

T. Austin-Sparks:

Reading: 1 Corinthians 3.

These words are carefully chosen: the supreme importance of a living and clear apprehension of Christ. If it were necessary to show how supremely important that is, it could be done very easily without going outside of this first letter to the Corinthians; for undoubtedly all the sad, the tragic, the terrible conditions with which the apostle had to deal in the assembly at Corinth were due to an inadequate apprehension of Christ. But there is very much more than what we find in this letter to prove this necessity, and it is upon perhaps one aspect of the necessity that we shall dwell more particularly at this time.

In the third chapter there occur the familiar words about the foundation and the building. The apostle says: "I laid a foundation... other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. But if any man buildeth on the foundation gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, stubble; 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." (verses 10-13) — "the fire shall prove each man's work of what sort it is."

We need to ask the question: What work is it that is referred to there? To what does that relate, "each man's work"? I do not think the apostle is here referring to Christian service. That is the common idea about this passage, that it relates to the work which we do for the Lord. Of course, that comes into the category of things tried by the fire, and of things manifested in that day. But I do not think that is the thing which the apostle has in mind when he writes this. I believe he is rather thinking of the substance of faith. We are building a Christian life: we are building ourselves up on Christ; we are constructing and constituting Christianity in ourselves. We have been doing this for a long time, and this superstructure of our Christian lives is composed of the things which we believe, the things which we accept, the things to which we give assent; everything that we gather in to make up the Christian life. We are Christians, and the make-up of ourselves as Christians is going on, is increasing, and in that way we are building. It is the substance of our faith that is in question, using the word "faith" in its largest sense.

The Nature of the Building

It is at that point that the whole argument of the apostle has its application, so far as this letter is concerned. Just there in the make-up of the Christian life of every one of us, that which constitutes the substance, the material, the elements, the features, it is there that the apostle is applying this great difference between earthly and heavenly wisdom. These Greeks at Corinth, because of their natural inclination and disposition to reduce everything to a philosophy, had taken up Christianity very largely in that way, regarding it as a philosophy, and handling it as such: examining, dissecting, appraising according to the standards of worldly wisdom, philosophical thought, and interpretation. So they looked at the preaching, the teaching, from that standpoint, and in a mental way, an intellectual way, took hold of Christian truth and made it, with human, worldly-wise interpretation, the substance of being Christians, the constituents of a Christian life. They were building on the right foundation. Christ was there as the foundation laid by the apostle. But they were building upon that foundation, a worldly interpretation of Christianity, a philosophical structure in Christian doctrine, terminology, phraseology, ideas, conceptions and it was becoming a purely mental, intellectual, academic thing. That is what they were building up. It had no living relationship to their inward condition. It was purely external. The result was that, while they had all that worldly structure of Christianity, Christian thought, and Christian ideas, and Christian doctrines, they were behaving in the most shocking manner amongst themselves and in holy things.

It was at that the apostle launched this word: "...let each man take heed how he buildeth thereon" (1 Cor. 3:10). In other words, that which is of supreme importance is not Christian doctrine, mentally appraised and apprehended, but a living and clear spiritual apprehension of Christ. That is the work. What are you building? Are you, through a living, clear, inward, experimental relationship with the Lord Jesus, building a structure which comes out of that inward spiritual knowledge? Is it by that you are growing? Or are you growing by things said and mentally judged, appraised, dissected, accepted, assented to? What is the nature of the building? The work in which we are engaged, to which this phrase "each man's work" applies, is the building of Christ livingly into the very substance of our being, into the very fabric of our lives. It is not a question of getting to know a great deal about Christianity. Let us note that. The heart of the whole matter is the difference between the philosophy of Christianity, of Christian doctrine and the spiritual knowledge of Christ.

The Nature of the Trying Fire

Now we come to a further point. “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). What is the fire? We have, as we see, the clause “for the day shall declare it,” which no doubt applies to the day of the Lord’s appearing, but I think there is an application of the words “the fire itself shall prove” in that day, which is specific, which is along a certain line.

