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Jesus Christ, The Faithful Witness...

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Jesus Christ, The Faithful Witness, The Firstborn of the Dead, The Ruler of the Kings of the Earth.

"John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was and who is to come; and from the seven Spirits that are before His throne; and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. Unto Him that loveth us, and loosed us from our sins by His blood; and He made us to be a kingdom, to be priests unto His God and Father; to Him be the glory and the dominion for ever and ever" (Rev. 1:4-6).

I feel that it is good, as well as needful, to keep the Lord Jesus well in view in these days when what is antichrist is so much more intensely coming out and occupying the stage. I am not going to talk about antichrist, but I am quite sure that we are all impressed, and increasingly so, with the supernatural character of things today and the direction of those things. We can truly say that there is a hand against the throne, that it is the place of our Christ which is the object of all this. It is against God's Christ in a way in which it has perhaps never been before, so far as this world is concerned. Well, without dwelling upon that side, it is good and right in such times to keep the Lord Jesus well in view, and I believe that that is the Father's desire for us, and over against what is about us and pressing so strongly upon our vision and consciousness in these days, we should contemplate *Him*.

In the words of Rev. 1:5, we have Him introduced in this threefold way, "The Faithful Witness, The Firstborn of the Dead, The Ruler of the Kings of the Earth," and that is comprehensive. We take each of those three phrases and think about them.

The Faithful Witness

That, of course, has to do with His life here on the earth. It is the backward view. That word 'witness', as you know, is the word 'maturion', from which we get 'martyr'. The faithful Martyr, the One Who gave His life for His testimony, Who was faithful unto death in His witness. And it is as such that He is first of all brought to us: the One who has gone that way, the One who has proved Himself in that ordeal, the One who has been steadfast at all costs, the One who has paid the final price for His testimony; the One who, under every kind of testing, and such testing as no other creature need ever know - did not yield, but stood His ground. He is the faithful witness.

But we ask, to what did He witness? What was the witness that meant for Him the uttermost price? What was His testimony for which He was called upon to lay down His life, which spontaneously led to His death? I am going to use a phrase of His own to answer that question, a phrase which He used as to the carrying on of that testimony by the Holy Spirit afterwards. Speaking of the coming of the Spirit He said, "When He is come He shall convict the world of sin and of righteousness and of judgment", and when you come to think about it, that is the testimony of Jesus. It was to those things that He witnessed, and in so witnessing found that He was up against the ultimate forces of evil which would exact from Him the uttermost price.

The Faithful Witness - as to Sin

He was the faithful witness as to sin. When you look at that, you find that the exacting from Him of that price of His very life, was made by the religious people of this world of His time; the people who had a reputation for religion; a people who would claim to be the most religious. Indeed, they would go farther, and say they were the most godly in the world; and it was to them that He bore His witness. It was in that realm that He was the faithful witness; it was by them that He was put to death because He bore testimony to sin.

He witnessed as to sin with this implication as well as direct declaration - sin - and no religious observances can dispose of it. You see, the religious people, the Jews, with all their ritual, were thinking that by their religious observances they were getting rid of the fact of sin. They were taking away the very sinfulness of sin and making sin something other than it is. The Lord Jesus was seeking all the time to bring home to the Jews, the religious people, the fact of sin. Sin! "Let him that is without sin cast the first stone", and they all went out from the least to the greatest; but where did they go? What happened when they got outside? "They took counsel against Him." He brought sin home to the religious people; and that was the effect of His presence all the time. He was showing that there is no religious system, there are no religious observances, which can make sin other than it is or get rid of it.

He bore witness to sin and if, not only by our language, our doctrine, and our declarations, but by what He is in us we are witnesses bringing home the fact of sin, we will have to pay the same price. The question of faithfulness unto death will be a very real question in our case. It may not be in martyrdom in the sense in which we usually use that word. There is that one great effort of the adversary in this world to rule out of men's ideas the reality of sin, and Satan will seek to do that by putting religion there. Perhaps one of the greatest, if not the greatest enemy to Christ, is religion, which does not really take account of the fact of sin, but goes round it.

