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A Chosen Nation

by T. Austin-Sparks

Transcribed from a message given on 2 March 1961 at the Christian Fellowship in Richmond, Surrey, England. Words which were not clear are enclosed in [square brackets].

A big little bird whispered to me that you are contemplating a study of the minor prophets and you have had a number of postponements in your arriving at this matter. And I expected to see all your faces drop this evening at the possibility of another postponement. Well, perhaps it will help a little if I say to you that I am going to talk about the minor prophets, perhaps by way of a general introduction. You will be getting down to them severally and filling in a good deal of the details and the technical points of chronology, and setting, and specific distinctiveness of message, and so on, and I shall not attempt to touch on that side of things, but just to help you, I trust, in your approach to the whole of these so-called "minor prophets".

And you will be told, if you've not already been told, that that term does not relate to the value of these prophets or of their significance. They are of no less importance than the four who are called the "major". Their message is quite as important, they are only called "minor" because their message is gathered into so short a compass so far as words are concerned. That is the only way in which they are minor prophets, and you must remember that that is not a biblical term at all; it's something that man has introduced.

Now then, to approach this section of the Word of God. You'll know that there are twelve of these so called "minor prophets". And I think that there is something more than a mere chance about that, a mere hap. It seems to me that there's a very great deal of significance and *Divine* meaning in that fact that we have *twelve* minor prophets with which to close the volume of the Old Testament.

Of course, you, if you don't know it, you will learn in your studies, that they do not chronologically or historically follow the other prophets; that is, Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel and Daniel, but many of them have to be interwoven with those greater prophets, or more lengthy prophets. Indeed, four or five of these so-called "minor prophets" prophesied before Isaiah. So you don't just take this section and say, "Now after you've got these great fellows, then the little ones come in!" No, you've just got to interweave them and find their place in the right setting. That is said just for this: that you don't take this as a section of the Bible necessarily as apart from the rest, but it is here, in the arrangement of the Bible. And we think that we have some very good ground for believing that the Lord has something to do with the *arrangement* of the Bible. He could have put Isaiah and then put in one of the small ones, or two of the small ones, and then bring another big one in and then one or two small ones, and quite rightly they would have fitted like that chronologically. But strangely enough, it's not like that.

And the New Testament is arranged on the spiritual principle that you've got a right *spiritual* sequence, if it's not chronological. That's important to remember that. So that the Old Testament, the Old Testament concludes with this section called the "twelve minor prophets". And it's on that significance that I want to dwell mostly this evening. I never know how far we are going to get, it's always a risky thing to start on so big a matter, but we'll just see, and I promise you that you'll get home for breakfast!

Well now, twelve: from Hosea to Malachi. And in the symbolism of Bible numbers, you probably know that number twelve symbolises completeness of government, or governmental order complete. Just keep that in mind because it is a *ruling* thing, especially in this connection.

Number Twelve

And twelve, as you know, is a combination of three and four; you learned that when you first went to school. Three and four. You'll be able to trace that if you'd like to study it more closely in the Scriptures. Three is the heavenly Divine number; the number of the Trinity, and in many other ways three represents the Divine, and the heavenly order or government. You know also that four is always the earthly number, the number of earthly government. You have spring, summer, autumn, winter - that governs the year, you see. You have north, south, east and west; and you can't get outside of that for the compass of creation. And so you could go on with our fours, so obviously the number of the earthly: earthly government. Bring the two together - heavenly *and* earthly government - and that's about the sum of government, isn't it? That's the fullness of government.

You notice how often the appeal in the Bible (it's something worth looking up) the appeal to God is, "Thou that didst make the heaven and the earth" - that means, "Thou who hast the government - complete, full, final, in every realm". So that twelve represents, then, the fullness of government.

