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by T. Austin Sparks

The Key to Fullness

Reading: Acts 2:23-25, 34-36, 41; 3:13-15; 4:8-12; 5:30-32; 9:4-6; 10:36.

As we read these passages, we cannot fail to see that one note runs through them all - one triumphant note ringing in un mistakable clearness. I think it is gathered up in the most concise and direct form in the last passage: "He is Lord of all". The Lordship of Jesus Christ - that is the note. That was the great declaration at the beginning, and that was the explanation of everything. There is no doubt but that, in those first days, there was a great fullness of life; everything was marked by fullness. We could say concerning that time that 'the river of God was full of water' (Ps. 65:9). Everything was full: the gathering in was full, the going on was full, the testimony was full. Everywhere you looked, you saw the fullness of the Lord in individuals and in companies, and the secret and explanation was just this - the Lordship of Christ.

Absence of Fullness Today

The one thing that we are having to deplore today is the absence of that fullness. We do not see those who are being brought to the Lord led into fullness. They get so far, but they very soon come to a standstill. Their spiritual life does not increase and grow with the fullness of Christ. Those who are the Lord's - I am speaking generally - do not bear the marks of having gone on into the greater fullnesses of Christ. Multitudes are still at the beginning. The one thing and the only thing that they say about their relationship to the Lord is that at a certain time in a certain place they came to the Lord, they found the Lord, they were saved - and that may be twenty, thirty, forty years ago. They may have a testimony to having been kept by the power of God during that time: that is, that they are still with the Lord, they are not back on the other side of their conversion; but they are not characterized by real spiritual fullness, having grown and made increase.

A very great many of the Lord's people are deeply concerned and burdened about this spiritual state today; and, in an attempt to meet it, through the last fifty years in particular, a great many movements have sprung up, so that over the Christian world, at regular and frequent intervals, conventions and conferences are held for what is called 'the deepening of the spiritual life'. This is to meet the situation which is recognized as being so far-reaching and widespread - a poor spiritual state amongst Christians; a weak and defective condition of the spiritual life - and this thing grows and grows, but is not meeting the situation at all. The demand for it increases rather than lessens, proving that the need is not really vitally touched and overcome.

The Remedy

Well, what is the remedy? Why was it that at the beginning they had such virile converts, marked from the outset by such a large measure of Christ? Why was it that then things happened on such a large and effective scale within the compass of a few days? Why was it that the churches grew and the Lord added unto them those who were being saved? Why could it be that in one day three thousand, and soon after as many again, were added? Why, in the course of one man's lifetime, could the greater part of the then known world be evangelized and churches be established everywhere, and that upon a large measure of spiritual light and life? Why?

If you think about it, I am quite sure that you will be convinced that the answer is to be found in the testimony - the declaration born out of something which had happened - and that testimony was to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. They proclaimed Him as Lord. "He is Lord of all." The Lordship of Jesus Christ is the secret of fullness, and we never really move into the fullness of Christ until He is Lord.

Now, perhaps you are saying that that is very simple. Who, after all, does not believe in the Lordship of Jesus Christ? Well, it is very much deeper than that. The Lordship of Jesus Christ is not only an objective fact. I suppose almost any Christian, any really born-again child of God, would be willing to subscribe to the objective fact and say, "Jesus Christ is Lord

"! But why, then, this state of things? Either what I am saying is entirely untrue, and the Lordship of Christ does not lead to His fullness, or else it means something more than objective truth; and I think the latter is the case. The real trouble is that in so many of His own He is not Lord. He may be Saviour, but He is not Lord. The Lordship of Christ means in us a very deep and very drastic work. It means the overthrowing of every other lordship.

But the other lordships may not be in the form of outward things. The other lordships may be in our own wills. Just that strongmindedness of ours may be the thing which occupies the throne in the place of Christ. The Lord Jesus is kept out of His place as Lord in us because of the very strength of our own natures, our desires, our affections, our likes and our dislikes, and all that realm of our human feelings. There may be that in our make-up which is thwarting and frustrating His Lordship and in so doing is just keeping us out of His fullness.

