

T. Austin-Sparks:

“When thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed... He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied” (Isaiah 53:10,11).

“But it is not as though the word of God hath come to nought. For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel: neither, because they are Abraham’s seed, are they all children” (Romans 9:6,7).

“Now to Abraham were the promises spoken, and to his seed. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ” (Galatians 3:16).

As we come to this further stage in the matter of the divine seed, this fruit of Christ’s travail, this new spiritual Israel, I want to make one or two preliminary remarks of a general nature.

God’s Dealings Have One Basis

In the first place, it is necessary that we should be quite clear that, in the Bible, there are not two distinct things, as represented by the two Testaments, the Old and the New, or even more, if the Old Testament is subdivided into eras. There may be two, or more, methods of expression, but throughout the Bible, from its beginning to its close, there is only one thing expressed. Our habit of handling the Bible by dispensations, and emphasizing the different characteristics of different times, may have had the effect of making us mechanically minded, just as can a preoccupation with typology and symbolism. I want therefore to underline this anew: that, in these several and varied forms of expression, God is actuated, from beginning to end, by one thought, and one thought alone: THAT EVERYTHING THROUGHOUT, AT ALL TIMES, SHALL EXPRESS AND BE SUBSERVIENT TO HIS SON.

HE governs everything, in the realities of His Person and of His redemptive and perfecting work. It is one Person and one Work, from the first book of the Bible to the last. The change from the Old Testament to the New is simply and only the change from the indirect to the direct; from the symbolic to that which is symbolized; from the temporal representation to the spiritual reality. That is all. It is not a change of purpose or object, not a change of basis or foundation; it represents no change of principle in any way.

Perhaps you feel you know all that; but there is very much more in it than any of us have yet realised. For example, all God’s dealings with the patriarchs were, in principle, as much upon the basis of His Son as are His dealings with you and me. That was true also of Israel. Israel in the Old Testament was dealt with as much upon the basis of God’s Son as we are in this dispensation. God has never, at any time, by any means, worked on any other ground than that of His Son. His creative activities were on the ground of His Son. “In Him, through Him, by Him, unto Him, were all things created” (Col. 1:16); and from then everything has proceeded on that basis, and will be consummated in Christ. By whatever means, in whatever way God has worked, His ground has always been the same. And on into the ages to come, that ground will be unchanging. It is the ground of Christ. It is very important that we should remember this and be quite clear about it.

A Transition

I want now to return to the point where I broke off in an earlier message in this series (see Chapter 2), when we had begun to refer to the Gospel by John, especially chapter 3. I was saying that we think we know something about John 3. Is it not the great chapter of: “Ye must be born again...”, and of: “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son...”? Do we not know it? Have we not heard it a hundred times, a thousand times? And yet, and yet... what do we know about it?

Now this part of the narrative, marked by chapters 3 and 4, embraces all that could be said about this matter of the transition from the indirect to the direct; the transition from God’s old method to His new method. It brings right into view the nature and principles of the heavenly seed, and much more. Let us look, then, at John chapter 3.

The chapter opens with these words: “There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews... Jesus... said unto him, Art thou the teacher of Israel...?” (John 3:1,10). “A man of the Pharisees”, “of the Jews”, “the teacher of Israel”. Here you have in a person, an individual, the full embodiment, the full development, of Israel after the flesh: a Pharisee. I must push back the temptation to dwell upon details, for half an hour could easily be spent on the history of the Pharisees, and that to great profit. Let

us simply note that the sect of the Pharisees represented the very essence, the intrinsic meaning, of “Israel after the flesh” (1 Cor. 10:18). They gathered into themselves all that Israel claimed to be or was supposed to be. If you met a Pharisee, you would meet the last word in Israelism and Judaism. This man Nicodemus was said to be “a ruler of the Jews”, and then “the teacher of Israel”. Note the form of the latter phrase, for the definite article is literally there in the text. Jesus did not say, “Art thou A teacher of Israel?”; He said: “Art thou THE teacher...?” This man evidently stood out; he was perhaps recognised above all others as the foremost teacher of that time in Israel.

