



The Online Library of T. Austin-Sparks

Published as a PDF by Austin-Sparks.net
Email: info@austin-sparks.net

In keeping with T. Austin-Sparks' wishes that what was freely received should be freely given and not sold for profit, and that his messages be reproduced word for word, we ask if you choose to share these messages with others, to please respect his wishes and offer them freely - free of any changes, free of any charge (except necessary distribution costs) and with this statement included.

Remembering and Forgetting

by T. Austin-Sparks

First published in "A Witness and A Testimony" magazine, Sep-Oct 1970, Vol. 48-5.

Reading: Deuteronomy 8.

"And thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God hath led thee..."

"Brethren, I count not myself yet to have apprehended, but one thing I do, forgetting the things which are behind, and stretching forward to the things that are before, I press on toward the goal, unto the prize of the on-high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:13-14).

"Thou shalt remember..." "Forgetting the things which are behind..." Remembering and forgetting!

In these two passages, which look like a contradiction (though we shall see that they are not), we have, firstly, an exhortation to grateful recollection. "Thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God hath led thee." Then there is an exhortation to profitable resume - gathering up the lessons for the future. And, finally, an exhortation to purposeful resolve: "Forgetting... I press on toward the goal."

In both places, Deuteronomy and Philippians, we have one particular point of likeness and similarity: they both mark a point of transition, or, if you like, of crisis. In the former case, a big change was about to take place, and all that Moses said, as you have read in this long chapter, was said in relation to that transition.

There was about to take place a change in leadership, which involved a change from a period of deep and drastic preparation, from a phase of pioneering the way and laying the foundations for the future, to a time of proving the value of all that had been and of taking up responsibility by means of it. It was a transition from a period of child-training, or what is called chastening, discipline, to the possession of the inheritance and an exercise of stewardship.

If you gather all those features together, you will see quite clearly that they represent the stages and phases of any normal Christian experience. A true Christian life or pilgrimage should be marked by those characteristics; it has its stages, which are Divinely-appointed economies for these different phases of the Christian life. At one time, certain things obtain, and are the governing, outstanding and quite conspicuous ways of the Lord. The time comes when these lose, or pass from, their particular place of prominence, and other things take their place. But within those changing economies there are always these two things that I have mentioned - preparation and fulfillment, or responsibility. There is the laying down of a ground, the providing by God of experience, of instruction, and then comes the point at which all that is going to be put to the test as to its real meaning to those concerned; and it will be put to the test as they are forced into the way of new responsibility.

It may be that this is the experience of an individual, and it very often is, for most of us can see the stages and phases of our Christian life as we have moved on through various crises, going from one phase to another. It may be true of a company of the Lord's people. It may be true of the whole Church. And at such a time, when the Lord brings us face to face with the issues of all that has been in the light of a new day, with its new demands and new responsibilities, there is a great value in remembrance. At such a time the Lord says: "Thou shalt remember."

There are two sides to the remembrance, or recollection. There is the human side. That is here in this chapter: "All the way which the Lord thy God hath led thee these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble thee, to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldst keep his commandments, or no." It was not, as we have often said, that the Lord did not know what was in their heart, and had to put them into situations to discover it, but more correctly: 'That He might make thee know.' The later statement about the basis of man's subsistence - "that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only" - can well govern this earlier statement: 'To make thee know what was in thine heart.' That is an essential uncovering and disclosure if there is going to be all that the Lord intends, and it is certainly the most painful experience, or part of life, when, under the hand of God, by His dealings, by His ways, by His methods and by His means with us we come more and more desperately to recognise what kind of people we really are. There is such disillusionment about ourselves if we were ever at all proud or self-sufficient, if we had any opinion of ourselves, or thought that we were anything. But this devastating uncovering of our true selves as God sees and knows them, while it is perhaps the most terrible aspect of a life under His hand, is absolutely essential to the purpose of God. There is no doubt about that; and there is no doubt that that is one of the things that the Lord does with a life when He gets it into His hands. Sooner or later He lays that life bare to itself so that it has no confidence in the flesh whatever. 'To make thee know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldst keep His commandments, or not.' And what was the verdict upon the forty years in the wilderness? It was 'No!' They were not capable of doing it in themselves, and they proved to themselves and to everybody else that it was not in them to do it. 'And thou shalt remember that!'

