

T. Austin-Sparks:

"And it came to pass after these things, that God did prove Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham; and he said, Here am I. And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest, even Isaac, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of" (Genesis 22:1,2).

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son" (John 3:16).

"By faith Abraham being tried, offered up Isaac: yea, he that had gladly received the promises was offering up his only begotten son" (Hebrews 11:17).

"Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and fill up on my part that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church" (Colossians 1:24).

During these meditations we have been moving along the line which leads into the heart of God. We have been letting Abraham be our teacher in this matter and have seen how he moved step by step toward that place where God could speak of him as 'My Friend'. No more glorious crown could be put on the head of anyone than that!

I want now as quickly as possible to dwell upon the last step into the heart of God, which is oneness with God in His passion - one with God in His suffering and in His joy. All the other aspects of oneness with Him meet at the Cross, and the deepest fellowship that can be had with Him is found in fellowship with His sufferings. When Abraham was obedient to the Lord's command: "Take now thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest", he certainly did reach the point of absolute fellowship with God, who Himself gave His only begotten Son.

Abraham had been called upon to make many offerings in his life; many sacrifices had to be made from the day that he left his own country, but there was no sacrifice like this one, which touched him at the point where it cost him more than anything else. This was more than all the other sacrifices, and so, at last, he stepped right into the heart of God.

That Scripture which we read from the Letter to the Colossians - with many others like it - makes it very clear to us that we are called into the fellowship of Christ's sufferings. This is not His sufferings which were atonement for sin; there is never any atonement about our sufferings. But leaving that aspect out, it is quite clear in the Word that we are called into the fellowship of His sufferings. The sufferings of Christ are a gift to His people. The Apostle Paul says: "To you it hath been granted in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer in his behalf" (Philippians 1:29).

Jesus offers us the cup and says: 'Will you drink of My cup?' While it is the cup of remission of sins - and we would grasp that with both hands - He also says: 'This cup is fellowship in My sufferings', and too often our hand is very slow to take that cup.

I think I have told you before of an incident I experienced in India. We were gathered at the Lord's Table and there were two very fine young Indian men sitting in front of me. I explained what was the meaning of the cup and the loaf, and then everyone rose to receive them. These two young men rose, and, having explained what the cup meant, I offered it to them. They both hesitated for a moment - they were weighing this matter up - and then one of them bowed his head and accepted it. The other shook his head, as much as to say 'No, I cannot.' One went out of that meeting with much joy in his face, and the other went out with his head bowed and no joy.

Fellowship in the sufferings of Christ is something that is offered to us as a gift, and it is always fruitful. The sufferings of Christ are always fruitful sufferings. We could not get many more people in here this morning, but this packed room is a testimony to the fact that the sufferings of Jesus are fruitful sufferings, and we know that this could be repeated thousands of times all over the world today. And we have a picture in the Word of God of how it will be in the end: "Ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands... a great multitude, which no man could number" (Revelation 5:11; 7:9). Indeed, the sufferings of Christ are fruitful sufferings.

Although we may not always feel it to be so, fellowship with Christ in His sufferings is the way of fulness of blessing. Did you see what followed those words to Abraham about offering his only son? "And the angel of the Lord called unto Abraham a second time out of heaven, and said, By myself have I sworn, saith the Lord, because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son: that in blessing I will bless

thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore" (Genesis 22:15-17). Fellowship with Him in His sufferings is the way of fulness of blessing. There is always a second time with the Lord. The first time was: "Take now thy son... and offer him", and the second time was: "Because thou hast done this thing... in blessing I will bless thee." The Lord commits Himself to those who commit themselves to Him. You can see that in verse 16 of this chapter, and here is one of the many 'I wills' of the Lord. How often the Lord says 'I will' to His people! It is usually some blessing, but here it is Himself. The Lord gives Himself to those who share His sufferings.

But this blessing is not just a personal thing for ourselves. See how extensive this blessing was! 'Abraham, however much you may be blessed, you will not just be one by yourself. Many, many others will come into blessing because you have shared My sufferings.' It must be like that, because God is like that. If we want to be a blessing to others we must accept fellowship with our Lord in His sufferings, and if we will accept it, we shall certainly be a blessing. The Word of the Lord is not 'I will bless thee' only, but 'I will make thee a blessing.' The Cross always cuts deeper channels in our lives, but God does not cut deeper just in order to leave it like that. It is in order that there may be more room for His fulness.

It is a universal law in all creation that increase only comes by travail. You may think this is rather a depressing note on which to finish a conference! I am sorry if it seems like that, but I cannot offer you any other way of blessing. There is no other way of coming into that fulness which we all desire, so this is not a message of despair. God only knows how much it may cost us, but where there is cost there is preciousness, that which is precious to the Lord. Paul says: "I... fill up on my part that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake." May we have grace to take the cup and go forth to suffer, if needs be, for the sake of our Lord, because it is not only the sufferings of Christ: it is the joy of Christ.