I indicate these things in order to point out that here we have Israel present after the flesh in a very full way—par excellence. He is of the natural seed of Abraham, a full-grown son of Abraham after the flesh. Three things are main factors here: he was born after the flesh as a son of Abraham; he was circumcised in the flesh as the seal of the covenant made with Abraham; and his all-absorbing and consuming interest, as a true Israelite, was with the kingdom that was covenanted to Abraham’s seed. All the natural seed of Abraham, with all its marks and features, is gathered into this chapter. It is not just Nicodemus—the nation of Israel is present. With this man, there are present in representation all the children of Abraham, “according to the flesh”, from the time of the patriarch himself right on to this very hour. He is really a most significant figure. Much more could, of course, be said about him. But that is where the matter is introduced.

Now the Lord Jesus, with a wave of the hand, repudiates the whole thing. He is not listening to it, not opening the door to it, not giving it a moment’s consideration or attention. “Verily, verily, I say unto you: You must be born again.” “Really to be the seed of Abraham, you must be born from above”—for the phrase can bear that meaning also. The true seed of Abraham, to whom are the covenant and the promises and the prospect and the kingdom, is that which is born from above; not this at all.

Two Great Contrasts

a) Two births

The Lord Jesus makes here, either by direct statement or by clear implication, some fundamental contrasts. Firstly, a contrast between two births: “that which is born of the flesh”; “that which is born of the Spirit”; that which is born of the earth and that which is born out from heaven. These belong to two kingdoms, two worlds, two regimes, and there is nothing in common between them. The door of the Spirit is closed to the “flesh”, and the Lord Jesus is not discussing this matter at all. He is simply saying that the Kingdom of God is so different, so other, it belongs to such a different realm, that there is no getting into it except by way of an utterly new beginning out from heaven. And the rest of the New Testament is built upon that fundamental truth. All Paul’s ministry is built upon that. I said earlier that that was the cause of all the trouble where Paul was concerned. It was a most drastic, devastating thing to confront Israel with a statement like that—“You are not Israel after all! You have not begun to see the real meaning of the Israel of God!” “Except a man be born anew, he cannot see...”

“Except a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” Here is not only the natural birth contrasted with the spiritual birth: here is a fundamental difference between, on the one hand, the Red Sea and the pillar of cloud and fire, as symbolic representations, and the spiritual reality on the other. “Born of water”—yes, symbolically in the Red Sea. “Born of the Spirit”—yes, symbolically in the cloud. They “were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea” (1 Cor. 10:2). “But, Nicodemus, you know all about that, or you think you do. I tell you, you have not begun to see the meaning of it. There is a difference between the symbolic and the spiritual, the typical and the real. Being born of water and of the Spirit has a far, far, deeper meaning than you have ever seen, or can see, Nicodemus.”

b) Two kingdoms

The second contrast related to the Kingdom. Of course Nicodemus had not mentioned the word. But let me remind you of the last words of the preceding chapter. “But Jesus did not trust himself unto them, for that he knew all men, and because he needed not that anyone should bear witness concerning man; for he himself knew what was in man” (John 2:24,25). “Now there was a man...”, and Jesus knew him and what was in him, “...a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus.” Jesus knew that this man’s one interest in life—no doubt an honest, sincere interest, indeed a passionate interest—was the Kingdom. That was, of course, the great hope of Israel. And the Lord Jesus, knowing the man’s absorption in that kingdom interest, made it perfectly clear that the kingdom about which Nicodemus was thinking was one thing, but that the Kingdom itself was quite another. The Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven, is quite another thing from the kingdom of Israel on the earth.

What is the conclusion that we are to draw from all this? Just this: that the historic was not the real — it did not conform to what the Lord meant by the “truth”. We find the same thing in His conversation with the woman of Samaria, in chapter 4, where the Lord Jesus brought in a clear contrast. “The hour cometh, when neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, shall ye worship the Father.” Here is coming a change, a transition, a passing over. “The hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth” (John 4:21,23). With that statement, the Lord rules out a whole order and system, and brings in something altogether different. All that which was historic was not the real thing: to use His word, it was not the “true”. “This mountain... Jerusalem...” — yes, but it is not the true. This birth after Abraham — yes, but it is not the true. This hope of the Kingdom — yes, but it is not the true! This is very searching.

The Principle of Death and Resurrection

The fact is that everything had to be put on to the ground of Christ, and that could only be, and can only be at any time, through death and resurrection — in other words, new birth. “In Isaac shall thy seed be called” (Gen. 21:12). That is a symbolic statement. Why? Because Isaac is the embodiment, in type, of the principle of death and resurrection. Everything had to be put on to the basis of Christ in death and resurrection, and that was no less true in the Old Testament than in the New.

