

**T. Austin-Sparks:****Reading: 1 Kings 8:5-11**

AT last the ark of the covenant had arrived at its destination. Amid scenes of great rejoicing it had been brought "to its place" and left there under the wings of the cherubim and surrounded by clouds of divine glory. "There was nothing in the ark save the two tables". God's holy law had been perfectly preserved, and there it reposed in the inmost oracle of God. Originally, of course, there had also been the golden pot of manna and Aaron's rod which budded. Their absence at this later date does not imply that their significance was any less, but rather indicates that the tables of the law included them in its own divine sufficiency. The wilderness journeys of God's people had ended and the ark was now at rest in the house of God. In that temple which symbolised the heavenly reality which marks the end of earthly pilgrimage, there was no longer any need to perpetuate reminders of the wilderness way: the abiding truths which they typified were all included in the tables of the law. These tablets set forth God's mind, His will for man; they were an expression of how life would be lived in accordance with His unchanging desires.

There can be no question about the perfection and finality of God's will. The letter to the Ephesians lays great stress on this matter, making use of such phrases as: "the good pleasure of his will", "the mystery of his will" and "the counsel of his will". It takes us backwards and forwards in thought, pointing back to God's will as predetermined before time was, speaking of that will as now operating through the years of time, and looking forward to the will of God overstepping time in eternal fulfilment. The passage shows that God's will is centred in one glorious intention of love: "he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blemish before him in love ...". God's will from all eternity is to have a great family whom He can love and who love Him in return.

LOVE is the fulfilling of the law, a fact symbolised in the ark, which was the receptacle in which the unbroken law was preserved. This ark was a chest made of acacia wood overlaid with gold within and without. The gold speaks of divine love, so that the fact that the tablets were hidden in the ark typified the fact that the mind of God dwells within a heart of love. Since Christ is the true expression of God's love, He is the only one qualified to be the fulfiller of His law. We know that the Lord Jesus always made love the principle of fulfilling the law. He made it clear that in His own case love for the Father governed everything. As the ark was at last placed before God in the holiest of all, so Christ is now in the presence of God, and He is there as a testimony that the will of the Father has been perfectly fulfilled, and that this has been done not through compulsion or legal obligation but by love alone. Love is the fulfilment of the law or, in other words, love consists in doing the full will of God.

As Christians we hear much about the will of God, and we often find it to be one of our greatest problems. We can only find the answer to these problems in the Lord Jesus who has perfectly fulfilled that will for us. "There was nothing in the ark save the two tables ...". Nothing more is needed, for Christ's fulfilment of God's law includes everything else. It includes the manna, for we find heavenly nourishment as we feed on His perfect life of love. All hunger of the soul is met when we realise how in love Christ has fully satisfied the Father's every wish for us. To the last degree He has fulfilled God's eternal desires for our lives; no more needs to be done; no more can be done for love's fullness is revealed in the perfection of the Son's obedience to the Father's will. When we get this clear we can feed on His faithfulness, and it will prove to be sweet heavenly food. If, however, we admit any doubts or questions about this, if we have any reservations or uncertainty as to whether the unbroken law is preserved in love on our behalf, then we become lean and starving believers, hungering for rest and comfort and failing to find them. This is quite unnecessary. We may feast continually on the glorious perfection of God's Son. The manna has not been lost or left behind; it is all included in those two witnesses to love's fulfilment of the law. There, in the holy [21/22] presence of God, the living Ark has come to rest and, as in Solomon's day the staves were removed to signify the reaching of journey's end, so Christ has perfected for ever those whom He has sanctified unto the will of God. There is nothing more to be done. There is not another inch to go, for the goal of God's will has been gloriously attained. "Lo, I am come to do thy will," Jesus affirmed as He entered this world for us, and when He returned to the Father's presence He was able to say: "I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do." To grasp this is to find the end of all soul hunger, to enter on a spiritual banquet, to feast on love -- His love for the Father as proved by His total obedience to the divine will.

