

T. Austin-Sparks:

"Why do the nations rage, and the peoples meditate a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against Jehovah, and against his anointed, saying, Let us break their bonds asunder, and cast away their cords from us. He that sitteth in the heavens will laugh: The Lord will have them in derision. Then will he speak unto them in his wrath, and vex them in his sore displeasure: Yet I have set my king upon my holy hill of Zion. I will tell of the decree: Jehovah said unto me, Thou art my son; this day have I begotten thee. Ask of me, and I will give thee the nations for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession. Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel. Now therefore be wise, O ye kings: Be instructed, ye judges of the earth. Serve Jehovah with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the son, lest he be angry, and ye perish in the way, for his wrath will soon be kindled. Blessed are all they that take refuge in him." Psalm 2:1-12.

"And they, when they heard it, lifted up their voice to God with one accord, and said, O Lord, thou that didst make the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that in them is: who by the Holy Spirit, by the mouth of our father David thy servant, didst say, Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples imagine vain things? The kings of the earth set themselves in array, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord, and against his Anointed: for of a truth in this city against thy holy Servant Jesus, whom thou didst anoint..." Acts 4:24-27.

We are taking account of the new nature and order of things, which came in for the age with the advent of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost - a new spiritual order, the setting up and the establishing of the Lordship of the Spirit, the supremacy of that which is spiritual; the heart and the sum of the whole matter proving to be a revelation and a knowing of the Lord Jesus in a spiritual way. The initiative was with the Lord in heaven - "the Holy Ghost sent forth from heaven"; it was a movement on the part of God Himself.

But we do not proceed very far in "The Acts" before we can detect the rumblings of a counter-movement from another quarter - the challenging answer to heaven on the part of the forces of evil and darkness. That storm gathers force and breaks with all its might in the seventh chapter, where we have the account of Stephen's testimony and death. The thing of which to take note is that in that chapter, at that point, everything is gathered up and focused upon a two-fold issue. We may say that all that has been implied, all that has been in the Divine thought up to that moment, is there crystallised and brought up as the double issue of the whole matter - heaven's object and hell's counter-attack.

We have earlier indicated how comprehensive was Stephen's survey, starting with Abraham, tracing history down through Joseph, Moses and Israel and the prophets, right up to the end of that dispensation, and finding its heading-up point in the murder of the Lord Jesus; and in that survey two things come out, or two aspects of one inclusive thing. One is that everything points toward the Lord Jesus and His absolute sovereignty, in the purpose of God. The other is the house of God, the sanctuary: it is the place of God's dwelling, where He is to be found. It is very remarkable how those two things are here in Stephen's summing up, and they are the two things which really provoked the trouble in that moment, or caused the storm to burst. In view of the way in which Stephen speaks firstly about the Lord Jesus and then about the temple, you can quite understand that his hearers would be very deeply provoked, and embittered.

The Conflict as to Christ's Lordship

Well, as to the Lord Jesus, what Stephen does is this. He goes right back and says that God in sovereignty moved to secure that which would lead right up to His Son, and in sovereignty He appeared as the God of glory to Abraham. Then it is not long before Stephen comes to Joseph, and what has he to say about him? Well, he tells very briefly the story of Joseph and the famine and Egypt, but what he is underlining is this, that Joseph's brethren were jealous. Then having said it, having touched the thing that he is after, he passes on and soon arrives at Moses, and then speaks of his going to his brethren in Egypt, being turned against and rejected, flying into the wilderness, being met by God in the bush, commissioned, and going back supposing his brethren would receive him. Says Stephen - "our fathers... thrust him from them." They rejected him, repudiated him. Again there rose up this inward antagonism and Moses suffered at the hand of his brethren what Joseph had suffered at the hand of his brethren. So Stephen goes on, and all the time he is underscoring this particular thing, the antagonism of the Lord's people to this and that and that which pointed to Christ. Joseph and Moses pointed to Christ. Stephen quotes a passage from the Old Testament, "A prophet shall God raise up unto you from among your brethren, like unto me" - words used by Moses pointing to Christ; and they cast him out, they would have none of that. Then Stephen goes on and brings into review the rest of that history - Israel in the wilderness - and he says some extraordinary things. I confess that I do not understand some of the things that

he says in this address. We will come to them in a minute, not by way of explaining, but because there is something there that is very startling.