Too easily, in the day of blessing, as the chapter goes on to show, we forget that work of humbling,

of emptying, of breaking, which the Lord did as a part of the very foundation of everything. That is human nature, how we are made, so the word comes with tremendous emphasis:

"Thou *shalt* remember." There are very many of those phrases with God: 'Thou shalt... thou shalt...!', and this is one of His imperatives: "Thou *shalt* remember!" You must keep in mind always that the foundation of everything is your own unworthiness of anything at all. You will never, never come to appreciate all the grace and mercy of God, all His goodness and kindness, His patience, His longsuffering and His forbearance (of which the forty years are such a history) unless you have come to realise what Paul said of himself, that 'in me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing. There is no merit for this in me.' Thou shalt remember that side!

But then, over against the human side of self-discovery, so much weakness, so much failure, so much shame and breaking down, there is the Divine side. Oh, what a story of faithfulness on God's part! The faithfulness of God is magnified as the true nature of man is revealed under His hand. 'Thou shalt remember...' that, while it was true that you could not be relied upon, depended upon, at all, that you failed at every point of testing and of trying, and that you proved yourself to be utterly worthless under every trial, God did not give you up; God did not abandon you; God did not wash His hands of you. He remained faithful. "The Lord, merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in loving-kindness" is written large on the, so to speak, Divine banner over all the tribes for forty years. 'Thou shalt remember... His infinite patience, His infinite long-suffering!' This is the foundation, and is, as I have said, necessary whenever it is the Lord's purpose to lead into something more of His glory and honour. It is a work of bringing home two things: that we are not *the* people, and better than any others; and that God is infinitely merciful to the poorest stuff of humanity.

The Forward Look

Paul, in the passage in Philippians, is also at a point of transition. As we know, when he wrote that letter he was in prison. He felt that the time of his departure was at hand, and he did not know from day to day whether he would be led out to his death. He had hopes that there might be an extending, but he was writing as though the end was very near. So it was a time of transition for him and for the churches. The leadership was changing, and all that had come in by way of the pioneering, the foundation-laying, the teaching and the training, was now to give place to the proof of its value by those to whom it had been given.

Paul knew that his course was run: 'I have finished my course; I have kept the faith', and yet for him it was not the end by any means. I think it was very wonderful that Paul did not close down at that point and say: 'This is the end!' Instead, it was: 'Even if I have only got another hour, another day, another week, *I press on*. I am not closing down now; I am going on!' And why? Because as Moses had done, he had seen far, far more ahead than ever had been before, far more than that which lay behind, and because that which lay ahead far outweighed all that he had come into thus far, even after all those years.

You see, these are the two great lessons of life. Where does hope lie? Negatively, you have to say: 'Well, looking at myself, as I now see myself in the light of God's uncovering of everything, I have to say: "There is no hope there! There is no hope in me! I have proved that I am hopeless in this realm of things."' And that is what Paul was referring to when he said: 'Forgetting...' What was it about which he said: 'Forget...'? Look at the chapter again and you will see. It was all the things in which there was no hope. He was recounting those things which he said, '*were* gain to me' in the old life, all

the things that made up this world for him in the past, and was saying: 'I have come to see that these things were no ground of hope at all. I have come to see that, though I may have had everything to which people in this world aspire, things that men are ambitious to get, there is no hope at all in them.' That is the great lesson of life, on the one side - to discover where there is no hope and to leave it. Leave the hopeless ground! Forget it! Oh, for this grace of forgetfulness, in this matter at any rate! Forgetfulness is a great trouble to some of us as we get older. But here is something which we are bidden to forget.

