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The Mark and Effect of Life - A Challenge

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt have lost its savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out and trodden under foot of men" (Matt. 5:13).

"Each man's work shall be made manifest; for the day shall declare it, because it is revealed in fire; and the fire itself shall prove each man's work of what sort it is" (1 Cor. 3:13).

We have come to the last Lord's Day of another year; today marks an end. And whenever we come to anything marking an end, we ought to ask the question, "What have we at the end? What is the net result, what is there, now that we have come to an end?" We are always coming to ends, ends of different kinds to different things, and we might, by reason of this end of the year, be exhorted to just raise this question and take stock, or look at the larger issue, the larger end, in the light of this smaller one: the end of a year.

We read in Matthew 5 about salt. Salt is used to indicate character, influence, effect; something which makes an impression. Salt, if it is true salt, is anything but passive and insignificant. If it is that, it is not true salt, it has lost its very nature, its very meaning, its very vocation. The Lord is right - "then it is good for nothing but to be cast out and trodden under foot" and "you are the salt of the earth". And whatever the Lord may have meant in a fuller way by that statement, there is this included in it, that you are supposed to be distinguished by something, to have definiteness of character, influence, effect; that your presence is not to be without distinctive meaning. You are to count for something, there is to be about you an influence. That, of course, lies right on the face of things when He makes this statement: "You are the salt of the earth."

The Bible is full of people with whom some special characteristic or feature is abidingly associated. I suggest to you that when you have exhausted your present line of Bible study it would not be an unprofitable one, not only for the children but for all, to begin at Genesis and work your way through with all the people that are in the Bible and see if you can put down beside them the thing for which they are mentioned or come into the Divine record at all; what they represent. I believe the Bible is just full of people with whom some special, some peculiar characteristic or feature is abidingly associated. We can leave out the great ones, the outstanding ones. We know quite well the thing associated with people like Abraham, Isaac, Moses, Samuel, David and lots of others like them. There are quite a lot who are not so outstanding and yet they are there, they are mentioned, and if you look you will see that it is because of something that they are mentioned, something for which they stood, something which they represented.

There is our friend Jehu, not one of the great patriarchs or prophets, but he is there and although he comes on to the stage and passes very quickly, he has left a mark, his life has said something, and everybody knows that the mention of his name signifies something; his name has become a tag. Jehu, a furious driver is Jehu, but what said Jehu? - "Come with me and see my zeal for the Lord" (2 Kings 10:16). Zeal for the Lord is associated with Jehu. There are many like him. It is said of Charles Dickens that he never brought anyone into his stories, however small, poor, insignificant, but what he made that one live so that you never forget the smallest figure in his story. If that is true in Dickens - and it is - it has given rise to an interrogatory ejaculation which is common parlance, "What in the Dickens?" meaning that everything signifies in Dickens. If that is true there, how true it is in the Bible. Someone comes on to the scene, passes quickly, but there is something abidingly associated for good or evil. On the dark side you will have a Doeg forever associated with treachery; Nabal forever associated with churlishness, or with whom churlishness is ever associated. Or Ruth, you never think of Ruth but what you think of devotion and faithfulness.

The New Testament is packed solid with such people; those lists the apostle Paul gives us, people of whose existence we should have no knowledge at all, but who are made to live in a simple and single reference perhaps of only one sentence. Demas - the tragedy of Demas: "Demas forsook me, having loved this present world, and went to Thessalonica" (2 Tim. 4:10). That is all you know about Demas really, not much more. Demas, who forsook a lonely imprisoned apostle in the hour of his need because his heart was divided. Demas the divided-hearted. That is all you have to say. But on the other hand, Epaphroditus, the man who gambled with his life in the interests of the Lord, for that is the meaning of his very name. Paul said that that was what he did for the Lord's sake. So we might go on. Antipas - who was Antipas? Nobody knows anything much about Antipas, but there is a reference - "Antipas, My witness, My faithful one" (Rev. 2:13).

The point is this, that at the end there will be something which will cling to us all as the feature or characteristic which summed up our lives and it will do us good and be well if we do recognize that and take account of that at once. We come on to this scene and at most, at longest, it is a brief stay and we pass on. What is it going to be? Of course, that would be just a very ordinary homily on human life if we left it there. We must go further. It is the association of our life which gives it its significance and makes possible something so much more. All these people in the Bible, from Abel onward, take their significance from the fact that they are in the Bible or that they are associated with what God is doing. Their significance is in that; they came right into the way of the onward march of God and they either took on the glory of that Divine purpose or that Divine purpose

marked them as unworthy, altogether unworthy. It was their association with the Lord and His work and His people which gave them their significance.

What I want to say is this, that coming into touch with the Lord Jesus means a significance which is altogether above the ordinary significance of a human life. Coming here in this world in the ordinary way, being born and living our life and dying, doing whatever we may, however greatly we may as ordinary men and women in this world, is one thing. We may make a name, a reputation, and do things which have, so far as this world is concerned, some abiding value. But it is in the light of that day that "the fire shall try." In the light of that day the significance of our life is going to be revealed.