We know many twelves: twelve patriarchs, twelve tribes of Israel, twelve apostles of the Lamb. When you come to the end of the Bible (to make this long story very short) in the last chapters of the Bible you have the symbol of government in the City, the new Jerusalem coming down from God out of heaven, which is only a symbol again, not an actuality, not literally a city, but a symbol of that final government: the City as the centre of that universal government. And number twelve predominates - it has twelve foundations to its walls, twelve stones, twelve gates, twelve pearls. Its dimensions are twelve thousand furlongs. You can't take all that literally, it's simply a symbolic number, meaning

here you have the impress of *government*. And I think that's quite enough for evidence that this number is no accident; it has a meaning attached to it.

And so, when you bring it back to this section of the Old Testament, the last section, you have the *twelve* minor prophets. And when you come to look into them and their message and their meaning and think about it, it is not difficult and it is not a far cry to see that while each one has his own note and particular aspect of the message of God, particular complexion, there's something here in the combination of them all which is tremendously impressive: it is the number of Israel in the Old Testament.

Israel sprang from the *twelve* patriarchs. Israel is comprised of *twelve* tribes. And there are other ways in which the number twelve is always representative of Israel.

Remember when Elijah, on the Mount of Carmel built the altar to precipitate the great crisis as to who was really God, the Lord? He built the altar, and he built it of twelve stones to represent all Israel. Twelve stones! It was the Israel number. Now, I could follow that through to a lot of detail, but I leave that to you. But my point is, this is the number of Israel, is the number twelve. So that, in the twelve minor prophets, we are in the presence of this whole matter of God's mind about Israel, God's summing up of Israel. It's the *summary* of Israel. It's *Israel* that is here particularly in view.

You may perhaps question that in at least one or two of the minor prophets, but think again before you walk away with that too easily. You may, for instance, wonder, "Well, Jonah or Obadiah - they had particularly to deal with nations outside of Israel". But you'll see in a minute that that is not an unrelated matter so far as Israel is concerned.

Now let us look at Israel.

Israel's Election

The Divine choice of Israel from among the nations. And the Divine purpose in that choice, in that election, one thing is perfectly clear as you read the Old Testament from Moses onward, is this: that God chose that nation from above the nations for *spiritual government* of the nations. "You shall be above only and not beneath", as a nation. Chosen to be in the midst of the nations, to *spiritually* govern the nations for God. *Spiritually* govern the nations for God: to be God's vessel and instrument in the midst of the nations for the exercise and expression of His sovereign rule, His sovereign government - not because they were better than other nations - that is stated. Not because of anything in themselves, but just in the sovereign will of God they were chosen for this particular purpose: to *rule* for God in a *spiritual* way in the nations. Underline "spiritual".

Of course, it was temporal, it was temporal and historical in *that* dispensation, but it was essentially spiritual, because as soon as they forsook their *spiritual* ground, they lost their ascendancy amongst the nations. Think of that for a moment.

It, their purpose, the Divine purpose in Israel, was to express here in the nations the supremacy of Jehovah over all gods of the nations, in this whole universe. To express that supremacy, superiority, uniqueness, unknowness of God as God in this whole creation. To express that! That's Divine government in expression.

And you know how *much* is made of the *Name* of the Lord, the *Name* of the Lord - to be above every other name, the honour of His name - we can't stay with too many details, but Israel was also called, *also* called. For in that calling, that Divine calling, the intention was that all the nations should, through them, receive blessing! That was the covenant with Abraham, their father, the father of Israel, that in his seed all nations of the earth should be blessed. The *blessing* of the nations!

We referred to Jonah just now. It's a very remarkable thing, a *very* remarkable thing, that right outside of Israel, Jonah is sent to Nineveh - that great Assyrian city in the midst of that great nation - with a message of salvation, a message of the mercy of God! God sees the iniquity of that city and what its doom must be because of its iniquity, or of that nation, and God doesn't want that doom to overtake even a *heathen* nation. And so He sends an Israelitish prophet with a message of salvation, a message of mercy, so exhibiting this, as only one little example, that God intended this people to be a means of *blessing* to all the nations of this world.