It may be the enthronement of that reasoning power of ours - we will not call it 'intellect', that would be too presumptuous - but the working of our minds, reasoning and arguing and thinking that our judgment about things is right, is certain, is conclusive. Our convictions, at which we have arrived after weighing up the pros and cons, are the things by which we are to be governed and, perhaps, others are to be governed. The strength of our minds, our reason - if you like, our intellect - may just be in the way of His Lordship, and you will find all those things in the Apostles before Pentecost. You will find them arguing against the Lord on affectional grounds, on rational grounds, on preferential grounds; mind, heart and will all obstructing His absolute Lordship, occupying the throne. Not until that was entirely and completely broken and smashed in the day of the Cross was a way made for His Lordship. Yes, the other lords may be inside our own constitution, our own make-up, our own disposition. Whatever they may be, wherever they may be, the truth is this, that the way to the fullness of Christ is by His absolute Lordship in our lives.

Now, the whole Bible bears it out. Wherever you look, you will find this is the underlying truth. You look at Israel's history. While in the wilderness for the forty years, the one thing that was the issue being fought out was the Lordship of God: they were fighting with that matter of absolute submission and subjection to Him in their own hearts, their own minds, their own wills. For forty years that battle went on; and it was not until the Jordan made the great divide between that kind of thing and the coming of the Captain of the Lord's host into His place - the representative of the people gathering them all up into his own person, taking the shoes from off his feet, bowing with his face to the ground and handing up the lordship to the Lord, the Captain of the Lord's host - it was not until then that they moved on into the great fullness which God had intended for them. The inheritance was altogether frustrated while the battle of lordship went on. The inheritance was entered upon so soon as that lordship was established. In the later chapter of Israel's history under the judges, it is quite clear. What is it? - limitation, defeat, bondage, captivity; everything frustrated and thwarted and spoiled. When David comes into his place as king, then Israel is delivered, moving later into the fullness of the glory under David and Solomon. Lordship is the key to fullness.

In the New Testament, it is just the same. Here you have it in the case of the Apostles, the twelve. You can see their defeat and their weakness and their failure and their poverty - until Christ becomes Lord, absolute Lord; the Holy Ghost making Him Lord in them as He was Lord in Heaven - and then they come into fullness! Pentecost - "Jesus Christ is Lord" - and then fullness!

Take Peter. You remember, Peter had to have a special battle over this. I think he had more than one battle; perhaps we all have more than one battle. Fullness is a progressive thing. We do not enter upon it all at once, and every fresh measure of that fullness is preceded by some fresh conflict as to the Lordship of Christ, and Peter had several. But you remember Caesarea and you remember the house of Cornelius. What preceded it? Peter in Joppa on the housetop, and the vision, a sheet let down from Heaven in which were all manner of four-footed creatures, reptiles, unclean beasts, and the voice saying, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." "Not so, Lord; nothing unclean has ever passed my lips." And the thing was done thrice, the Lord was insistent; and Peter was wondering what the vision meant, when the messengers of Cornelius arrived from Caesarea. Peter was invited to go to the house of a Gentile with the word of the Lord, to the house of the unclean. And what was his note there? Well, his note was: "He is Lord of all". What happened? Peter entered into something bigger than he had ever had before; that is, he found a bigger Christ than he had known before. In recounting what happened, he says: 'Who was I to withstand God?' 'Who was I? The Lord took this thing in hand and showed Himself far bigger than myself and my tradition - He simply lifted me right out of my old bondages and limitations and landed me out of my depths altogether!' The house of Cornelius came into fullness. It was all upon that one inward triumph, the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Take Paul. Paul is a wonderful case of spiritual growth, of swift movement on into spiritual fullness. How quickly Paul moved on with the Lord! What a wealth we have in him! Why? Because he was such an exceptional man? Not necessarily. Spiritual growth may have nothing whatever to do with what we are naturally. Nothing at all. Oh, we meet so many of the