Passing over to another part of the Scriptures, let us ask what the nature of the devouring by the dragon is in Revelation 12:4. There we see the great red dragon standing waiting to devour the man-child the moment he is born. What is the character of the devouring? How will the dragon seek to devour? I do not think it would be an adequate answer to say that this is a way of describing a great persecution from without, a physical persecution of the saints. That is not an adequate explanation; because the Blood of the Lamb is not the ground upon which you overcome physical persecution. You go through physical persecution, you are not delivered out of it. You can appeal to the Blood of the Lamb as much as you like in the day of persecution from without, and the Blood of the Lamb does not avail to release you from it. There is a support through it. But here in this twelfth chapter of Revelation the man-child is seen escaping the jaws of the dragon, being delivered from him, and being caught up to the throne. It is an absolute deliverance from the dragon who stands waiting to devour. Now what is the nature of the devourer? The nature of the devourer is explained by the nature of the victory. “And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb, and because of the word of their testimony...” It may be outwardly they suffer death, loving not their lives even unto death, but there is something inward which means that, even while they are delivered up unto death outwardly, they overcome spiritually.

Here is something in which these escape the dragon and are not swallowed up by him; and that will tell you, if you think for a moment, what the nature of the devourer is. It seems to me that the devourer is related to the faith of the overcomer. It is a matter of swallowing up their faith. Faith in what? Faith in all that upon which they stand for their eternal salvation. The accuser is there, and if, with no more multiplication of words, we reduce it to this, you will see what we mean. It is a question precisely of an inward spiritual, living relationship to Christ Himself. In that day, when the enemy moves in that intensified form against an overcomer-company to swallow that company up, there will be the most severe and intense testing and trying out of an inward relationship to the Lord.

It will certainly come along one line, if not entirely along the one line, namely, of being tempted to believe that the whole foundation has given way. In other words, the great effort of the adversary will be to bring to a place where the hope of salvation is gone, where the saints have had cut from under them their assurance in Christ. The devouring will be in relation to their faith, the awful blackness of being out of the pale and hope of salvation. That is not mere hypothesis; that is an actuality. There are many true children of God in that affliction now, and the enemy is pressing that, and will press that more and more toward the end. You and I, beloved, by reason of being given certain conditions and circumstances: physical, circumstantial, mental, will be tested on that matter, tested right out as to what we have been using to build with. What does your building represent? Is it so much teaching, so much doctrine, so much theory, so many meetings, so many prayers, so much Bible reading, Bible study, so much activity in the Lord’s work? Is that the structure? Supposing it all goes, and you are no longer able to do anything: no longer able to pray, no longer able to study the Word, no longer able to go to the meetings, no longer able to work for the Lord outwardly, what do you have left? Supposing all that structure is all that you have, and your whole Christian life is represented by that, and it all goes, what do you have left? Do you have Christ inwardly? That will be the test.

“Each man’s work shall be made manifest... the fire shall prove each man’s work of what sort it is.” (1 Cor. 3:13). The work is that which we are doing now in the building up of our Christian lives. What are we using? What are we working with? I believe that the only thing which will satisfy the Lord is that we should be able to stand with Him in any place, though it be in hell itself. The Lord might test us by the fires in that way, as to whether we are able to stand not merely when we are in the good fellowship of Christian people, with all the helps around us, with all advantages at our disposal spiritually, but when we are alone, cut off, shut up, or in some place where it is ninety-nine percent the devil and hell.

What is it that will make it possible for us to stand in such an hour? Nothing but an inward, clear, living knowledge of Christ Himself. Each man’s work shall be tried; the fires shall make manifest of what sort it is. The work relates to the building up of ourselves as Christians. What is it that is represented by our Christian lives? Is it the place in which we meet? Is it the teaching we receive there? Is it anything like that? You may be assured that that is going to be put in the fire, and then the question will be how much of Christ has through that become a living, inward reality, a part of your very being, so that you do not say: I know of certain teaching, and I belong to a certain fellowship! but, I HAVE CHRIST! That is our work, and each man’s work shall be tried.

The enemy will stand ready to swallow up, and he will swallow up all that he can. He cannot swallow up Christ. If Christ is in us, in a closer relationship with us than any human relationship, so that Christ has become a very part of us, the enemy cannot devour that.