That is spiritual government, isn't it? To bring in the supremacy of God and demonstrate the supremacy of God. And my word, isn't the Old Testament just full of the demonstration of the supremacy of God! Whether it is in Egypt or anywhere else, it's just that. You've been in Daniel, well, "that the heavens do rule" - God in heaven! That's your message of Daniel - the absolute supremacy of God, but also that the whole of the nations should receive blessing through a channel and that channel therefore becomes, in that way, heaven's instrument of government for blessing! Well, that's the calling for the election of Israel.

Now, Israel's failure. That's where we are in the twelve.

The Failure of Israel

Of course, we were there even before Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel - the failure of Israel in this vocation, this purpose. They have just let God down; failed in their great Divine calling and vocation. Instead of maintaining the honour of the Name of the Lord, they have brought dishonour and shame upon it. Instead of showing the true *nature* of God to the nations, they've shown something very, *very* contradictory to that nature.

Well, it doesn't need much to show that we, at the end of the Old Testament, find ourselves in the presence of Israel's tragic and terrible failure so far as their great calling was concerned, to govern. Where are they now? Governing? Above only? In Divine supremacy? That's all gone. That's all gone! They're *subject* people now, Gentiles have taken the authority in this world. It's like that, their failure.

Now, what were the causes? All this, as you see, is leading up to our main message. What were the causes? Because, what God does (and write this in your minds) what God does is *never just done officially*. He never does a thing just *officially*, that is, God just does not take hold of something and without any meaning or significance just put it there, as an act of His volition, of His fancy, and that thing is a thing and He deals with it like that. Whenever God does a thing, it is *not* done just officially, it is done upon a certain basis, on a certain ground. In His doing, there is wrapped up, bound up with that, *spiritual principles*. That vessel, that instrument, just rests upon certain *spiritual* principles, and if they are violated, then God will take the thing and dash it to pieces! Though He has brought it in, and put it there, and used it, let it violate its spiritual principles, and the thing is no longer. That's what happened to the tabernacle. It became an empty shell! An empty shell; that's what became of the great temple in Jerusalem in the days of the Lord Jesus. It was an empty shell and show!

God brought these things in and used them, but on certain grounds. You see? Certain grounds, His own grounds: to contain His own thoughts, His own character. Let that ground be violated, and the thing itself no longer counts with God. So that, when Israel failed, Israel failed and was set aside, not simply by some unmeaning, senseless, foible of Almighty God who can take up a thing and pull it down like that willy-nilly, but because the *spiritual* principles and meanings are no longer to be found there.

When we come to this section which sees Israel's failure, there are causes. And these causes are, firstly: their loss, their loss of *distinctiveness* as God's people. Remember that: the loss of their *distinctiveness* as God's people. He'd separated this people from the nations; very definitely so, did He separate them from the nations. You take the early history: Abraham. Abraham... well, God, I suppose, could have given Abraham an Isaac in Ur of the Chaldees and the family could have grown up there and enlarged. But God said, "Get thee out! Get thee out!" He put a very distinct difference and distance between Abraham and this world. He called him *out* on principle.

Israel in Egypt: "Let My son go" and the "exodus", as it's called. The separation was so utter in God's intention and mind, that He said, "Not the hoof of one single beast shall be allowed to stay in Egypt". Pharaoh bargained and bargained, and cajoled and argued and strove with all his might to maintain some kind of link, some kind of link between his dominion and this people. God said, "Not a bit of it! Not to the hoof of the last lamb. Not to the hoof of the last lamb!" If they'd had cats and dogs in those days, "Not to the paw of the last kitten!" Right out.

And see the *tremendous* barrier of the Red Sea. He puts that between them. They're out, there's no doubt about it, they're out! They knew it for forty years that they were out, feeling it every day of their life. They were out. But all that, which is geographical and historical, has a spiritual principle. This people is different, it is *separated*. It's the whole meaning of sanctification or holiness. It's to be *separated* unto God. Separated! Different! Different. God has marked them off.