se who have the natural intelligence and the advantages of training, all the academic advantages, but who in spiritual things cannot see, cannot grasp. At the same time so often there are those who have had no such advantages, who are altogether without that natural basis which might be expected to be necessary for understanding, and yet somehow these leap into things, and on they go. No, it may have nothing whatever to do with what we are naturally. Why was it that Paul made such swift progress and grew so rapidly? You notice, at the end of the ninth chapter of Acts, how, after he had been received at Damascus, had recovered his sight and had been baptized, it says that he was with the disciples certain days, and he at once in the synagogue began his witness and his ministry, and mightily refuted the Jews, openly testifying that Jesus was the Son of God. He grew. Well, where is the secret? "Who art thou, LORD?" "What wilt thou have me to do, LORD?" That is it. From the beginning with him Jesus was Lord.

Now, let me say it again. It has been said many times. In the book of the Acts, they did not first of all preach Jesus as Saviour. They preached Him as Lord. You see, that carried with it of necessity the Saviourhood. Acknowledge Jesus to be Lord, in those days, and see what it involved. If that One who so recently has been crucified and buried is really today the living Lord, then that crucifixion and burial was no ordinary thing. That could not have been just a man being killed, martyred, for his beliefs. He could not be classed amongst those who have died for their fanatical views or for trying to set up a movement against the powers that be. If this is the LORD, then it is something more than that. He must be the Christ, He must be the Saviour, He must be the Son of God. All THAT is involved if He is Lord now; and if they accepted and acknowledged Him as Lord, well, that included His Saviourhood, but the Saviourhood was something subsidiary to the Lordship.

After all, the Saviourhood of Christ is but a recovering thing in relation to His Lordship. The Lordship was the eternal intention of God concerning Him. The Saviourhood is in order to get back to the Lordship, to lead on to the recovery of the Lordship. He can never be actually Lord until He has saved the inheritance of which He is the eternally designated Lord; but when He is Lord, it means that He is Saviour, He HAS redeemed. The Lordship is more than the Saviourhood. And so, when you come on to God's SUPREME ground - "hath made him a Prince and a Saviour" - then the way is open for God to take you right on, beyond conversion, beyond the infant stage of just being born again, on to 'growing up into Him in all things', on to the fullness of Christ. So they put the full testimony there, where all the rest was included, and thus there was a wide open way for all God's intention. Wherever you look in the Scriptures, you find that it is Lordship which is the secret of fullness.

God's Dealing with the Individual

Now, this is something which God, by every means, seeks to make good in every one of us. All the dealings of the Lord with us are not just to get us saved, but to make the Lordship of Christ real in us. Yes, all His dealings with us are to that end, and His dealings with us are personal dealings. Everything is going to be very personal in this matter. You and I, no matter who we may be, if we really come into the Lord's hands, are going to be dealt with in such a way as to bring us to the place where Christ is Lord in our lives. It is going to be personal: for, after all, while the end is corporate and collective, it must of necessity be an individual thing between us and the Lord, so that we know, within our own hearts and experiences, that God is working at a very real thing in this matter of making His Son Lord. It is going to be as personal with us as it was with Paul. It may not be in exactly the same way, but it will be just as personal. "When we were all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice speaking unto me in the Hebrew language" - I, me, and my own language, and by name - "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" (Acts 26:14). It is going to be as personal as that with us; we are not going to pass in the crowd. You say, 'Oh, Paul was an exceptional man, an exceptional case, outstanding; it can never be like that with me!' Well, it is going to be. We may not go on a Damascus road and see a light from Heaven at noontide brighter than the sun. But it is going to be as personal.

