related to the Lord Jesus is inward, no longer outward, objective. He is God in the Throne, but He is known experimentally through the Holy Spirit within.

Turn to the second letter to Corinth 3. The old Covenant was an outward thing written on tables of stone: Paul bringing it down to our times writes "written with ink": but the new Covenant is not a thing of time, but an Eternal Covenant; not an outward writing but an inward writing by the Eternal Spirit of the living God and written in our hearts.

Oh! do we get the greatness of this fact, it is so necessary and vital to see the *inwardness* of everything, this *must* be recognised by the Lord's people. The life of the believer is inward and everything to do with the life of the believer is inward, and in so far as the believer's life is outward and dependent upon outward things, to that measure it will be weak; in so far as the believer's life is *dependent* upon gatherings and to be ministered to by others and knowing the Lord only in this kind of outward manner, instead of that deep inward knowing Him, alone in secret with the word and prayer, the expression of life will be weak and not constituting spiritual strength to the assembly, but rather bringing in a weakness (a dead weight and even ground for the enemy to work on and from).

All is now inward and we do recognise that "*all*" is the Lord Jesus Himself.

The Church is an aggregate of individuals and it needs each individual to know the Lord in this inward manner and to live this inward life; and to have a dictating by the Holy Spirit of the "Law of the Lord" inwardly to our hearts and to know the heavenly things within as inwrought by the Holy Spirit.

The essential point is this - the very great need, the desperate need of the Church being strong in every individual member. The great need of this day is more strength in the Church, for the Lord's people individually to be Strong in the Lord, and so able to personally contribute to the assembly, and be a strong factor in the Lord unto the realisation of His purpose.

In our gatherings together, the strength of the gathering is determined by the strength of the individual and is no stronger than the strength of the secret life of each individual in his or her personal secret history with the Lord.

We do not just come together to hold meetings, to sing, to have a nice time: we meet together that there may be spiritual strength both manifested and received through meeting with the Lord. (I am not forgetting the first and chief purpose - to worship Him - all else is nothing apart from worship of Him unto Whom are all things.)

But the question here is of spiritual strength. The effectiveness of our gatherings together and its impact in the spiritual realm is a question of spiritual strength; when we meet together there is far too often the aspect of passive expectation instead of recognising the very fact of our being gathered together should be the occasion for a mighty expression of spiritual power for the accomplishing of spiritual ends.

## **We are up Against Great Spiritual Forces**

The Ephesian letter heads all up to the realm of wrestling in spiritual places where nothing less than the exceeding greatness of His power will accomplish the purpose and enable the Church to fulfil its vocation: that is the realm of the Church's activity on behalf of brethren in Christ in all the world; it is the one battle throughout the world against the one enemy against the Church of Christ. Oh! that we would recognise there are always terrific issues at stake when the Lord's people assemble together and there should be a strong expression of power and influence against the whole system of evil - the impact of the Lord's children meeting together into the Name, should be the setting back of the adversary and a celebration of the triumph of Christ over His enemies; meeting together thus there can be the winning of the battle miles away.

Paul attributes his own victories and escapes to the prayers of the assemblies far off (2 Cor. 1:2). When we get together there are tremendous issues for the Lord Jesus at stake as gathered up and focussed in the Church.

We are in a universal fight, the battle is on and the Church is never going to get through to the throne without a fight.

While all is secured in the Throne in our Lord Jesus Christ by His complete and perfect triumph in His Cross, yet that triumph has got to be wrought out and manifested, and the Church is His instrument unto this, so the battle is always focussed in the Assembly.

The need is great for the Lord's people to recognise this and so to be gathered together unto action, and in spiritual power for the whole body of Christ. It is the business of the whole Body and of every member in that Body. So the question is one of spiritual strength and power; and the power and spiritual strength of the Church assembled is the individual quota of spiritual life and strength to the whole.

There is a tremendous amount the Lord wants to reveal to His people, that, by that revelation they shall possess the spiritual knowledge of Himself that is necessary for the further unveiling and full realisation of the ends of God for this time. It is very important to know the time we are living in, and God's Eternal Purpose in relation to it.

You cannot fight without spiritual knowledge and the Church cannot be built without spiritual revelation; and you cannot get one ray of revelation without a fight; for the enemy is out in full strength and subtlety to cut across the revelation, and ever seeks to prevent spiritual revelation, being given or received.

