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Pride and Its Undoing

by T. Austin-Sparks

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If I were asked to choose a text for what is on my heart I should have very great difficulty. I can only say to you that the whole Book is the text, so I give you the whole Bible as my text, and what I have on my heart I am going to present, in the first place, in the form of three propositions or questions.

Firstly: If there was one particular thing that was the cause of all the suffering, the misery, the trouble, the distress, the wars, and the necessity for God to stand back in reserve; would we not wish with all our being to be saved and delivered from that thing? There is such a thing, and I am quite sure that, if it really did come home to us that all that I have mentioned, and much more, from the beginning until now and to the end, was related to and bound up with that one thing, your answer to my question would be, 'The Lord save me from that! With all my heart, with all my being, I do seek to be delivered from that!' I am sure you agree.

Secondly: If there was one thing that gave God the ground for being toward us, free from fear and free from reserve on His part, so that His purposes could be realised, His power be released, His wisdom be active, fellowship with Him be unclouded, and His glory be resultant from our having been here on this earth; would we not with all our heart and with all our being say, 'Let that be in me!?' We certainly would be in very earnest and whole-hearted quest for that, would we not?

Thirdly: If that first thing should be in us, that first evil thing, and we could only be delivered from its power and its activity by a deep application of the Cross of the Lord Jesus, and ever deeper application, though it might cost suffering, breaking, emptying, humbling; would we not say that the

Lord would be justified in whatever course He took to bring that thing into subjection, making way in so doing for the other thing, really supplanting the evil thing by the other, the good thing; would we not justify God in His methods, in His way? If that were the end in view and He was moving toward that end, would we not say, 'The Lord is right, the Lord is justified'? Do you agree with that? Perhaps it is not so easy to say Yes here - but when we come to think about it, what is the alternative? The alternative is the loss of the one glorious thing, with its far fuller meaning than I have indicated, through the remaining of the other evil thing. These are the alternatives. Then is the Lord justified in what He does to displace the one and implant the other?

What is the one evil thing, the cause of all that we have mentioned, and very much more? It is *pride* - the root of all the trouble. What is the good thing? Well, just the opposite - *humility*. I started by saying that I gave you the Bible as my text, for the whole Bible is built upon this issue of pride or humility, with their twofold consequences. That is a big field in which to walk and meditate; but there is no doubt about it - wherever you look, from the day that man sinned to this day and to the end which the Bible gives us, you find it is just that issue which lies behind the whole history of God and man and the evil forces - just that issue. There are many aspects of it, but it comes to one question. In one way or another it can be traced to this question of pride or humility.

Yes, the whole Bible is built upon it. The whole meaning of Christ's coming into this world is bound up with it, His very coming from glory. Somewhere, somehow, before He arrived, He "emptied himself" (Phil. 2:7). He spoke to the Father later of the glory He had with Him before the world was (John 17:5). He had laid aside all that, He had emptied Himself. And then His strange - ah, yes, very strange until we have this key - His strange entry into this world, the circumstances of it all related to His coming and His whole time here. "*The foxes have holes, and the birds of the heaven have nests [lit. roosts]; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head*" (Matt. 8:20). It is all this one issue. Some tremendous thing is being fought out and dealt with, some immense thing. The whole meaning of His coming - His condescension, self-emptying, birth, life, death - and the whole explanation of the experiences of His people, is all centred in this one matter. The discipline - the chastening, as it is termed - the Lord's dealings with us, are centred in one thing: it is all related to the purpose for which Christ came, and how He came and how He accomplished the purpose.

And, further, the whole nature and vocation of the Church is centred in this one thing. The Church that is going to serve the eternal counsels of God will never be a Church of pride, self-glory, worldly glory, worldly power, worldly praise. It will be, ever and always, what it was at the beginning, something that the world will not look upon with praise, will always look upon with contempt. That is essential to its vocation, for its vocation is positively to displace the world, and its temper and spirit and standards; to do something spiritually in this universe - to rid it of that evil thing which has been its plague and curse from Adam onward.

It does not need any argument to show that the cause of wars, the cause of all the trouble, is pride - somewhere, somehow. No wonder then the phrase occurs - "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Rev. 13:8). This is not something subsequent, taking place late in the history of this world. From the foundation of the world the Lamb was slain. And if a lamb symbolizes anything at all, it symbolizes purity and innocence of motive, dependence, selflessness, weakness - all that from this world's standpoint of glory, greatness, power and wisdom is at a discount - and it is therefore not surprising that the Holy Spirit chooses to use the diminutive in relation even to a lamb. It is not apparent in our translation, but it is there quite clearly in the original - "a little Lamb" - a symbol of that which overcomes, fights out this battle from the foundation of the world. This issue is the cause

of all the trouble - the cause of God standing back, God in reserve, God unable to commit Himself, because of this thing here that is always ready to take hold of Him and make Him and His blessings serve its ends and glorify itself; that is always there ready to snap up the slightest goodness of the Lord and turn it to its own glory. It is there. And so the Lamb was slain from the foundation of the world.

