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Email: info@austin-sparks.net

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The Sentence of Death

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"Yea, we ourselves have had the sentence of death within ourselves that we should not trust in ourselves but in God, which raiseth the dead.... Always bearing about in the body the deadness of Jesus that the Life also of Jesus may be manifest in our mortal body" (2 Corinthians 1:9, 4:10).

The burden of the Lord's word is mainly to His own people, but there may be just at the outset a simple word which may take us right back to the beginning of things and reach any who are not quite sure that they are the Lord's, or are quite certain that they are not, but who may nevertheless be reaching out to find Him; and to such I would like to say again, with renewed emphasis, that to belong to the Lord, to know the secret of His fellowship, and to have the realisation that you have passed from death into life, to be a child of God, is not to enter into any system of religion, though you might call it "Christianity"; and it is not to join a company of religious or Christian people whom you may call the Lord's people, or "the church," wherever they may be found or under whatever name they may go. To be the Lord's is to receive into the centre of your very being a gift of God which is called LIFE: a LIFE which we by nature do not possess: a LIFE which is God's own LIFE, and which alone can bring us into a place where sin no longer has dominion over us, where we are saved from sin, and where we have the assurance of that salvation.

There are so many who are struggling to be Christians, to be good, to be better, or the best they can be; struggling to be the Lord's and to live as belonging to the Lord; struggling to move with the Lord and to do those things which are pleasing unto Him; struggling and striving and yet all the time despairing. And I tell you why; Satan cannot cast out Satan! Satan is Lord of Death, and he has

gained a foothold in the very race at its beginnings, and death has passed upon all, and is in all. The nature of that death is separation from God, and thus it is with every child of Adam. Death reigns by the work of Satan, and by it he has this hold, this standing, this established place in the race, and everyone in that race is in this sense dead. Now what is the good of a dead thing trying to cast out death? What is the good of the thing which is but the fruit of death trying to overcome the very source of death? Satan cannot cast out Satan, and so you may struggle to the end and despair. You need LIFE - TRIUMPHANT LIFE - PERSONIFIED LIFE - for if death is personified in Satan, LIFE is personified in the Lord Jesus who says:-

"I AM THE LIFE," AND "I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE."

And you need Him as the Life resident within your very being to eject death, and "To overcome him that hath the power of death, that is, the devil." So to be the Lord's is to have the Lord, to be a Christian is to have Him as LIFE resident in your spirit, mighty, triumphant, able to resist the powers of death, and to make you to overcome by His LIFE. "The LIFE" - as this servant of God, Paul, put it:-

"The LIFE whereby Jesus conquered death."

Now that is the basis of all Christian experience, and, as we may see, of Christian service, and I do want to urge upon you, for I know it is necessary, that it should be emphasised that it is not joining a fellowship, it is not coming into a company of religious people and associating yourself with them; it is not accepting some system of teaching; it is not merely deciding for Christ, it is something infinitely more than that, and all that may only prove the instrument of your undoing and your despair. You may be wretched even in the presence of heavenly joy, you may be miserable even in the place where heavenly light is, you may be ashamed where the glory of God is, you may be despairing in the very presence of the "Hope which maketh not ashamed" if you have not the one Life of the Son of God with all His children. The one Life! What you need is the gift of God, which is Eternal Life in and through Jesus Christ our Lord. That is the essence of the gospel, the beginning of the gospel, the end of the gospel: it is the gospel in sum total. THAT YOU SHOULD HAVE HIS LIFE.

Now, beloved, having said that, one goes on to speak mostly to the Lord's people, though the others listening may by the Holy Spirit's aid see something more for themselves, and the burden is this -

Death Complementary and Death Antagonistic.

You will see by a glance through the word of God, with this two-fold thought in your mind, that death can be either of these. Death can be an advantage, or it can be a disadvantage; it can be complementary, or it can be antagonistic; it can make possible the higher purpose and blessings in God, or it can be absolutely paralysing and nullifying to all fruitfulness in Him. Now you wonder how death can be complementary or advantageous, the very ground of fruitfulness, because you so often hear it said that death is death, and that it is desolate and barren and there is nothing that can come out of it; but you must remember that it prepares the way for all the other, it brings you to the point where everything else is possible, and not until you have come to death is anything else possible at all. Now you notice the passages we read -

"Yea, we ourselves have had the sentence of death within ourselves that we should not trust in ourselves."