But he comes to the prophets - "Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? and they killed them that showed before of the coming of the Righteous One." These prophets, as he indicates, were all pointing to Christ and what Stephen is saying comprehensively is this - that right from the beginning in the history of Israel there has been something inside Israel which was ground for the Devil to work against Christ and all God's purpose concerning His Son, the Lord Jesus: something there all the time, constantly cropping up, and the forces of evil using it and causing it to work in this way, that wherever the evil powers saw an inference, a suggestion concerning the Lord Jesus, they made their hatred manifest, it came out in expression. That is the awful spiritual history back of religious nature. You can be intensely religious, as religious as the most rabid Jew and Pharisee, and yet when it comes to the real issue of the absolute sovereign Lordship of Jesus Christ there is something that is positively antagonistic. You see the issue in that matter is the issue between the flesh and the Spirit, seeing that this is now the day of the Spirit that has come; and when the day of the Spirit really comes in, then the flesh is dragged out and manifested and shown to be what it really is as something energised and actuated by the very powers of evil, although it may be most religious flesh. It is a most impressive thing that we never know what is in us until we are challenged on some point of the application of the absolute Lordship of Jesus Christ; if you like to put it the other way, of the absolute government of the Holy Spirit.

The Spiritual Nature of the House of God

Then Stephen touches this other thing - the sanctuary. It is there that he says these extraordinary things which I confess I do not understand. He quotes from Amos 5 - "Ye took up the tabernacle of Moloch, and the star of the god Rephan," and the question is asked, "Did ye offer unto me slain beasts and sacrifices forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel?" Then Stephen adds: "Our fathers, had the tabernacle of the testimony in the wilderness." Is he implying that, while they offered sacrifices outwardly and ostensibly to Jehovah, in their hearts they were alienated and were really worshipping some other god? A terrible suggestion; but I do not know how you are going to explain this, otherwise than that Stephen is saying in connection with the main theme - 'You people, although you appear outwardly, supposedly, as the people of God, in your hearts you are really antagonistic to the Lord, and you always have been.' He sums it all up when he says, "Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Spirit." 'Even back there in the wilderness when you were supposed to be worshipping God, deep down it was not the worship of Jehovah; some foreign thing was in you all the time.' It was a terrific charge to lay against them. You can understand their gnashing their teeth. He passes immediately from the tabernacle to the temple. "But Solomon built him a house" - and that is all Stephen has to say about it, and dismisses the whole thing, seeming to say, 'Yes, but it did not matter, it was not the real thing.' "Howbeit the Most High dwelleth not in houses made with hands; as saith the prophet, The heaven is my throne, and the earth the footstool of my feet; what manner of house will ye build me? saith the Lord." It is remarkable with what brevity Stephen dismisses that great mass of the Old Testament which circles round the temple. What is he saying? 'Because God discerned inside of the people something which was so contrary to His mind, all the outside did not really count with Him; He is after something more than that.' We know quite well that the temple did mean something in the thought of God as a type, but that is another line. Stephen is showing that all that history really deep down was not spiritual history; it was in the realm of men's souls and natural life, and therefore it was not what God was after.

Now he brings the two things out. He brings Christ right out in absolute Lordship, affirms so positively that in spite of all that they had done: in spite of everything, right through their history, of antagonism to God's Son: in spite of all Satan's fury against God's Christ: He is on the Throne, He is exalted; and then by implication he says, 'God has another kind of house, the house He has been after, not made with hands, not the tabernacle in the wilderness nor the temple. But He has something now in which He is worshipped in spirit and in truth, where there really is that which He is after. "God is (a) spirit: and they that worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:24), and this house has now been brought in with Pentecost.' That is the implication. It is a mighty twofold issue that comes out with Stephen, and it is a marvellous turning point in the course of things. Everything has been heading up to this. Something is going to happen; you can see that from hell's side things will not be allowed to go on like this much longer, but in the sovereignty of God the bursting of the storm only serves to bring out with clearer and fuller view the two things upon which all is hanging - the Lordship of Christ and the spiritual nature of God's house. I love to see the Holy Spirit's sequence. Well, there are so many details that are fascinating and tremendously inspiring, but we cannot dwell upon them.