I, many years ago, knew a very well-known Jewish leader. And we used to have very interesting talks. But he said this to me one day. He said, "I travel all over the world, and in all nations there are Jews. There are Jews. In some nations they are not dark skinned Jews or dark complexion or even olive complexion; they are fair. In other nations they're different complexion, they've been there for generations." But he said, "I *always* know a Jew in any nation when I meet one, without being told. I always know! There's something that I recognise." Well, perhaps you would have no difficulty, but that's an interesting thing. There's something that God has stamped, a difference, even in physical features and that kind of thing, in order to show that this is another people and they're never really absorbed into the nations. Am I wrong? They're always strangers in the nations, aren't they? Always strangers here. Well, that's physical, but true, but it carries a spiritual principle, you see.

Now, the trouble with Israel eventually was mixture.

Mixture

Intermarriage and idolatry, which was mixing the gods of the heathen with Jehovah; getting mixed up in this whole thing. The whole terrible story of idolatry is just that, in principle: you've lost your distinctiveness - the distinctiveness of your God, the distinctiveness of your own character and nature - it's gone. It's all mixed up now, all confused now, you don't know where the one ends and

the other begins. It's like that. Lost distinctiveness was the beginning and the end of their downfall as the people for God's use and government in the nations.

Lost distinctiveness. Then what? Strangely enough, with it, an *exclusiveness and pride*. A seeming contradiction. *Seeming* contradiction: exclusiveness, shutting out all other peoples and shutting themselves in as *the* people. Pride: "We're superior, the superior race. We're the superior race." Exclusiveness and pride. That was the terrible battle of Jonah, wasn't it?

God said, "Go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach that they shall repent, and be saved." "Oh," Jonah said, "Not a bit of it! Not a bit of it! If those people are saved then we as Israel stand to suffer at their hands. Let them perish, for *our* preservation." That's the argument behind Jonah: "We are the people and no one else is."

Look at them in the days of the Lord Jesus. The Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans. Exclusive! Remember the parable or story of the *good Samaritan*? What a picture of the attitude of Israel toward others. There's this poor fellow, left for dead; stripped and robbed, left for dead. And the priest comes along, sees the fellow, and the Levite comes along, [leaves him]. That's the attitude of Israel to anyone not of their race. You see the contradiction of this. Called to be a *blessing* to all the nations! Now what? The message: "They are dogs! They are *dogs*, we are the master race!" Exclusivity and pride. Even when they were so corrupt.

But then: *earthliness*. There was in *all* that God had given them, a heavenly meaning, a *spiritual* meaning. Their sacrifices were not just things in themselves, they carried a spiritual and heavenly meaning. Their priesthood was not just some cult, it carried with it, as we know from the letter to the Hebrews, a *spiritual* meaning, a *heavenly* meaning. Everything had that, but now all the meaning had gone out of everything and there was this carrying on the things as things. Mere cold formalism. Ritual. Tradition. Spiritual value - all gone, come down to an earthly level; out of the heavenly, to a carnal, fleshly level from the spiritual. Mere formalism. No meaning in anything. "Yet," Isaiah says, "they seek Me daily. They seek Me daily, but show this people their sin, their iniquity. While seeking Me daily, delighting, they delight to know My ways, yet...". What a state.

Well, these are some of the *causes* of their downfall, their rejection. We come to the twelve and what have you? Judgement. Condemnation. And doom! My word, hear some of these minor prophets. Isaiah might say some strong things, Jeremiah might say some strong things, they can't stay on the same street with Amos! Some of these men, these men have really got their coats off! And they're really getting at Israel, for their sake. It's terrific. Doom! Doom! Israel's about to be *spewed out* of God's mouth, set aside as a nation, to be rejected.