In connection with this, I was recently reading again the fascinating story of Joseph: the famine in the land, the coming of his brethren, and the subsequent removing of the whole family — Jacob and all his sons — seventy souls — from the land into Egypt. The whole story of Joseph is, I think, one of those things that holds you to the end once you start reading it. It is just full of overmastering interest. But I found myself brought up short with a question. The Lord had brought Abraham into the land and given it to him and to his seed, by covenant, as an everlasting possession. Then what is this? The whole seed, every soul of them, is vacating the land, leaving the land of covenant, and moving into Egypt! Now, we know that the Lord had told Abraham that his seed would be in a foreign land in bondage for four hundred years, and would be ill-treated, and so on (Gen. 15:13). The Lord said that it would be so, and here it is. But leave aside for the moment the fulfilment of the prophecy. Here is a strange thing: the whole family, to the last soul, is uprooted and evacuated from the very place of covenant and into EGYPT. What is the meaning of this?

I think I see the answer. Look at the seed of Abraham in the land; just look at those sons of Jacob. What sort of people are these? Yes, they are the seed of Abraham after the flesh, the historic line — but look at them! The incident with Joseph alone is enough to betray what sort of people they are. And the whole story of those men, throughout, is not a very nice story, is it? Their behaviour, their disposition, is a poor showing up of the seed of Abraham. Do you think that God is going to allow that kind of person to follow through to His end? Not at all! He will bring them into Egypt and put them first of all upon the basis of the travail of Christ — the cross — and then, when they are there, let the principle of the cross deal with the self-life, the flesh, until they groan. But then, out of that travail, see the mighty energies of God bringing that seed out from Egypt.

The principle, you see, is this same great principle — that of travail unto a new birth through death and resurrection. God is putting them off the ground of nature onto the ground of Christ, and that can only be in death and resurrection. Unless they go through this ordeal, this terrible ordeal, they cannot inherit, they cannot come through to possess the land. God is true to His principles: God is true to His Son. God is not play-acting; He is not just making meaningless history. God is writing, in very purposeful history, the eternal laws of His Son in Person and redemption.

The Principle of Circumcision

Here I must put in a rather long parenthesis on the matter of circumcision, a matter fraught with the greatest significance. Let me turn you to a few passages.

“And he gave him” (that is, Abraham) “the covenant of circumcision” (Acts 7:8).

“For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God” (Romans 2:28, 29).

“Is this blessing then pronounced upon the circumcision, or upon the uncircumcision also? for we say, To Abraham his faith was reckoned for righteousness. How then was it reckoned? when he was in circumcision, or in uncircumcision? Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision: and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal

of the righteousness of the faith which he had while he was in uncircumcision: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be in uncircumcision” (Romans 4:9-11).

You almost hold your breath as you read the next:

“Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing” (1 Corinthians 7:19).

Imagine a Jew saying that! We shall come to that in a minute.

“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision; but faith working through love” (Galatians 5:6).

“For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation” (Galatians 6:15).

Finally, that tremendous statement and exposition in the letter to the Colossians:

“In whom ye were also circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands, in the putting off of the body of the flesh, in the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with him in baptism, wherein ye were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead” (Colossians 2:11,12).

The Importance of Circumcision to the Jews

Let us remind ourselves of the immense importance attached to circumcision by the Jews. It is something that could hold us for quite a time, and it would be well if the full force of it could come home to us. It was the very sign of their national oneness, of their national existence, of their belonging to the people of God. Anybody without that sign was altogether outside the pale of promise and covenant and hope. It was the door, for them, into everything of value: everything for them rested upon that. No one, for instance, would ever be allowed to partake of the feast of the Passover who did not bear that sign.

We can realise a little of what they placed upon it when we come into the New Testament and consider some of the events after the day of Pentecost. On the one side, think for a moment what it meant for the apostles themselves — Peter, James, John, and the others — to have to deal with this matter and weaken their position regarding it. It was a real battle, for it meant uprooting something from their very being, something that was a part of them; and it was cropping up all the time. On the other side, there were the Judaizers — those men who pursued Paul over the face of the earth, tracking him down into every town and city, on this one issue. They followed him up and said to those to whom he had ministered: “Unless you are circumcised, you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1). That is a positive statement, and this was the cause of all the trouble.