Sovereign Outcome of Satanic Activity

(a) Paul the Issue of Stephen's death

Stephen was one of the seven deacons chosen to deal with money matters. The Holy Spirit has other thoughts. When He gets things in hand, He is not finally concerned with money and serving tables. He has the Lord Jesus in view in the fullest possible way. The Holy Spirit lifts Stephen right out of the realm to which he was appointed, because He has bigger thoughts for him. Stephen is slain, with a testimony on his face, and on his lips the cry "I see... the Son of man standing on the right hand of God." The storm breaks, terrific persecution follows. They have tasted blood, and they are going to satiate themselves. The sovereignty of the Lord Jesus is riding upon this furious tempest of hell's outbreak, and in very simple and wonderful ways that sovereignty operates. We know one of the immediate results. That sovereignty of the Lord Jesus came with full impact upon Saul of Tarsus, who was standing by and giving consent to the death of Stephen. "Why do the nations rage, and the peoples meditate a vain thing? The kings of the earth... and the rulers take counsel together...." All that is taken up here in this movement of hell. But, Jesus is Lord! "I have set my king upon my holy hill of Zion." That is not the natural Zion, that is the heavenly, spiritual Zion. "My king." "The Lord shall have them in derision." Here it is working out. Paul is brought in as the immediate issue of Stephen and he is the one who, more than anyone else, brings into view two things - the Lordship of Christ and the spiritual nature of God's dwelling, the Church.

(b) National Enmity Destroyed in Christ

But then in other ways the sovereignty of the Spirit is seen. The next chapter brings into view another of the seven deacons - Philip. Oh, the counter-movement of the Spirit to the movement of hell is now setting in. There is persecution, yes; and by the persecution, the believers have been scattered everywhere. Philip goes down to Samaria, and preaches unto them Jesus; and yet Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans (John 4:9). That was never intended by man, but God is getting His spiritual house in which there is not Jew or Gentile exclusively - nor either of them as such. It is a spiritual house, it is a heavenly house. And so the Spirit moves down to Samaria in this connection, and the Lordship of Jesus is proclaimed and is triumphant; and out from Samaria - think of the history of Ahab, of Jezebel! - out of Samaria members are gathered into the Body of Christ.

(c) Incapacity Removed by the Spirit

Then when things are going on tremendously in Samaria, the Lord tells Philip to go down to the desert. You know the story of the Ethiopian eunuch. Oh, I think it is grand! It is the underlying thing here that is so fascinating - to see this sovereignty of the Spirit underneath everything. Down to the desert; and then this man of Ethiopia, a eunuch. We are touching a delicate thing, but we are going to be sensible, and we are not going to pass it by because it is delicate. It holds something precious if you keep to the spiritual and leave the natural out. He is a eunuch, an Ethiopian eunuch, and he has been up to Jerusalem to worship God. Evidently he is a proselyte. When he got to Jerusalem, what would happen? He would find the door of the temple shut to him. A eunuch was not allowed to enter the house of the Lord, by the Old Testament command so, having got as far as he could get, a disappointed and dissatisfied man, a man after all still seeking, he has to turn back and go away home to his distant country. And the Lord takes Philip across his path. Why was not a eunuch allowed to enter the house of the Lord? Because there is a spiritual principle involved. A eunuch is an end in himself, a dead tree, one who cannot be fruitful. You cannot have that in the house of God. God's principle says, 'Nothing which is an end in itself has a place in My house; nothing which is unfruitful can have a place before Me. My house is the place of life, continuous life.' You have only to look at Isaiah 56 and you will see there the Lord's promise to the eunuch, "...neither let the eunuch say, I am a dry tree." You see the point. Leave the natural and come to the spiritual. Here was this man who was ruled out, incapacitated, forbidden, having no place in the house of God because of his condition. The Lord Jesus came across his path through His servant Philip. Philip took up Isaiah 53 and preached unto him Jesus. Then the eunuch said, "Behold, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? ...and they both went down into the water, both Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him" (Acts 8:36-37). He died to his death in the death of Christ; he died to all that he was by nature in the death of Christ, and, rising in the resurrection of Christ, he would be a fruitful branch with a new life, a resurrection life. There is something very precious there.