I feel that there is a very great need for the Lord's people to be very much in prayer that the Lord Himself will find a people on this earth who will bring home to men the fact of sin. That can be put in

different ways; that we should be very much in prayer for a mighty work of the Holy Spirit to convict of sin, and when that work begins, it will find its pivotal point of registration in the realm of religion.

"The faithful witness". It was that that resulted in the cross - His witness to sin. Perhaps we need a greater abhorrence of sin, a keener sense of the sinfulness of sin. Certainly, we shall be helpless in all our witness unless in the first place we convict of sin.

Oh, that our presence individually on this earth, here amongst men, might bring home to their consciousness the fact of sin! You see, the Lord Jesus did not only preach, but His presence meant that, and the appeal is for this: that our presence on the earth may mean more than it does. It is possible we know it in a small way, but oh, that it might be true in a much larger way. It is possible for us to be in the presence of people without saying a word and they become very uncomfortable and something comes out without our having said anything or looked anything; it is not that we have frowned, but our presence. I am quite sure that the Lord would have every one of us be a positive factor in this matter, because there is the other side to that.

While the professional religionists objected and became intensely evil and took counsel how they might destroy Him, those people who were burdened and distressed by sin, were drawn out by His witness. His presence made them conscious that He had got the secret they needed. It will always have that effect. If, on the one side, we shall make many enemies if we are faithful witnesses, on the other hand, our presence will make many opportunities. The point is that we shall be counting for something. We have to ask ourselves, without getting too miserably introspective and occupied with our failure: What does my presence mean spiritually on this earth? Where I am, where I am living most of my life, what is the effect? If the Lord Jesus, the faithful and true witness, is living in us and living as Lord in us, then surely the same thing will result in our case as resulted in His case. There will be conviction to the making of enemies, and that is a good sign.

It is a great thing when the church makes enemies because of its real spiritual testimony. It is a great thing when believers make enemies because of the genuine nature of their spiritual influence, but on the other hand, there will be those who, in their hearts, are longing for the way out, who recognise that we have got the secret. So it is for effectiveness in witness that the appeal comes to us from the Lord for positiveness of testimony and effectiveness of life here on the earth. He witnessed as to sin.

The Faithful Witness - as to Righteousness

He witnessed as to righteousness, the righteousness which is by faith alone, and in that connection also He, by implication, influence, and statement, made it perfectly clear that no religious works can attain unto or secure righteousness. He was always making this matter of righteousness a matter of faith in Himself, but they were turning always to what they were doing and what they were not doing, how they were behaving themselves and how they were observing this and that, and in that realm they claimed righteousness.

There is nothing in the universe of God more potent, more mighty, than righteousness. Do remember that this is the thing which spells the undoing of Satan and his kingdom, and this is the thing which is the most powerful weapon in the hand of any believer. It is this thing which puts the feeblest saint into the position of the most mighty foe of Satan. We cannot exaggerate, we cannot be too strong on this matter, that it is righteousness which is the key to everything; on the one hand for the destruction of the whole satanic kingdom and on the other hand for the bringing in and

establishing of the kingdom of our Lord. It is all a matter of righteousness, the righteousness of God, but that righteousness is by faith.

I wonder if you are beginning to see a little more as you go on of the tremendous significance of righteousness? You speak about the Blood. When you are speaking about the Blood of the Lord Jesus, when you speak about overcoming by the Blood or because of the Blood, when you speak about the testimony of the Blood, when you sing 'There is power in the Blood', when you recognise that before the Blood Satan is helpless and death is powerless, you are only using another word for righteousness. What is that Blood? Why, ever and always through the Word of God in both Testaments, it is the symbol of incorruption; incorruptible life is perfect life. It is the blood as of a lamb without spot and without blemish. That is the point. What is its nature, its character? It is the infinitely perfect nature of this Lamb of God. It is a mighty power against Satan. When He advanced to the cross crying, "Now shall the prince of this world be cast out!" He was only saying, in other words, 'Now shall he know the infinite power of righteousness, now shall he know the meaning of the blood of the Lamb!' That is what is there. Satan advancing to Him found no ground upon which to encamp to overcome Him. "The prince of this world cometh and hath nothing in Me... Now shall the prince of this world be cast out."