And on the other side, of course, we have to learn where hope lies. What is the ground of hope? And here Paul is but the counterpart of Moses. Moses is bringing into view the land - the wonderful land flowing with milk and honey, with all its wealth, all its fruitfulness, all its depth and fulness. All that was in view. And now today we know that all that was but a prophetic pointer to the spiritual. We have heard hundreds of times, perhaps, that that land depicts, typically, Christ, the 'heavenly country'; Christ, in whom all the fullness dwells. Hear Moses talking about the riches and wealth in the land, and then hear Paul crying: "O the depth of the riches...!" Oh, the fullness he had seen in Christ! The land and Christ are part and counterpart. Where is the hope to deliver Moses and Israel from despair? It lies in Christ: "Christ in you the hope of glory." What is the hope with Paul? Well, his outlook was not too inspiring, you know. He had many things that made up a ground of very real depression: 'All they that be in Asia be turned from me', and then he mentioned different ones who had left him. And then, looking at himself in his situation, it was not too inspiring from the natural point of view. He was shut up in prison, tied to his chain, and reduced to pen and paper, but he was not for a moment cast down or depressed. Why? Because he had seen how much more there is in the Lord Jesus than he had ever attained unto. Christ is bigger than it all. His Christ is bigger than everything, bigger than all the accumulated discouragements, so he says: 'I have counted everything as loss, as refuse, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him...' - "Forgetting the things which are behind, and stretching forward to the things that are before, I press on towards the goal unto the prize of the on-high calling of God in Christ Jesus." There is the hope, and that saves from despair.

I wonder, dear friends, if this is all words to you? What would be your salvation in a time of severe trial, disappointment, discouragement, opposition, perhaps of disillusionment? I suggest to you that it is that the Christ whom you have seen and come to know is bigger than all that. You just cannot give up everything because of the difficulties, for what you have seen of Christ is so real. It is not theory, nor mere teaching. It is not mere verbiage. No, it is your own heavenly vision. You have seen, and what you have seen you just cannot un-see. What has come to you you cannot let go as some mere thing, for it is your life. And when I say 'it', I mean Him. What the land was to Moses Christ was to Paul - very, very real, very wonderful and very great. And that was hope in a day when it might well have been despair and deep depression.

So, what is it? It is the fullness of Christ that has got a grip on the heart, is pulling at the heart strings and drawing on, getting through the transition, and disappointment, of sorrow, of anguish, and of all that into which we have been brought in those training ways of God when it would have been so easy to give it all up - if it were not that we have *seen* the Land; that we have been to Pisgah's mountain, and viewed the Land; that we have had some revelation of Jesus Christ to our hearts that just cannot be given up as something that does not work, and does not matter.

"That I may know *Him!*" says Paul in this chapter. That is not the quest of a beginner, but of a man at the end of a long and full life of learning Christ. Here, at the end, with that so full and rich knowledge of his Lord, gained through all the years of training, he says, in effect: 'My knowledge of the Lord is

such that I see far beyond my present attainment and experience. I see that He is far, far greater than anything to which I have yet come.' So it is that he says: "That I may know him!"

There does come a time in the Christian life when the Lord says: 'Now, look here, I have been dealing with you. I have been making you know and understand very much, and now the time has come when all that is going to be put to the test as to its real value. Have you learnt the lessons? What do they amount to now in your being able to take responsibility in spiritual things?' Those crises arise from time to time. They are very real, for a new phase of things is breaking upon the people of God. I do not think I am wrong if I say that the time has begun when the people of God are going to be put to the test as to their inheritance, as to what they have received from the Lord.

Now, let us gather up all the values of our past experience of the Lord and His past dealings with us and bring them to this resolve:

'I press on... I press on... I press toward the goal of the prize of the on-high calling of God in Christ Jesus.'

I wonder if we can come to that resolve! Individually, you may have been in the fires and have been having a pretty hard and painful time in your spiritual life, but that only means that God has been preparing you for something more. No, God is not a God who believes in bringing everything to an end. He is always after something more. He is made like that, if I can put it so. Something more, and then something more - that is God! And if He has to clear the way for something more by devastating methods, well, that is all right, for it is something more that He is after. There is so much more, far, far transcending all our asking or thinking.

I said that individually you may have been in the fires, but it may also be as a company. The Lord does deep, deep ploughing, but it is always in order to do deep sowing. He wants a harvest, a crop, and His past dealings, though they may seem to have been devastating, are only in the light of that so much more that He would have. But there must be this resolve to go on, and not give up: 'I am going on, by the grace of God. I press toward the goal!'

May that spirit be found in us!