Only What is Christ Will Endure

The foundation is Christ, and the structure must be Christ. The foundation is not our decision, our beliefs, our attainments spiritually; not our accuracy, not our works, not the measure of our knowledge, not our spiritual ability, not our measure of strength, not our mind or our will, not our activities for the Lord, and not our persistence. It is nothing of ourselves, it is Christ. When you come to think about it, is not that just where the enemy gains his advantage? So many of us have thought that unless we can do certain things, or be of a certain mind, we can have no assurance. The Lord would teach us— and this is the lesson that my heart is bent upon learning, and that I would urge upon you to make your quest also— that the ground of assurance is not in our having decided for Christ, nor that we persist in the Christian life, nor that we feel strong, nor that we have certain ability as Christians and are able to do this or that. It is not the measure of our activity in the work of the Lord, nor any one of these things which constitutes our Christian life. These are simply the outworkings. The thing which constitutes us is that Christ is the foundation, and that we are inseparably linked with Him by faith. Everything else can be suspended as a secondary consideration until that is settled. It is as though God, if we may put it this way to try to simplify the truth, had given us His Son and had said to us: In Him you have everything, and the first thing is not what you are, what you can do, or anything to do with you; it is what He is! If only in the face of all you may see of a multitude of contradictions in your own life in weaknesses, and imperfections, and lack of attainment, you will persistently believe in Him as having it in Himself to bring you through to the end, you will go through in spite of all. We begin to take stock of ourselves, measure ourselves up, and say: I am not this, and I am not that, and I am not something else; or else, I am this, and I am that, and all this goes against me. Nothing of all this is to the point at all. The totality of every divine requirement in us is in Christ.

The very last stroke of our sanctification and glorification is finished now in Christ, and by faith we have to receive the end of our salvation. The only way in which we are related to the matter at all is by faith. Of course faith is always proved in obedience. Perhaps someone will say: You are simply ignoring and ruling out our responsibility entirely! We are doing nothing of the kind. We are saying that our responsibility is faith, and faith works out in obedience. But never let us think that it is our faith or our obedience that saves us. It is Christ who saves, Christ who is salvation, and there is nothing more dynamic unto a life of consecration than seeing what Christ is for us. The dynamic of consecration is not in struggling to be something; it is in seeing Him.

Perhaps none of us have realized that the Holy Spirit never co-operates with our struggling. The Holy Spirit never comes along and assists in our endeavours to be good. Have you not proved that? The Holy Spirit never comes along and lends His aid to us to solve our problems concerning ourselves while we dwell upon our own problems. Have you not discovered that? Why not let that be settled? The Holy Spirit stands back while we struggle to solve our own spiritual problems. What is He waiting for? He is waiting for us to apprehend Christ by faith, and then He will come in and work on that ground. The Holy Spirit works because of what Christ is, not for any reason to be found within ourselves. Faith's apprehension of the perfection of Christ, in His Person and work, provides the ground for the Holy Spirit to come and make that good progressively in us. Stand apart from the perfection of Christ, and you will make no progress. Stand on the ground of the finality of Christ, and the Holy Spirit begins His operations to make it good. There is all the difference between seeing Christianity as a system of life to which you have to conform: a standard to which you have somehow or other to attain; an objective Christianity presented in a systematic doctrine, and seeing that Christ is that fully and finally; and Christ livingly in you is the ground of your conformity.

It is not found in anything that can come from us. God chose the foolish things. Why? To make the wisdom of God everything. God chose the weak things. Why? To make His power in Christ the only power of which such weak things have any knowledge. God chose the base things. Why? In order that that which is noble in Christ should be the only honour of which they know, which they have. God chose the things which are not. Why? In order that He should be the only reality. God's activities are not directed toward making something of us, but God takes account of the fact that no matter how much we struggle and strive we never can be anything. He takes account of the fact that there is a nothingness upon which He can put His all. But you and I have to recognize that that is the place of the Cross, if we have not come to it. It opens up such tremendous possibilities when we see that God does begin at zero, that everything of God is bound up with the place where we see, as to ourselves, that we are out of it. But how we are concerned with ourselves! We must settle it that we in ourselves are of no account, and that Christ is all.