There is very much, both in the Scriptures and outside of the Scriptures, that shows what a great thing this was. Even today, the celebration of this in a Jewish home is preceded by festivities and sacred rites. Yes, there is for them something about this ordinance that is big, tremendous. It was rooted deep in their very being as a most sacred thing, upon which everything of ultimate value hung. And here is this man who comes along and says, “Circumcision is nothing!” A Jew of the Jews, “of the stock of Israel”, “circumcised the eighth day” (Phil. 3:5), and he says it is nothing! What has Paul seen?

The Significance of Circumcision

Well, of course, he has seen the spiritual significance; and when you see that, the other is nothing. In his letter to the Colossians (among other places), he lays down precisely and concisely what that significance is. Let us read the passage again.

“In whom ye were also circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands, in the putting off of the body of the flesh, in the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with him in baptism, wherein ye were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead” (Col. 2:11,12).

Now there are two things here. First of all, we have God’s full thought about circumcision and about baptism, and the relationship between the two. And then, secondly, we see what is the real significance of baptism in the life of the child of God.

Circumcision, Like Baptism, Points to the Cross

The relationship between circumcision and baptism is here stated by Paul. In both these words — “ye were... circumcised”, “having been buried... in baptism” — we are brought right to the cross of the Lord Jesus. In principle and meaning they are combined as one, and they point to the cross. “Buried with him... raised with him”. The whole thing is put on the basis of Christ crucified and risen. Of course, we who are Christians know that to be the meaning of baptism. But what was the meaning of this other sign? Perhaps we may put it like this: that the cross is here brought in as — so to speak — the instrument of circumcision. It does that which must be done — it is the means of actually carrying it into effect — and it is drastic.

If Israel had only seen! If they had only seen, nothing would have been given away. They would not have had to lower their idea or lessen their estimate; they would not have made less of circumcision, if they had seen. For, after all, this IS a big thing, it is a great thing. After all, national existence does rest upon it: but it is not this nation, it is the heavenly one. Entry into all the blessings of the covenant, the eternal covenant in His blood, rests upon the principle that is here. The whole Kingdom, as covenanted, is entered into and inherited by this door. Yes, it is a big thing. Nothing has been exaggerated as to its importance. If only they had seen Christ crucified and risen! It was only because they did not see the real meaning of this pre-eminent rite in their own life and history that they lost everything. They lost the Kingdom; they lost their place as a nation, in the purposes and counsels of God, for the time being at least; and all because they separated between a thing and its meaning. Now, in John 3 we see the Lord Jesus taking up the meaning of things for Nicodemus. By nature, of course, he is blind, like the rest. But Nicodemus is of the circumcision — that is the point. He is a Jew indeed; he is a representative, in a very full way, of Israel after the flesh. And the Lord Jesus makes it quite clear to him that — so far as acceptance with God is concerned — he, as such, is ruled out.

What is the meaning of all this? In the life of the true seed of Abraham — which is Christ’s seed — what does it mean? It means simply this: that circumcision is, as Paul says, not a matter of the flesh, but of the heart (Rom. 2:28,29). It is a severance that has to take place right down in the inner man, deep down in the innermost being of the person; a radical, fundamental putting of two things apart. You will be able to follow through the implications of this more fully than it is possible for me to do here. There is an encircling of the blood which makes a separation, puts two things apart, and for ever after witnesses to the severance that has taken place, declaring that those two things are no longer together: God has put them asunder. And how much of the New Testament comes in when you say that! That is the spiritual meaning of baptism. You cannot say all this to everyone who is going to be baptized — they would be frightened and run away! — but God means all this. And God does not let us off. If we really mean business, He does not let us off any of His meaning, even though at the beginning we may not see it all — and thank God we do not! But even so, it might be well if we knew a little more than we often do.

The Flesh, or Self-Principle

What is it that is severed in and by the cross of the Lord Jesus? From what do you and I accept severance, when we come to the cross of the Lord Jesus and, in the symbolic act of baptism, take our position with Him there? There are various terms for it in the New Testament. It is sometimes called “the flesh”. Paul uses it here: “the body of the flesh” (Col. 2:11). He is not talking about our physical body, our body of flesh. He is using that word “flesh”, as he often does, in a symbolic way. A definition that he gives to it in the Corinthian letter is “the natural man”. Perhaps we think: Well, “flesh” is a difficult word, but “natural man” is still more difficult — it seems more technical. What do these terms really mean?