That is the very basis of everything in real spiritual fruitfulness and effectiveness. "The sentence of death in ourselves." Of course, here Paul is undoubtedly speaking in the first place about something very serious which had overtaken him. In the beginning of the chapter he speaks of this something which had come in the way of a terrible affliction, and he said he despaired of life and had the very sentence of death in himself so that there was no hope whatever for him from any human standpoint, there was no hope according to all human judgments and verdicts. He ought to have died - the very sentence of death was in him - and I do like the way he puts it, it is so richly significant: he uses just the little word THAT, and it gives an entirely different complexion to the whole situation. He might have put it: "We had the sentence of death in ourselves *and* we cannot trust in ourselves," but he did not put it like that. Of course, that would be quite logical to say, "We had the sentence of death in ourselves, it was there; and of course, that being the case, we were no good for anything at all, and there was no hope whatever, and therefore we cannot trust ourselves."

But he did not put it that way. "We had the sentence of death in ourselves THAT -". There is purpose in it - there is an object in it - there is something in it as a basic and fundamental principle. He realised that it was not the end but the beginning, with a design that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raiseth the dead. So that the sentence of death was not the end of everything it was the beginning of everything. There was a real purpose in this thing, and if you take up the Holy Spirit's teaching in the New Testament, you find that this has become the foundational principle of all Divine activities and operations. The sentence of death passed upon us and registered in us and working out in us, and all the time another thing doing the work of God, triumphing over this sentence of death in us - this other thing which is in us, working through us, giving us ascendancy over death in Christ: so that the wonderful things of God are manifest by us when there is no accountableness for them in us. The Lord has swept away with one stroke the whole basis of our trust in ourselves - has wiped out forever any hope in ourselves, not to destroy us, not to make everything impossible, but THAT He who raiseth the dead might show the mighty works by this Resurrection Life which is fruitful in us.

Have you noticed this, I do not know where it came from, whether it was Satanic or Divine inspiration, that even Herod, "that old fox," when it was reported to him that the Lord Jesus was doing His many mighty works, said, "This is John the Baptist, risen from the dead *therefore* these mighty works are shown!" Risen from the dead - mighty works! How he got that inkling I don't know, but there is this principle in it, that resurrection from the dead implies mighty works - works mightier than those before death.

There is that there, and this is the principle all the way through the Word, that on the ground of a Life wrought in us through the cross by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God is able to achieve and accomplish His supreme purpose. But in order to do it, the sentence of death must be planted right at the centre of our old life to rule it out, so that where we despair of life in ourselves and have no trust in ourselves, we know we cannot of ourselves accomplish anything, there is the mighty Life of God for everything. This that is "Christ in you," the Life of God, the hope of glory.

God has brought us to this very point, in order that we might not trust in ourselves, but in God "Who raiseth the dead." You notice that Paul puts the three-fold rescue work of God immediately over against that - and we do trust in Him who hath rescued us and doth rescue us, and we believe that He will yet rescue us, that we shall not be wholly swallowed up of death, but in death, maintained in Life.

Now this is only the beginning of things, the basis. This is the thing that is with one with tremendous force in these days, that if you are going to be effective in the realm where the prince, the Lord of Death holds sway, you cannot be effective by the means and resources in which he has got a stronghold; and he has that in all the resources of our natural life, however fine and splendid they may be from the natural standpoint. The only thing that can be effective in that realm is the Life whereby Jesus conquered death, and in order that that Life might have full sway and free course, and the utmost and fullest fruitfulness of that Life as triumphant over death might abound, all that in which the enemy has any hold whatsoever (our natural life) has got to be put out, and we must have no trust in ourselves for this work.