It's an impressive thing, friends, I can't take the time to give you the detail, but it is an impressive thing that the New Testament quotations from the twelve minor prophets are *almost entirely related to Israel*. Have you got that? Not in every case, but with perhaps one or two exceptions in the New Testament (and there are many quotations from the minor prophets in the New Testament) in all but these one or two instances, the quotations relate to Israel. See how many there are in Matthew from the minor prophets. And you know what Matthew's to do with, it's dealing with Israel, isn't it? You know that quite well. It's Israel that's in view, it's the Jew, the Jews that are in view in Matthew. It's the kingdom of the heavens supplanting the Jewish kingdom. And so you quote from the minor prophets, the same quotations in Mark, and Luke, and John, from the minor prophets.

You come to Acts chapter 2 and you know the great Joel quotation: "This is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel and it shall come to pass..." when? "In the last days". What last days? Of *Israel*, as God's instrument. "It shall come to pass in the last days saith the Lord, I will pour out My Spirit upon all flesh." Well, that on the day of Pentecost *all* Israel is represented in Jerusalem on that day, and Joel is quoted in this way, to give Israel one final opportunity of turning to the Lord, coming back, repenting, being brought into the heavenly kingdom.

You know Acts chapter 15 is the great crisis, isn't it? The great crisis chapter where this council is being held because the Gentiles have received the gospel and that's upset even, *even* [these apostles]. The Jews and the head of the Jerusalem Christian church is tremendously troubled about this. Gentiles! Gentiles! And so the crisis is reached in chapter 15 of Acts and what, what is it? *Amos* is quoted by Peter. *Amos*! And what does Peter quote in that crisis? James stands up and says "Simeon, (that is, Simon Peter) hath said..." and then he quotes *Amos*, "It will come to pass after those days saith the Lord, that I will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down... that the *residue* of the nations..." The *residue* of the nations! Israel is being left behind and the Gentiles are coming in. It's the crisis. And *Amos* is quoted, you see? It's transitioned from Israel, to the church. And *Amos* forms the bridge.

I say, it's impressive isn't it, that all these quotations from the twelve minor prophets in the New Testament, with just one or two exceptions, relate to the transition from Israel to the church - the rejection, the setting aside of Israel for this dispensation.

Now we've got that far, that Israel is rejected. She has failed in every respect of her Divine [calling. Rejected.] What is the great transition statement? Coming from the lips of the Lord Himself, what is it? "The kingdom of heaven shall be *taken* from you and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof". Peter, in his letter says of *Christians*, not of Israel now, "*Ye* are a chosen nation".

A Chosen Nation

"A nation bringing forth the fruits" have taken over, taken over by Divine decree all that God intended concerning Israel. Israel's failed, the church comes in, and takes up the government. From that time onward number twelve has a new meaning. Isn't it remarkable that this new *heavenly* kingdom and *heavenly* instrument begins with the number twelve! Twelve apostles, twelve disciples - same number, governmental number. From that time onward this number twelve comes in until, as I've pointed out, you get to the end of the New Testament and the church is seen as the City with this predominant number twelve: government. Government! It's the church now.

And you don't need to be reminded of the content of the letter to the Ephesians: "And hath raised us together with Him and hath seated us together with Him in the heavenlies". What does that follow? "And hath raised Him from the dead and set Him at His own right hand, *far* above *all* rule and authority, principality and power and every name" - and has raised us together with Him and seated us there! It's the church that's being referred to, called in for heavenly, spiritual government. *A heavenly* people! *A spiritual* church! *A holy* nation that is *separated* unto God!

Is the church going to fail the Lord the same way as Israel did?

Well, that's the challenge, isn't it? We are talking, it seems, on such big dimensions, so objectively, and yet we in this very little room, we, a couple or so dozen people, are *in this thing*, this thing that

God intended concerning Israel, that Israel forfeited, and you and I, Gentiles, have been brought in to take it over, with all, of course, others called in Christ. A tremendous thing!

Now you know why the New Testament has *so much* to say about our not being of this world. "Ye are *not* of the world. Ye are not of the world!" The Lord Jesus said, "They are *not* of the world even as I am not of the world". There's your spiritual, inward distinctiveness of life, of nature, of character. Is it true?