And it does invest that proclamation of John with such full significance - "The Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). What is *the* sin of the world? It is pride. You may not think so; you may not see it: but I would ask you to consider again and see if all that is called sin cannot be traced to this, if it is not this in some form of expression. For what is the root of pride? What is pride? It is *selfhood* come to life, risen up, active - that is the root of pride; and the branches and the fruit - how many they are! - jealousy, covetousness, wrath, and all the rest. How is wrath pride? Well, wrath, if it is not holy, purified, blood-purged wrath like the wrath of the Lamb, if it is wrath which is actuated by ourselves and our interests, is the wrath of selfhood. So often our anger is our self-preservation, our reaction to some threat to our interests or our likes. Rebellion, stubbornness, prejudice, and much of our fear, are all traceable to pride. What are we afraid of? What are we fearing? If we examined our fears, why are we afraid? If we were utterly severed from the personal interest - that is, if we could hand entirely over to the Lord and get out of the picture ourselves - would not a lot of our fear go? And so we might go on: but we do not want to indulge in a wholesale analysis of human nature or of pride. We have mentioned enough to show that pride is the root and that there are countless fruits traceable to that root.

So, on the one side, it is terribly true: "Every one that is proud in heart is an abomination to the Lord" (Prov. 16:5). "The haughty he knoweth from afar" (Ps. 138:6). It all sprang out of that proud heart that lifted itself up and said, "I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; ...I will be like the Most High" (Isa. 14:13,14). With that *I*, all the trouble began, and that one bit his poison into the race. The poison of the human race is pride, and it has come all the way down. It is sometimes almost untraceable: we are not able always to trace it out in all its forms, because pride has what we might call negative aspects as well as positive. There are, of course, the obviously, manifestly proud, the ambitious, the assertive, the self-important, the self-sufficient. But there are negative aspects - and I use that word with regard to pride very carefully, because pride is positive whatever form it takes. It is an ugly thing. A lot of our murmuring is pride; a lot of tears are pride - we think they are humility. A lot of our criticism of other people springs from pride: we think we could do better, we could go one better, setting ourselves up as the judge, the critic: pride is at the root. Very much of our poor, miserable tone is, after all, pride. Oh, how subtle and serpentine a thing this is! It is there. So the Lord has to stand back.

On the other hand, look at humility. "To this man will I look" - that is the beginning, the Lord even looking in anyone's direction - "even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit" (Isa. 66:2), and He dwells with them (Isa. 57:15). And "the meek will he guide in judgement: and the meek will he teach his way" (Ps. 25:9). And "the meek shall inherit the earth" (Matt. 5:5). It is like that all the way through; vindication is on that basis. "Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth" (Num. 12:3): and you know when that was said - at the time when his position was disputed, and God appeared at the entrance of the tabernacle and answered the challenge on the ground of the meekness of His servant. God stands by and vindicates the meek.

I say the whole Bible is founded on this issue. What a vital matter this is! Is not the Lord justified in taking *any* steps to clear up that situation - breaking, emptying, humbling, withholding, deferring,

delaying; in any way bringing us to nought, to a place of utter dependence, where there is nothing we can rely upon at all but the Lord Himself? Is He justified? It is a tremendous process. It is a very real, very devastating work: and the very fact that we suffer so much shows how deep and real it is.

Yes, but you see the Lord has such great ends in view. It is not just that the Lord wants people of a certain kind and type; not just that He wants us to be of a certain nature. He created man for a great destiny, and this thing - pride - came in and made it impossible for man to fulfil that destiny. So He has secured it in a Man utterly different from us - the Lamb slain, the Man who emptied Himself, the Man who became obedient *unto death*, yes, such a death as the Cross, the last word in shame, in despicability and now He says to us, "Have this mind in you" (Phil. 2:5). I think the greatest conjunction in all the Bible is there. "Wherefore... God highly exalted him, and gave unto him the name which is above every name" (Phil. 2:9). "*Wherefore*" - all that leads up to that and all that issues from that. Two vast realms of meaning and value are linked by that conjunction, "wherefore". But - 'this is the way the Master went'. Well, we cannot do what He did, or fulfil all that He fulfilled, but we are called to drink of the cup which was His cup.

So may this be a word of interpretation as to why the Lord is dealing with us as He has and does - on the one hand, overcoming this evil thing, breaking, emptying, grinding to powder, until there is nothing of us left in the matter of self-sufficiency; on the other hand, giving Himself, increasing Himself.

Now this is not a word, perhaps, of great inspiration, but I feel it to be a word of very great importance. This must be true of us individually. There must also be a corporate humility. This is the way along which the Lord will commit Himself. He will never give us anything to feed our flesh, to enlarge and strengthen our natural life. He will hold us to the way that keeps us safe where that is concerned. How wonderfully the Bible becomes alive when you look at it in this way! It was Adam's sin, Israel's sin, the sin of us all. "By reason of the exceeding greatness of the revelations... that I should not be exalted overmuch, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, that I should not be exalted overmuch" (2 Cor. 12:7); that was making a man safe for great revelation, undercutting pride.

Yes, this is an important word; it explains a lot. But let us remember that the Lord always has positive ends in view, not negative. Though His ways may seem to be destructive, even annihilating ways, He has always in view - and not in the far view only, but as quickly as possible, as soon as possible - that position where He can Himself let go, so to speak, His own fears, His own reserves; and say, 'I have found that to which I can give Myself without fear'. May it be like that with us.