And that is the theme of the book of the Revelation. It is the Lamb, the Lamb has overcome. Worthy is the Lamb! Why? Because of righteousness. God can do nothing until He finds the ground of righteousness, but when He has found that, He can do everything. Satan can do everything when he has the ground of unrighteousness, but when he has the ground of righteousness he can do nothing. And it was that in the Lord Jesus which cost Him all and led to the Cross - His testimony, His witness, to righteousness by faith. Oh, may the Lord bring that home to us more and more and put us in the mighty position. I believe that He would take infinite pains with us to get us there, that He would bring us down to the very depths of utter, dark, terrible despair in the consciousness of our utter worthlessness so that truly we would regard ourselves as worms and nothing, in order that He might make so gloriously and wondrously triumphantly real in our hearts the unspeakable value of righteousness by faith, that we should be at that place where we can say and do say - not in pious language, not in mere religious sentiment, not in feigned or mock humility, but from the depths of our being, 'A sinner, the chief of sinners, yet before Him no sin appearing at all; regarded, reckoned, as righteous in His sight!' When that is our heart apprehension of things, Satan has lost ground, we are in the way of a tremendous effectiveness in the spiritual realm. It is then we begin to count and we ought to know that by now. We ought to know that by the immense effort of Satan at which he persists throughout life to get us where the question of righteousness is not a settled one in our hearts, the question of an absolutely clear way with God is not a settled question; still some wondering, still standing outside asking if peradventure we dare. Still without that mighty note of assurance which comes through such words as "Let us come with boldness". No one can really appreciate that who has not come to know in their own heart, in their own experience, the wonderful value of the righteousness of Christ as given to us in His Blood.

Oh, when you take the Cup, remember that you are taking in symbol, and testifying to, a righteousness which is God's own righteousness which is yours now through faith. That is a mighty testimony. Let us ask the Lord to increase our appreciation of the precious blood and deepen our apprehension of the meaning of this first thing, righteousness which is by faith. But let us remember that there is nothing which arouses the enemy more than that, and we shall be called upon to be faithful in the midst of all that he can set against us. Jesus Christ, the faithful witness in the matter of righteousness.

The Faithful Witness - as to Judgment

Jesus Christ, the faithful witness in the matter of judgment also. In effect He said, "Judgment is a reality, and no religious practices can evade or get round it, you can never be saved from it by all your religious activities".

If I may just put in here an aside, it is significant that chapter 19 follows chapter 18 in the book of the Revelation. In chapter 18 you have Babylon, the great harlot, cast down. Now, when you look at Babylon, you find that Babylon reverses each and all of these things which we have been mentioning. You may say Babylon is the Roman Catholic Church, if you like. Well, it is something very much bigger than that. What does Babylon do? It sets this whole sin question aside and puts religion in its place. I do not want to refer to any particular institution such as Rome, but we do know, speaking quite generally, that it is true. The sin question is never dealt with; sin is rampant, sin rages there; religion up to the clouds, but sin reeking; that is Babylon. Religion and sin going together. Righteousness reached and established by works, not by faith. Luther had to pay a heavy price in testifying against Babylon on that matter. Oh, how judgment is got round! But here you see, in chapter 18, Babylon the great, the mother of harlots, is cast down, is fallen. Then chapter 19 follows, the marriage supper of the Lamb, and you get the only "Hallelujahs" in the New Testament. You get all the glory of the Lamb brought into view when Babylon is cast down. You see the significance. The Lamb, the faithful and true witness, Whose blood was shed as a testimony against that which Babylon embodies and represents, setting aside these three great things in the testimony of Jesus. Wherever you look in this book of the Revelation and find the witnesses of Christ, you will find that they always are witnesses as to these very things - sin, righteousness and judgment - brought home to the consciences of men of the world, and they had to pay the price for it.