Now that immediately defines and delimits the measure of spiritual effectiveness. It is the measure of His Life coming through by the sentence of death being in ourselves. These cries of the Apostle in the fourth and sixth chapters of this second letter, concerning oppositions, adversity, trial, affliction - he sees in all this a great advantage for the Life of God, and that this death is complementary really to the purpose of God, that it is aiding the purpose of God. Paul always looked upon things in that way. He saw that those things which might be reckoned impossible of fruitfulness to God were essential to make that fruitfulness possible. Death itself is not the end of all things, but is the beginning of things where God is concerned, and so he will say "a great door and effectual is opened unto me" - and with no repining or complaining, "*but* there are many adversaries," rather with the complementary "AND there are many adversaries." That is, that these things are included in the great door and effectual to make it all the more effectual. The fact that there are adversaries is not any reason why we should sit down and refuse to go in through the door, but the very reason why we should go in that very door to prove how effectual it is. Things which men would consider to be *against* are the very things which are *for* God, and death becomes His captive and the Lord of Death His slave to serve His higher ends, so that death must be registered in us in order that His Life might show what a triumphant Life it is. These paradoxes of Paul are very beautiful.

Now, beloved, we are right up against this whole situation, the situation of dealing with the system of spiritual evil and spiritual death. We have often said of late that we have passed, and are passing more completely, out of the era and time of certain orders of Christian work. I think it is recognised by most spiritually-minded people that the old forms of Christian enterprise - organised religious activity - are breaking down, are failing everywhere. It seems that the thing has been rejected and cannot meet the need.

We have passed into a new time, a new phase which we believe to be that culminating phase in the age when we shall come more directly into conflict with the forces of darkness - with the power of Satan. The church has been meeting him for a long time through things, and now it is going to meet him face to face; and that is the time and condition into which we are moving now. We are finding that means and old forms and institutions and organisations cannot meet the more direct encounter with the enemy. We are being forced to recognise the need of something more, and that something more is simply the naked Life of God as manifested in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ coming into tremendous contact with the whole system of death and of darkness. That is our position.

How many of you are able to appreciate this I do not know, but I know there are some who can appreciate it. God synchronises His provisions with recognised and realised needs. Now the movement is to be along this line where the Life of God, unmixed with the resources of men, with human machinery and human drive and human enterprise - the very Life of God has got to be

directly, immediately, nakedly manifest in the church for the last phase of the battle unto the ultimate triumph. In order that this might be so, there must be this tremendous emphasis of God upon the need for the wiping out of all that which stands in the way of a pure and clear manifestation of His Life, and of the intermingling of those things in which there is death, that is, the natural life of man. All that intermingling has got to be removed, and God is coming to the time, has come to the time, when He is going to have very close accounts with His people, so that you cannot touch the earth, you cannot touch the flesh, you cannot touch the world, you cannot touch anything in which death is, without at once having a check and an arrest put upon your spiritual effectiveness; you have to stand absolutely clear.

Now that is why Paul in this fourth chapter, speaking about the Life of God being manifest in us because "We are always bearing about the deadness of the Lord Jesus" immediately goes on to say, "Be not unequally yoked together with an unbeliever, for what is there in common between God and Belial, light and darkness?" What fellowship, what in common? These two are poles asunder, and absolutely antagonistic, "Wherefore come out from among them and be ye separate." And in as far as there is that coming out and being separate, and being cut off from all that in which death is, and a coming into that in which Life is, can there be a manifestation of the triumphant and effective Life of the risen Lord in us. There is always a big purpose, as big as eternity and as big as God Himself, in every injunction in the scripture, not just some little bit of spiritual advice; it is as big and great as God Himself, and as vast as His Eternal purpose, and when He says, "Be not unequally yoked with unbelievers," He is not just giving you a bit of spiritual advice that will save you trouble in your domestic arrangements. He is laying down a vast principle that spiritual effectiveness to the maximum depends upon your being out of the range of the grip of death so far as your spirit is concerned and your life voluntarily lived.