They mean, purely and simply: the SELF-principle in man. That is at the root of everything. That is where all the trouble began with Adam; that is where all the trouble has gone on; and that is where the trouble is with you and me. It is a protean monster that has awoken, stretched itself, risen up and taken hold of the heart of man. It will assert itself, make itself known and felt, in every conceivable and inconceivable way. We shall never be able to conceive of the unnumbered, unsuspected ways in which this monster will show itself. It is no use trying to track it down. Every hour, every minute, every second, almost, of our life, in some form or other, this many-headed, many-membered thing — the self-principle — will assert itself.

a) In the mind

It is found in the mind. It makes use of our intellect and our reason in order to overpower opposition and bring things our way, to argue and to substantiate our own position. And therefore, before you and I can ever get into the true realm of heavenly things, we have got to have a “circumcised” intellect, reason, mind. Is that not exactly what the Lord was saying to Nicodemus? Here is this teacher of Israel, coming to argue, to discuss, and the Lord says, “It is no use. You may have been circumcised in the flesh as a good Jew, but what you need is to have your intellect circumcised”. “Except a man be born anew, he cannot SEE...” “You have got it all

in the mind, all as an intellectual apprehension. If I have spoken of earthly things, and you do not understand them, where will you be if I begin to talk to you about heavenly things? Out of your depth altogether! Devout son of Abraham though you may be, you need to experience a radical severance between your natural mind and the things of Heaven.Â”

That is the trouble with many people. It is their head that is in the way all the time Â— the one thing that is obstructing their progress is their own head! Their stubborn-mindedness, or their clever-mindedness; their intellectual superiority, or their argumentative disposition: you meet it all the time Â— there is no way through. If you try to take them on that line you are simply beating your own head against a wall. The Lord Jesus never attempted such an approach in trying to win souls. He simply said: Â”You must be born from aboveÂ”.

b) In the feelings

In other cases the circumcision needs to take place in the realm of the feelings, the emotions, the desires. That is the part of the being that gets in the way of so many people. They are controlled entirely by the feeling-life, the affection-life Â— they are in bondage to that part of their being; and they are very difficult people to handle. But a true child of Heaven, the seed of His travail, is one in whom there has taken place, in that very realm of the feelings and desires, a deep work of circumcision.

c) In the will

And what is true of the intellect and the emotions is true in the realm of the will. With many people it is their will that is in the way. They have got a position, and they tenaciously hold to it and support it; they have got a grip, and they just cannot let go. They will support their position with Scripture, or even with a Â”revelationÂ” superior to Scripture! Their will is the cause of all the trouble. The cause of the setting back of all GodÂ’s purposes in their lives is just there: in their choices, their decisions, their position, their way; in their natural self-strength, that has never been broken. And so it is just there that circumcision must take place.

It applies in so many other ways. The cross, as the instrument of spiritual circumcision, has to be applied to this self-life deeper and ever more deeply, because there seems to be no end to it. But that is the painful side, the dark side. What is happening on the other side? Is it not that room is being made for Christ? The real seed, the seed of Christ, is growing, becoming more and more manifest. The opposite of the characteristics which we have been considering Â— strength of intellect or emotion or will Â— is meekness. He said: Â”Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heartÂ” (Matt. 11:29). Pursue this right through, and you cannot fail to recognise that there was something radically different in the very depths of His being.

I have said that we cannot calculate the whole range of this self-principle, in its myriad forms of self-expression and self-occupation and self-attention and self-pity and self-consciousness and self-satisfaction. Even in our Christian life, in our devotion to the Lord, we are so happy that other people see how devoted we are, and how humble we are! And it is the self, the wretched Â— may I use the word? Â— the stinking self, coming up all the time. For a true child of God is oblivious of himself, has lost consciousness of himself in every way. If other people point out something good about them, they had not realised it, they were not aware of it. They are surprised that anyone could say anything good about them; they are not conscious of that. And on the other side, should people be critical and point out failings, well, they only say, Â”Yes, I know: I had that out with the LordÂ”, or Â”I have got that before the Lord right now. I am not deceiving myself about that.Â” This is the true child of Heaven.

So we could go on. That is the meaning of circumcision. In the light of that, the true meaning, the true principle, think of a Pharisee Â— a child of Abraham Â— saying: Â”I am better than anyone elseÂ”, or making long prayers for everybody to see and to hear! A child of ABRAHAM! You remember all that the Lord said about them. Oh, they have missed the point! Ah, but do not let us criticize and blame. It is a very searching thing for ourselves, is it not? Paul says that circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but a new creation. True circumcision is not of the flesh, but of the heart. The Lord give us circumcised hearts, and give us grace to have this severance pursued to finality.