I was once staying with a sea captain, and as we talked about ships, and work amongst men on the ships, and so on, he told me an incident in the life of a Captain of one of the Union Castle liners. When he was Chief Officer, he was always seeking an opportunity for leading men to Christ, and he asked the Captain one day if he could have a service for the crew in the evening. Although he received permission, he said nothing during the day. He said nothing to anybody; he was letting it go. Late in the afternoon someone, one of the crew, said, 'Oh, you are having a service tonight, I hear, and quite a few of the men are coming!' 'Oh', said the Chief Officer, 'I have not said anything about it: where did you get that from?' 'I think it originated with the cook!' was the reply. So the Chief Officer went along to the cook and said, 'Who told you I was having a service tonight?' 'Oh', said the cook, 'it was only a joke!'

The Chief Officer felt that the Lord had tied him up to it and that he had to have a service. Amongst the men who came was one who was brought under deep conviction of sin. He had been greatly concerned about this man, and had been paying very much for him. But he did not come through to the Lord. They arrived in port, and he and another fellow went

off 'on the spree', and they took the voyage back without them. This fellow spent all his money, got into no end of trouble and then quarrelled with the other man, and they parted and he was left stranded and in a deplorable state. He went to the British Consul to ask for help. The Consul got into touch with a shipping agent, to get him a job on a ship, so as to get him back to his own country, and he was told to report at a certain yard on a certain day to go aboard and take a job. When he got there, because of past history he was given a very menial job down in the stoke-hole, looking after the fires.

Some days later they were in mid-ocean. There was terrible heat outside and inside, and he staggered up on deck to get a breath of air. Dazed and half senseless, he perched on the ship's rail, lost his balance and went over. For a time he was not missed. Presently he was enquired after and could not be found. A search of the ship was made, and the roll-call was held. Three-quarters of an hour passed, and they reported to the Captain that he must be overboard. The Captain ordered the ship to turn round on its course (and it takes three-quarters of a mile to turn a ship like that round), and back they went for three-quarters of an hour. No one ever expected to find him, but at sea every effort has to be made to recover a man, not just leave him. Three-quarters of an hour back on that course: everybody looking out in every direction, listening.

Suddenly a man said, 'I thought I heard something!' All looked - there was a black spot in the sea! A boat was lowered, the man picked up, brought aboard. Asked what had happened, he explained, and said: 'I saw the ship going, going, going! I kept myself afloat, and struck out to follow the ship's course so far as I could, though I knew it was a hopeless thing. She went on and on, almost out of sight. And then I saw her turn round, gradually come nearer, and as you got near I decided on one last shout for help - and that was the shout you heard!'

Well, you are not surprised, are you, that that man came to the Lord? That was the outcome of this true story. His last shout, as he explained, was not just a shout to the ship. It was a shout from his heart, higher than the ship - it was the last cry of a man to God. But he is a representative case. Poor fellow, he is not a Paul by any means, is he? - ship's stoker who has been touched by the Spirit of God, who has kicked against the pricks, who has fought and gone off, but who has been so marvellously singled out - saved by what might be regarded as a millionth chance naturally. Yes, the Lord had His eye on him.

Yes, the Lord's dealings with us will be as personal as that. They may not take the same form, but the matter is going to be as personal as that with every one of us. The Lord is going to hedge us up to this. If we are really going through into all the Lord's purpose, we are going to be faced with this matter of His absolute Lordship, and our destiny is going to be determined entirely on the basis of His Lordship. We may be saved, but that is not the end of the destiny which God has fixed for us. Salvation is the first step in God's purpose. We can be saved, and still lose the great purpose of God in salvation - the fullness of Christ. That is the destiny toward which salvation is the first great step. But the fullness of Christ demands the Lordship of Christ. If you want to go right on, to go right through, not to miss anything - as Israel, that first generation, missed the Lord's purpose - if you do not wish to miss what He is after, do not be content with just being saved. For, after all, to have Christ as Saviour means that the benefits are ours; but to have Him as Lord means that everything is for Him. Which is the higher - what we get or what He gets? Surely our hearts respond to this! While we are deeply, we are profoundly grateful for all the blessings of redemption, of salvation, nevertheless it is unto Him and not unto ourselves that we want the satisfaction to come, and He is only really satisfied with the glory that issues from His own acknowledged Lordship.