Why that story? Oh, we are occupied with this movement of the Spirit; the Spirit is saying something here all the time. He is stressing the way of spiritual fruitfulness. "First... that which is natural" - barren, unfruitful, impossible; "then that which, is spiritual," with all the tremendous possibilities of the new life in Christ. That is the inner history of the Ethiopian. "He went on his way rejoicing." Up to that moment he was a disappointed man, feeling his handicap. Is there anyone reading this who knows quite well and is feeling only too deeply that, because of what he is by nature, there is little hope or prospect for him, little chance of spiritual fruitfulness?

This story is the story of a great hope for a man who was shut out of the inheritance, shut out of the house of God, for whom there was nothing because of natural condition, but who entered into all the blessed fulness and prospect of a new life, a new world, by identification with the Lord Jesus in death and burial and resurrection. He died to what he was by nature, and he rose to what he was in Christ. It is the story of how the Holy Spirit is making everything fruitful, turning the wilderness and the solitary place into a garden. That is the prospect here.

That is the new age. You are saying, 'Yes, that is very good; that is grand; it is there right enough at the beginning, but we do not see much of that now; why?' And that is the point - why? Why does Satan hold things up? Because he has got ground. Why do people not make spiritual progress? Why is there such limited fruitfulness? Why is there so much barrenness? Because there is ground for arrest. It is the ground of nature, and "the flesh warreth against the Spirit" (Gal. 5:17). "Ye do always resist the Holy Ghost" (Acts 7:51). Now, what Stephen was really saying was this - 'You may not be conscious of it, you may not be deliberately meaning to war against the Spirit of God, but that uncrucified nature is there, at enmity with the Spirit of God, and that is the cause of everything.' We must come to the place where the Spirit really gets the upper hand, where that life of nature is truly subjected to the Spirit of God. Oh, I press this because I know so many people who believe in the Holy Spirit, who have all the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, and they can work it all out systematically - the baptism and the filling and all the rest of it - but there is an immense amount of carnality, even in those realms. The point which arises is this, that if there is really going to be this life, this fruitfulness, this enlargement, this progress, this ascendancy over the power of the enemy, it is not going to be merely official and automatic, it is not going to be simply because we believe certain truths, and use certain phraseology and shout certain slogans about Satan being a defeated foe. It is going to be, and only so, as the Holy Spirit transcends our natural life - as our natural life is brought into obedience and subjection to the Spirit of God.

We have all got a strong natural life in some way. It may be in a negative strength, or it may be in a positive strength - and very often the negative is just as powerful as the positive. It may be a feigned kind of humility, an assumed meekness, but it is natural and it is self all the time - self-pity, always wanting to be taken note of because you are such a sorry creature: drawing attention in some way to yourself. That is a negative strength of nature, and it gets in God's way. We have to get this self, whatever it is, out of the way. We have to be occupied with the Lord Jesus Christ and not with ourselves - occupied entirely with Him. The Lord cannot do His work in us until we have a fixed faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and an eye riveted upon Him. Immediately the enemy succeeds in turning us in upon ourselves he has broken our strength, he has the ground that he wants for our undoing and our barrenness. Whatever the form of self-life, it must go. First the Lord Jesus has to come in as Lord; then He can get on with what He is after.

A People Living in the Value of Divine Sovereignty

I have left a lot unsaid, but you will gather from what has been said what is in view - a people who are not merely believers objectively in the Holy Ghost, but who are subjectively under His government, in whose being His Lordship is established; in whom He can have His mind over their minds, His will over their wills, and His desires and feelings over theirs. But even then we may not see what is in the book of the Acts as we read it, because, after all, there we have the cumulative thing in a few chapters of vivid history, and we are impressed. If we had lived in those days we should have been far more continuously conscious of the forces that were against us than we were of the mighty sovereign triumph of the Lord Jesus, we should have had to wait till afterward to see that. And it will be like that with us; we shall be conscious of the enemy at work, difficulties arising, all kinds of sufferings abounding, but in due time we shall see the Lord triumph; we shall go into a deep experience but after a time come out and say, 'The Lord has triumphed in that, He has got something out of it.' That is the story - seeing the Lord getting His end through the very works of the enemy and the sufferings of His children. That is a life in the Spirit. The Lord give us to know more of it in experience.