Now I want to stay for a moment here - the Lord might just help some. Beloved, the principle of Life in your spirit is to be the guiding principle of all your service in the Lord Jesus Christ. I do not mean Life in your surroundings. The Lord may take you to a place where death reigns, but if death reigns in you, you may as well give up the whole thing at once. You may be there, and the Life of God may be in you to meet that situation, to triumph over it; but mark you, if you begin to touch what you call pieces of work for God and there is no Life in your spirit, and the thing is dead in your spirit, you have no right there until you get in your spirit the Life of God relative to that thing. Don't touch it, or you will be found in dead works, trying to do something where there is no vital principle at all.

Now note, it is all very well to have a broad view and say, Yes, but the Lord Jesus Christ, as the Life, has come into the world where death is in order to save the world, and that Life can be taken as the broad basis upon which we should enter upon any work for the Lord that seems to offer itself or is presented to us. But that is no criterion. There was a time when the Lord Jesus recognised in His spirit that the living purpose of God was arrested with regard to certain situations, and He had no Life witness there and He came out. We believe that that was so in the case of Israel as a nation. He gathered the whole situation up in the incident of the fig tree. Ministered to, witnessed to for a long time, but the moment the curse of God had to fall upon it (what is the curse of God? It is death), from that moment He was cut off from Israel. He had no ministry to Israel as such; He recognised in His spirit that there was death there, and it was no use being sentimental about poor Israel, no use trying to act upon a basis of human sympathy and compassion and having imaginations and mental pictures of what could be done and what might be done; that was an end. I am only using this by way of illustration, for spiritual effectiveness demands that we should have the witness of LIFE in our spirit. A lot of people hold on and continue in certain realms, certain spheres, certain companies,

certain connections, and they are there merely from the standpoint of natural reasoning and argument, sentimentally, traditionally, or somehow thinking that by staying in something is going to be done; and in their spirit they know the thing is dead, and they have no Life there. May that not be the Lord's witness to them that they should serve Him where they have Life, where the witness of Life is in them, and a spirit of promise? If all around is dead but they have Life in themselves, it is all right; but if all around is dead and they have no Life in their ministry, surely something is wrong, the door is closed. It is important that for spiritual effectiveness up to the hilt, the witness of Life in us should be born.

Of course, we have swept aside in ourselves that which might bring the death - we have stood by the cross and seen that the sentence of death must be in ourselves as such, in order to make the Life possible; but if that has been dealt with and we have the sentence of death, and we no longer trust in ourselves but put our faith in Him who raiseth the dead, then we have the right to claim and receive the witness of Resurrection Life in ourselves for ministry as the Lord appoints, and the day in which the Lord brings death upon one's spirit in any sphere or kind of ministry, that is the day when one will begin to look to see where the Lord is going to bear the witness of Life for ministry. Now that is important.

I do not know why the Lord should give one such emphasis upon this, but it is no use your going on to do God's work when you have death in your spirit. Nothing will come of it; drop it, and ask the Lord to bring you into a place where you can in your spirit bear witness by Life - the Life whereby Jesus conquered death, to meet the situation as it is around you.

Now you notice one thing Paul says in this very connection, in this opening chapter of his second letter: "The afflictions of Christ came upon us above measure. We despaired of life, the sentence of death was in us." How did the Apostle regard the afflictions of Christ? You read anything that the Holy Spirit says about this matter, and you will find that it is always related to a testimony, or to put it in this way, the afflictions of Christ, the sufferings of Christ are intimately related to, and, in fact, inseparable from, Who Christ is and what He is going to do. The impact of Christ with the purpose of God upon the system into which he has come has immediately precipitated this whole matter of affliction. You may go out and do Christian work, and you may do it in such a way and by such means as to reduce suffering to a minimum, to have a comparatively smooth and easy time. You may seem in that realm to be having a tremendous amount of success, the thing is beginning to get big and prosperous. Beloved, do not think for one moment that that is always a testimony to spiritual vitality.