I always want to come back, *must* come back, to test theories by actualities. What my friend, my Jewish friend said about Jews, is it true about Christians? Oh, blessed be God, it is true. You know I have travelled a good deal of this world, from far east to far west, and many countries between, and many, and many a time, without being introduced to a person as a fellow Christian, I know they are a Christian although I've never met them before. Never met them before; got into a railway carriage, never met that person, never seen that person before, it hasn't been long before we've discovered we've got something in common and as we went on we're able to talk together on common ground. You know a true Christian whenever you meet one, don't you?

When I was a young fellow I worked in an office for a time and I had to interview people. As they came into that office and I had to interview them, well, one came, business was done, and another came, and business was done, and then one came - there's something different about this one! I'd never seen or heard them before, didn't know anything about them, but there's something different. "Are you a Christian?" "Indeed I am!" We were on common ground. There's something, something, isn't there? Isn't it true? Oh, it ought to be more like that than it is, but it is true, there's something different, isn't there, about this heavenly nation. Oh, may the Lord help us to preserve that! Not try to be like the world or to hide this for any reason whatever, but to keep it clear, to preserve our distinctiveness. The tragedy of the church in general today is its lost distinctiveness. This world is not able to recognise the clean cut, the clean cut difference between these people and others.

Well, that's the challenge to us because we're called to govern in the ages to come, to be a heavenly people, with a heavenly life drawing our resources from heaven, living [life with strength] received from heaven. A heavenly people! A holy people! It must be.

Now, if the general fails, God will seek out from the general those who will answer to His thought. And that's why we're here, I think, not just to have a meeting, a Bible study, or meetings from week to week, but because the Lord is seeking a people who correspond to *His* thought, to be His instrument of government, in a spiritual way now, in a spiritual way now.

And there are two ways of reading world situations, you know. You can say, "Well, look at China, Russia, Siberia and its communists and the devil's instruments who are governing." Look at the Christians! Why are the Christians where they are? Why are they imprisoned, in exile? Because the world is afraid of them. Afraid of them! You let these people be at large and your kingdom won't last long. Is that true? So, "We must shut them up!" They mean something in this world, the world's afraid of them. The world's afraid of them! Oh yes, there *is* a sense in which they are the people that count and are governing, and *forcing* this world to take certain courses. It's only, after all, what happened to the Lord Jesus. It *looked* as though the devil and evil men got the upper hand when He was crucified, that *He* was the defeated one. His very presence compelled them to take the course which fulfilled Scripture and carried out the Divine method and means of the redemption of men.

His death, while the devil meant it for His destruction, was *God's* way of bringing Him to the throne and bringing us to the throne.

There are two ways of looking at world situations, and you can take it this way: if you are a true, true out and out child of God standing for God's rights and for Christ's rights, the devil will mark you down and give you a pretty bad time. If you don't count very much, he'll leave you alone, but if you count for anything, either individually or as a group, he won't leave you alone. He's afraid of you. He knows that nothing less than his whole kingdom is at stake where you're concerned. Have you got that? Does it sound too big? Put it to the test. Does it work? Is it like that? Is it like that?

Whenever there is something of the *Lord* on hand, something more of the Lord on hand, you're going to have a time that's going to count for the Lord, what happens? Invariably you'll find yourselves thrown into a time of conflict, and pressure, and difficulty. All hell [is loosed]. Well, so it is. It's significant! It's because what is of the Lord and those who are of the Lord, are so significant in this universe, that they will not be left alone. And it isn't accident or hap is it? It's so uncanny, the timing of it, the method of it, the foresight of it, it's so uncanny! It's supernatural, it isn't *just* things happening. There's something about this that is well-timed and well-aimed and just gets you at the point where you're most, most susceptible. Isn't it? It's true.

Well, now you see the minor prophets have a very big message as a whole about this matter of God's calling to government, the principles of that government, and the secrets or reasons for failure and loss, and therefore, what God is seeking today is what He lost in Israel: a peculiar people, a people different, a heavenly people. "Fear not, little flock, little flock, it is your Father's good pleasure to give *you* the kingdom".