In Daniel 10 we read of the terrific conflict on earth and in the heavens; and see it all related to revelation. (Dan. 10:1 A.R.V.) "A thing was revealed unto Daniel... and the thing was true, even a great warfare, and he understood the thing and had understanding of the vision. I Daniel was mourning for *three whole weeks*... I did not anoint myself at all until *three whole weeks* was fulfilled... Fear not, Daniel, from the first day thou didst set thy heart to understand and to humble thyself before God, thy words were heard, and I am come for the words sake, but the king of Persia withstood me *one and twenty days*... the vision is yet for many days (marg. for the end of times.)"

Daniel stood in relation to the whole Body of the House of Israel; and the Church gathered together

is representative of the whole Company of the Lord's people. The Lord must have such an instrument in these latter days - end-days of this dispensation.

This chapter in Daniel shows it was a costly business to receive revelation; yes, it *costs* to receive revelation and it costs to give it out; *spiritual* ministry is tremendously costly and there is a battle every time for every bit of revelation.

**This revelation is not something extra to Scripture, but what is hidden from unenlightened eyes in Scripture.**

It is absolutely necessary to be strengthened with all might in the Lord. "Be strong in the Lord and in the *strength of His might*" (Eph. 6:10). "Strengthened with power through His Spirit into the inward man... that ye may be *strong to apprehend... strong to know.*"

We require an inwrought strengthening in order to know! Spiritual knowledge is far more than mental acquisition; and it is only spiritual revelation that accomplishes things, and is the strength of the Church in its nature and constitution unto the enabling for its mighty work. The strength of the assembly is just the strength of the several individuals who are gathered together, and our gathering together does not lift us up above our personal relationship to the Lord, together with other of the Lord's children we are still the same measure in ourselves, and that measure is the measure of our secret history with the Lord, and unto that measure is the spiritual exercise in the assembly. The individual has got to be exercised in the things of the Lord and his inward man gains strength through such spiritual exercising.

Take the matter of prayer: what about our private prayer life? Now, beloved, these questions are not meant to be criticisms but unto a constructive purpose only. The assembly is no stronger than its individual prayer life. If we come to the assembly and do there our private praying, that praying which we should have had alone with God, or get others to do our praying for us - the Lord does not accept that kind of substitution; only as we are individually mighty and strong in our private prayer life will the assembly reap the strength of it as they come together. Each one gathered into the assembly having a strong, true private prayer life in secret with the Lord, means a strong mighty power of spiritual effectiveness in the Body of Christ and unto a definite realising of the specific ends of God for that hour as related to His Eternal Purpose in Christ Jesus. But if we are doing our private praying in public the Lord knows and there is weakness and ineffectiveness in the assembly; and if strong in private prayer life the assembly will feel it and the whole Church of God will benefit.

What are you doing in your personal prayer life? Of course there is an added strength by all being together, and there is gain to the individual by corporate prayer.

And what is true in the prayer realm must be true also in the realm of the Word.

The Holy Spirit strengthens us in this way by exercising our inward man in the Word.

What time has the reading and study of the Word in your life? Are you getting all your knowledge of the Word from other servants of the Lord, instead of getting down on the Word yourself as well?

The Holy Spirit demands work and perseverance with the Word; it is very necessary for us to have the Word *in* us for the Holy Spirit to work upon; this is the way of strength, down on the word

working, reading persistently, meditating, praying, and not giving up when we come to a dry spell - but persisting on and on. The Holy Spirit needs this exercising of our inward man in the study of the Word and prayer, to build the Church strong, and the Lord will make use of every bit of the Word thus individually planted, and the Holy Spirit will come down and operate upon that.

The Word of God is the *sword of the Spirit* (Eph. 6:17). "Let the Word of God dwell in you richly" (Col. 3:10). What is true of prayer and the Word for making us strong with the inward spiritual strength is also true of Witness.

When I say we must ever be alert to witness for the Lord Jesus, I do not mean that we are to button-hole every one to speak with them about their soul. What I mean is, do we at the outset of the day definitely seek the Lord to be made alive to every opportunity for Him, to be on the look out, alert to take the opportunity as it comes along, are we prayerfully and eagerly looking out for it? Are we *alive* in spiritual watching for souls?

The strength of the Church depends upon the spiritual *life* of its members. How often do we ask the Lord to make us alive for contacts? Are you on full strength to witness? The feature of the Church after Pentecost, was that all believers went everywhere preaching the Word - wherever they went, in their daily life there was a proclaiming of the Lord Jesus - they were in all circumstances a witness and a testimony to Him; a *living* testimony, a witness of Life; and, beloved, it must be so.

And then the wonder, when we come together, Oh! how vital it would be, how alive unto God, and the whole Body of Christ throughout the world would feel the impact of so coming together in the Name of the Lord, and there would *have to be* a standing back of the enemy.

May the Lord bring us into this for His Name's sake in an increasingly fuller measure.