On the other hand, you may go out in the service of what you call the Kingdom of God and you may suffer much because you run counter to the traditions of men, or to the accepted system of the day, or to the popular public mind, and, as a reformer, die a reformer's death, being rejected and refused and perhaps murdered. That need not be a criterion either of spiritual effectiveness. How many there are who are deceived along both of these lines, and oh, tragedy of tragedies, how many of the Lord's dear children are suffering in what they call His work without real spiritual value and result, without breaking through, without planting the standard of the victory of His cross in the enemy's territory! They are out for the Lord, and they are suffering, having a hard time, a bad time, but nothing is coming of it all, they have run counter to a system, to traditions, they have run counter to the personal preferences and likes of mankind. You may take it that you can never, in corporate union with the Lord Jesus Christ move for the fulfillment of His mission without bringing His sufferings upon you. As to this, if you are in corporate union with the Lord Jesus and you are out

with Him, and He is in you for the accomplishment of His purpose, there need be no fruitless sufferings, all the suffering will be fruitful. The explanation of course is that the world, not being an end in itself, but being embraced, circumferenced by this whole system of spiritual antagonism knows who Jesus is and knows the destiny of Jesus according to the will and determination of God, and therefore all its antagonism and wrath is stirred up from the bottom against Him and against Him in His corporate presentation as well as in His personal, against Him in the form of His Body, the one Body which is Christ, just as much as against Him as a separate entity.

Well now these are the sufferings of Christ relative to the work and person of Christ, but they are mightily effectual sufferings, and the Apostle recognised that and pointed that out. The sufferings are fruitful sufferings, they are mighty sufferings because they represent the challenge of the Christ of God, and they imply not His defeat, but His triumph. Satan would not bother himself if he knew that Christ could and would be defeated; he bestirs himself because he knows the end of this thing, what it means, the coming of the Christ of God into his domain. Now in order that this might be so, that deadness of the Lord Jesus to all that to which He died is the thing that has to be ruled out in order that the issues of His Life might be realised and manifested, and oh, that God's people had discernment, spiritual discernment!

The one cry in our spirit is that His people might be more discerning, be able to discern in their spirit where Life is and where death is. You know it would accelerate and expediate the whole business if we had more of this discernment as to matters of life and death. You know how frequently we have tried to do a thing for the Lord, to do a thing with the best motive for the Lord and inside there has been death. Dead! And yet we have tried to do it, to force it, and there is nothing but waste of energy and waste of time. We have got to get on to the thing that God is doing, for only in this can we have the witness of Life that it is the thing of God and we shall get through. In order that He might be able to consummate His purpose, gather up His plan and bring it to a mighty, victorious issue in the coming of the Lord, our need is to have Life more abundant, and the spiritual discernment by Life to know where Life is and where death is.

You may be doing what you call the work of God and have death in your spirit; and that very doing of what you call the work of God, because there is death in your spirit is antagonistic to the purpose of God. You may have Life in your spirit and death all around, but the fact that you have the witness of Life is both the key and the assurance that something is to be accomplished.

I believe, beloved, that we dare not do a thing unless we have definite witness in our spirit that it is the thing of God to be done through us. We cannot take these broad sweeps, we must have the witness of Life, and not take the general conception that the world is to be saved, and therefore we ought to get out into the world to save it. Do not make that mistake, the world will not be saved. You may say "the whole wide world for Jesus," but God is looking to take out a people from the nations, and this part of the dispensation will not see the whole wide world for Jesus. Is God in this, is God in that, has God undertaken it? The answer to that question in your spirit will not be an audible voice, it must ever be the liberty and the freedom and the uprising of His Life in you that gives you a clear way through in your spirit.

The Lord teach us how to be led thus in our spirit by the Holy Spirit that He may bring us to the place where the maximum of spiritual effectiveness is attained, and in order that it may be so, beloved, "We must have the sentence of death in *ourselves* (our flesh), that we should not trust in ourselves" and "always bearing the deadness of the Lord Jesus, that His Life might be manifested."

God only works now on resurrection ground, by Resurrection Life, and this life in us is the basis of the Holy Spirit's operation in revelation and service.

The law of the Spirit is Life. Romans 8:2.