And what shall we say of Aaron's rod which budded? Life in its fullness, beautiful and fruitful life, is ours as we rely entirely on the utter sufficiency of Christ. "There was nothing in the ark save the two tables ...". Nothing more is needed; nothing more is possible; this is enough for God, as the clouds of glory testified, and so it is surely enough for us. In Aaron's case the budding rod represented God's answer to men's criticisms and Satan's accusations. So it is in our case, for we can rightly claim that for us the law has been fully satisfied. The

will of God in perfection is just as truly sustained in Christ Jesus our heavenly Ark as ever the tables given to Moses were permanently deposited in the gold-covered chest which came to rest in the holy of holies. The ark of the testimony had been specially constructed to hold the tablets: they belonged there and no one could ever remove them. And all the good of Aaron's rod was made available because of them. We pine for life, we bewail our lack of beauty and fruitfulness, whenever we take our eyes away from Christ's perfection; but conversely we enjoy life in its fullness as we concentrate our faith and hope on His finished work on our behalf.

THE will of God has so many aspects that we get into all sorts of difficulties about it, wondering what the will of God is about this matter and that. There is only one way to resolve our difficulties and that is by accepting Christ as the fulfiller of the law in everything, and yielding ourselves completely to His headship. The will of God is not sectional or divided up into compartments; we cannot submit to it in piecemeal ways. We must know that will in all its comprehensiveness, for when Christ is altogether given His place of absolute headship as the perfecter of the will of God for us, then we find the key to a life in which the many details of that will are all included. It is no longer a matter of applying the law to different aspects of our life, but a question of a wholehearted subjection to Him as Lord. This reduces every problem to the simple issue of what He wishes, with the one question: 'Lord, what do You want me to do?'

In some way or other this inevitably means that we are led back to the cross, for the tables of the law were covered by the blood-stained mercy seat. The cross was the answer to all sin. Surely the very essence of sin is failure to love God. If Adam had truly loved God the whole tragedy of man's fall would never have occurred, for love is the fulfilment of the law. Man's sin made Christ's sacrifice necessary; His cross was the only way by which atonement could be made for our shortcomings. But it was also the supreme expression of His love for the Father. In the case of the Lord Jesus His love to the Father was so complete that it enabled Him to face even the death of the cross.

If we consider what were some of the practical factors in Christ's crucifixion we realise that His sufferings were caused by men's fickleness, bigotry, fearfulness, jealousy and treachery. In love He bore all these for us. And these may well be the factors which challenge the reality of our love to God. The fickle crowds so soon forgot the kindness and goodness of the Lord Jesus, allowing themselves to be carried away by base and false accusations, so that they cried out against the one whom they had formerly extolled and praised. The Pharisees were so dominated by a religious bigotry which was cruel in its intolerance and harsh in its legalistic denunciations that they took the lead in causing His sufferings. The disciples, as well as Pilate, were fearful; Judas was treacherous; and Satan was jealous himself and inspired jealousy in the Sadducees and others. But all this concentration of attacks upon love did not turn the Lord away from remaining faithful to the Father's will in every detail. God's love meant more to Him than the bitterness of enemies, the failure of friends, the strength of popular opinion or the matter of His own tights. When He came to rest in the glory of the Father's presence, love [22/23] had conquered every temptation. Just as the tables of the law had been preserved inviolate -- not only unbroken but not even scratched -- so the will of God was preserved in perfection by the Lord Jesus, whose love for the Father was so great that it enabled Him to drink even the bitter cup of Calvary.

WE, too, are confronted by some of the foes which He had to face, for we have been called to bear the cross after Him. The fickleness of friends and fellow-workers, the bigoted criticism of those who claim to be God's servants, the fear-inspiring pressure of popular opinion, the misunderstanding and jealousy which Satan himself inspires -- these are some of the tests put to our love. We can never hope to overcome them unless we remember that there is in the presence of God for us a Saviour who suffered the full agony of these things, but accepted them as part of the cup which the Father had given Him to drink. It was love for the Father which enabled Him always to choose the Father's will, and the outcome of His triumph is that "we should be holy and without blemish before him in love". There is a sense in which God is seeking to undo in us all that failure of love which we inherit from Adam. He exposes us to the painfulness of the cross, not in some capricious or unsympathetic way, but because He aims to reproduce in us that love fulfilment of His will which Christ already presents to Him on our behalf.

One day our wilderness journeys will be over. The staves will be removed and we will find ourselves in the full realisation of that eternal purpose that we should be perfect before Him in love. The house, then, will indeed be filled with the glory of God to the exclusion of all else. In that day it will be seen that the only thing which really mattered was love's fulfilment of the will of God. In fact that is all which matters now. There is nothing in the ark save the two tables! What is now true in Him is to be made wonderfully true for us also. And all the glory will be His.