But that is not all. Babylon is cast down, the marriage of the Lamb is put into a parenthesis, and then what? You have Him coming forth, the rider upon the white horse, coming forth in this wonderful way to judge. An angel takes the seer up into an exceeding high mountain and says to him, "I will show thee the bride, the wife of the Lamb." And he took and showed him the New Jerusalem. Babylon cast down, fallen, shattered; the Lamb's bride comes into full view, the New Jerusalem. What is the Lamb's wife, what is the New Jerusalem? Oh, just the embodiment of these things - sin dealt with by the blood of the Lamb; righteousness established by the blood of the Lamb; judgment. Oh! There it is for Babylon and for the nations who reject the Lamb, but judgment is swallowed up in New Jerusalem. I say that only in passing, but it is significant that it is put in that way.

Well, the Lord Jesus related all this to Himself. Sin, righteousness and judgment: "Of sin, because they believe not on Me; of righteousness, because I go to the Father... of judgment, because the prince of this world hath been judged." All a personal matter where the Lord Jesus is concerned.

What is sin? What is the sin that has to be brought home to the consciences of men? What is it that is to be the effect of our presence here? Are we going about telling people that this is wrong and that is wrong and they ought not to do this and ought to do that? Never! You are only doing the very thing that we are saying must never be done: making the matter of righteousness a matter of more or less good in people. No, sin is this personal matter gathered right up in the One, the Lord Jesus. Of sin, because they do this, because they do that; because they don't do this and that and the other? No; *"they believe not on Me."* "Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world." Do you believe that? The whole sin question is bound up with that. The only thing that judgment will mean, the whole matter of dealing with the sin of this world, will be resolved into a very simple thing: What did you do with the Lamb of God? That is all. Not, how much sin did you commit, how many sins, few or many, but what did you do with the Lamb of God? "Of sin, because they believe not on Me."

"Of righteousness, because I go to the Father." No one has ever yet got to the Father only in so far as they corresponded with the nature of the Father. God will never have in His presence that which is not Himself in essence. That is, God can never have in His presence unrighteousness, but here then, He has gone to the Father. That means the Father is utterly satisfied and the whole question of righteousness is, "Are you satisfied with that which satisfies God? Has the Lord Jesus become to you what He is to the Father, the uttermost satisfaction?" That is the question of righteousness. After all, it is a simple one. What is He to me?

"Judgment, because the prince of this world hath been judged." He has judged the prince of this world; He has judged him as the fountain of iniquity, He has judged him unto eternal destruction. Well, is there complicity between you and that judged one? Have you forsaken him? Are you in the kingdom of Satan or have you abandoned that whole realm of darkness, that whole judged kingdom of Satan? Are you out in the only other place in God's universe - that is, with His Son? If not, then the judgment which lies upon Satan lies upon you. That is the awful thing. It is a personal matter: your relationship to the Lord Jesus. If your relationship with the Lord Jesus is not full and established, then you lie under a judgment which was never meant for you, a judgment which is Satan's judgment. That is the great issue of the gospel always - what is done when it has been made known that God sent His only beloved Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. "The faithful and true witness".

The Firstborn from the Dead

This second thing relates to what He is now. The first is what He was on the earth, "the faithful and true witness". Now, "the Firstborn from the dead". Listen to the word: Firstborn! If a thing is the first, then it does not stand alone. You would have to say the one and only. If it is a 'first', it is related; there are others to follow. Firstborn or first-begotten, then it is a new race by birth, birth out of death. A new race is introduced here over which death has no more power, if they are begotten out from the dead. Death has gone as far as it can go, death has exhausted itself, and now it has been overpowered; it has been broken into. Its power has been rent and destroyed and, by the Life which cannot see death, they, with the First-begotten, have been raised, made a new race by begetting from the dead, and the power of death can no longer touch them.