We may be very ordinary people naturally and never make any kind of impress or mark upon history, but that need never be and should never be with anyone who comes into touch with the Lord Jesus, because relatedness to Him immediately implies an eternal significance, and you and I, by our relatedness to the Lord Jesus, are meant to take on a significance which is not of time and not merely of this earth, but which is of eternity and of a universal nature. The simplest, the weakest, is to be given a meaning and a value far beyond anything that this world can ever attain unto.

It is no small thing to touch Christ. You can never be the same; for better or worse, you have come into touch with the Lord Jesus. And so the Bible divides these into two; on the one hand you may have a Doeg or a Nabal, a Demas and their company, a great multitude. They have touched the things of God, and it is not just that they were treacherous, churlish people. Oh no; that has been brought out because they had a chance of something so much greater by reason of their association, and they were meant for something so much greater by that contact. What Nabal might have done for David! How different might have been the story of Doeg the Edomite on that day when David was in such desperate need! He might have helped God's man to the throne instead of in his treachery bringing upon David so much more trouble and heartbreak and distress. How Demas might have been a fellow-companion of Paul in his hour of deepest need instead of causing heartbreak. The apostle writes out of his sorrow of heart: "Give diligence to come shortly unto me, for Demas has forsaken me". A lonely man needing a companion and in that hour, oh, what Demas might have been in association with such a man as Paul. Unless we recognize what the meaning of our association with Christ is, we lack imagination, but that is a weak word. If only Demas could have seen down the ages the significance of Paul and having had the chance of being companion to Paul, for at least two thousand years he would have been in honoured association with that great servant of God; how differently he would have acted. But no, he had a divided heart; he had personal interests. A divided heart robbed him of the greatest thing that God could put in a man's way and left his name under a shadow for all time.

We have got to see that association with the Lord Jesus and that which is of Him is an immense thing intended to give a character, a nature, a feature, to our lives - something far more than anything we can attain to apart from that association. It is a great thing to have touched Christ. It means something immense one way or the other to have been associated with Him. "These are they that follow the Lamb wherever He goes" (Rev. 14:4), and they are distinguished by white robes. They are marked with a character for eternity; they have followed the Lamb.

Well, to come right back to the immediate practical challenge of such a word: what about it now? We have got to take this up at this point, not some future time at the end of our life, now is the time. What is it that is suggested by you and by me at this point? What is the significance that we bear? There are many things, of course, which impress people about us. People take account of us for this

or for that and we are known as men and as women for this or that thing, or these or those things, very often very mundane things, very ordinary human things, but these things will pass. Even time itself will test all those things and rule many of them out. But what, after all, is the main registration of my life? Not that I am this or that, or I am not this or that, any particular points, but the main effect. Those things will go. I may be known as the person who is never punctual; that will pass. But what is going to be the main effect? All these things, of course, mark people out humanly, but not in that sentimental way that when people die, you forget their faults and talk about their good points. That will pass, mere sentiment will go. The thing is, by reason of our being here in relation to the Lord Jesus, what is the main significance and effect of our being? What does it suggest, what does it imply, what is going down to eternity as the net result? I think that is a question that should help us if we will face it. It ought to help us, at any rate. I am seeking to get help from such an enquiry. It is not that you or I do very many things and say many things, but what is the result of it all so far as the Lord is concerned? I am not talking about that realm of results of Christian work. I mean the impress of ourselves. What manner of persons are we in that essential way? Are we really an influence, a salt influence of positive effect in relation to the Lord Jesus? Is there something about us that is an effectiveness by reason of our having come into touch with the Lord Jesus? Are we sure that we are making good the possibilities that have been put in our way because we have been linked with God's Son?

Well, you see, to have such an association with Him is to give possibilities to life of significance beyond anything humanly attainable. But there is always in the Word of God the urge to make sure - "Give diligence to make your calling and election sure" (2 Peter 1:10). Apply yourself to see that what the Lord has made possible and that you, so far as you are concerned, are going to make actual. "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12). You see the responsibility of making sure, not drifting. I am not going to be melancholy or morbid, but any of us, even the youngest, any day may find that the Lord wants us up higher. Many are going, going in youth, going in prime, being called away, and there is not one of us but may come to that end - we know it is not the end, but that end - at any time, and it might be as well for us just to look at life in the light of ending it any time and say, "Well, what is the net result after all? Not what I am going to do in the future, that future is not mine, but now, today? What is the net result, what is the effect, today? What is the salt value of my life for the Lord now? Am I one who is really an influence, an effective influence, for the Lord? Am I salt or am I good for nothing?" Well, I hope that is not true, it need not be true of any one of us. But I do feel that we should, from time to time, just say, "Now then, what is the upshot of all this that I hear and all this with which I am associated; what is the upshot of it all? Is there increasingly a distinctive definiteness about my life and witness and influence in association with the Lord Jesus?" When the story is written, what will it be? God forbid that it should be a Demas in any one case, who failed in a great opportunity. Rather would we be an Epaphroditus: right out even to gamble with our lives for God.

It is a very simple word, no profound truth about it, but I think worthwhile in a time like this just to say, "Well, how is it working out? What is the present situation where I am concerned? Am I negative, neutral, or positive? Am I drifting, am I caught in the tide? Or am I standing right out, the forces are breaking over me, and I am counting against the course of things? I am arresting, challenging, and I am a positive factor here for the Lord!" The Lord help us to be that!