The order in this first letter to the Corinthians is, firstly, Christ crucified, as over against the wisdom of this world, the wisdom of men. The latter, to the Greeks, represented everything that man cares about. I do not know whether Paul would have written the same thing to this Western world that he wrote to them. When he wrote to the Hebrews he did not write about the wisdom of this world, because other things were pre-eminent with them. If he were writing to this Western world, I wonder if perhaps he might speak more of financial acquisition, and would say: Now, when I came to you, brethren, I came not to talk about financial acquisition. I determined to know nothing about financial acquisition amongst you! just as he said to the Greeks at Corinth, And I, brethren, when I came unto you... I determined not to know anything among you about worldly wisdom, philosophy. That was the import of his declaration. Whatever it may be, and in whatever part of the world, the principle is that the fundamental obstruction has to go and Christ crucified has to take its place.

Related to that, the next thing to be noted is the utter nothingness of those who are in Christ. We are said to be "in Christ" — "...of him are ye in Christ..." (1 Cor. 1:30). Who is the "ye?" The foolish, the weak, the ignoble, the things which are not, the nothings, all those whom God has chosen.

The sum of the whole matter is the importance that is given to life in the Spirit, or a spiritual state. Read again the second and third chapters.

"Things which eye saw not, and ear heard not, and which entered not into the heart of man, whatsoever things God prepared for them that love him. But unto us God revealed them through the Spirit" (verses 9-10).

"For who among men knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of the man, which is in him? even so the things of God none knoweth, save the Spirit of God."

"The Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God," and he that is spiritual, that is, who has come into a spiritual state by renewal and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, comes into the realm of the knowledge of Christ as God's fullness, the things which God hath laid up in Christ for them that love Him. A life in the Spirit is what is signified, which means, firstly, a spiritual state of government by the Holy Spirit. From this in turn there results a condition in which the Spirit is found revealing Christ and making Christ everything. "He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord."

If the devourer is going to be cheated of his object, if you and I are not going to come under that awful onslaught of the prince of darkness to rob us of our assurance of salvation, so that the time comes when we doubt whether we are saved after all, doubt whether there is any salvation for us, we must recognize that there is a place in the innermost chamber of our being where we have to know the Lord. Does it seem impossible to you that you could ever reach a point where you doubt your salvation? There are possibilities for every one of us along that line which are fearful. You have only to have a nervous breakdown and, as the entail of it, the devil strutting in to becloud your mind and trade upon your melancholy, to know the truth of this. You have only to be cut off from all your activities, where you cannot pray any longer for some reason or other, where you cannot do your accustomed work in the Word of God, where the Christian service which has been such a delight is taken away from you, and you are shut up in a state of weakness, aloneness, with loss of vitality, and depression to which these minds and bodies of ours are prone, and then have the devourer, encamping upon it all, and beginning to say: God has left you, you have sinned against the Holy Ghost! and to listen to that once, to find yourself engulfed. We have to know the Lord in that innermost chamber of our being, so that, be it mental and physical breakdown, circumstances all against us, all these things, there is that inward grip, that inward reality of Christ which is adequate to stand up to this situation. That is our need.

It must not be ninety percent of externalities in the Christian life, or seventy-five percent, or fifty percent. These things are good: let us make the most of them. But let us continually go to the Lord on our knees and say: Lord, these meetings are good, and it is gracious of You to give us these fellowships and helps: but I must know You in my own heart, lest the day come when the fellowship is blown upon and scattered to the four winds and all these things are taken away, and I am left stranded because my life has stood in the power of outward activities and not in knowing the Lord. Plead with the Lord about that. Have an understanding with the Lord about that. Let us see to it that the building which is going on where we are concerned is the building of Christ Himself into the very fibre of our being. Then the devourer will be eluded, the overcomer will be caught up to the Throne, and the devourer will go away to the wilderness to persecute the rest of the woman's seed. What kind of wilderness is this? It is the wilderness in which some believers are found now. They have lost the assurance of their salvation: and that is an awful wilderness. God save us from that.