These are the themes of the book of the Revelation. You go right through the book and you find that it is all based upon this threefold statement about Him. You find that these three things of which we have spoken run right through the book and are bound up with it: the Blood, the Lamb, the testimony of Jesus right through, and then the first-begotten.

You see the race coming in, don't you? You see that new race round the throne: you hear them singing. What are they singing? "Unto Him that loveth us and washed us from our sins". And you see them there as a race triumphant over death, a people over whom death no longer has any power. You come right on to that glorious conclusion of the book of the Revelation, "I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven", and then, "and there shall be no more death". The First-begotten from the dead followed by this wonderful company, and death destroyed. That is something to contemplate in a time like this! That is the testimony of Jesus, and it is all because of the Blood. You see how closely linked all this is. "Jesus Christ, the faithful and true witness, the first-begotten of the dead, the ruler of the kings of the earth". "Unto Him that loveth us, and loosed us from our sins in His blood; and made us a kingdom, priests unto His God and Father".

Ruler of the Kings of the Earth

The Revelation brings this particular thing out in chapter 19, as we have indicated, "The ruler of the kings of the earth".

"And I saw the heaven opened; and behold, a white horse, and He that sat thereon called Faithful and True; and in righteousness He doth judge and make war. And His eyes are a flame of fire, and upon His head are many diadems; and He hath a name written which no one knoweth but He Himself. And He is arrayed in a garment sprinkled with blood: and His name is called The Word of God. And the armies which are in heaven followed Him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and pure. And out of His mouth proceedeth a sharp sword, that with it He should smite the nations: and He shall rule them with a rod of iron; and He treadeth the winepress of the fierceness of the wrath of God, the Almighty. And He hath on His garment and on His thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS" (Rev. 19:11-16).

This third thing is what He is going to be in manifestation. Firstly, what He was in humiliation; secondly, what He is now in exaltation; and then thirdly, what He is going to be in manifestation: Ruler of the kings of the earth, King of kings, and Lord of lords. It is good for us to have Him thus in view at a time like this. What does it say to your heart?

These are terrible times. Sin is raging, unrighteousness is rampant, and the forces in this world are very terrible. How iniquitous is the rule of the kings, the rulers of this world, and what mighty power they have! Satan certainly is giving his power to them and they are doing great and terrible things in the earth. But let us look off and catch a fresh glimpse of Him, the faithful and true Witness.

He has established this whole matter. His kingdom is founded in the fact, in the first place, that He has dealt with the sin question, the righteousness question, and the judgment question. That is all settled in the Lord Jesus for ever. Let us see that He is there representing this new race over which all this terrible death has no power. All that is taking place today will not be able to affect that glorious issue which is in the power of a deathless Life. We have that in us. And let us look and see Him over against the kings of the earth, the Ruler thereof. He comes forth to make war with the nations. The point is that virtually and ultimately, all this has got to reckon with Him and all that stands to oppose Him and what He has done is going down under His heel as He treads the winepress of the fierce wrath of Almighty God. Wonderful that that title of God is put in there, is it not? "The fierceness and wrath of Almighty God". He is coming out in that power to deal with this thing in the earth, and then when that is dealt with, the parenthesis is over, the marriage of the Lamb is come.

It is a great scene, and then it is as though heaven said, 'But wait a minute', and you have a break. At a certain point in chapter 19 you stop and the scene changes and you have to go over to verse 9, chapter 21, before the continuation is made. What is in the parenthesis? The coming forth of the white horse to deal with the nations; heaven says, "Wait a minute, before we can go on with this, there is something to be done", and so the Rider on the white horse and all the hosts of heaven follow Him to deal with this, and then the church can start her glorious career without any further interruptions from below. You go right on now. A new heaven, new earth; all this that would spoil is dealt with.

The Lord keep us in full view of Jesus Christ, the faithful and true Witness, the First-begotten from the dead, the Ruler of the kings of the earth!