



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.

The Earthly Man and the Heavenly Man

by T. Austin-Sparks

First published in "A Witness and A Testimony" magazine, May-June 1951, Vol. 29-3.

"Jesus... said... Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born from above (R.V.M.), he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3).

These words and nearby verses are used almost exclusively in speaking to the unsaved, and, of course, originally they so applied. But I am remembering that John wrote this many decades after the incident. The aged apostle, who outlived all the other apostles, went right back to that early time and wrote this, not for the unsaved but for the Church. John's writings are undoubtedly for the Church, and he wrote for the Church, "*Except a man be born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*" I do not mean, of course, that he said to the Church that it had to be born again, but he was laying down something of primary importance for Christians. You will notice that I have quoted the marginal rendering of the Revised Version, "born from above," because the original Greek word used here is the same as in verse 31 - "He that cometh from above is above all." It is an unusual thing to speak to Christians on that text, but the fact is that, in one way or another and in varying degrees, the whole of the New Testament is about that which is born from above - the nature of it, what it is, what it does, how it should behave, and everything else. That is a sweeping statement, but it will stand investigation.

Let us read a section of the Word, ignoring the very unfortunate chapter division, which of course was not in the original documents. We go back to what is verse 24 of chapter 2 and on to verse 13 of chapter 3.

"Jesus did not trust himself unto them, for that he knew all men, and because he needed not that any one should bear witness concerning man; for he himself knew what was in man. Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: the same came unto him, by night, and said to him,

Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God; for no man can do these signs that thou doest, except God be with him. Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born from above he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter a second time into his mother's womb, and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born from above. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the voice thereof, but knowest not whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit. Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be? Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou the teacher of Israel, and understandest not these things? Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and bear witness of that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness. If I told you earthly things and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you heavenly things? And no man hath ascended into heaven, but he that descended out of heaven, even the Son of man, which is in heaven."

Two Men - The Earthly and The Heavenly

Now, in that section, we have two persons face to face, an earthly and a heavenly. One word is used of them both, the word 'man.' "Jesus did not trust himself ("commit himself" A.V.) unto them, for that he knew all men, and because he needed not that any one should bear witness concerning man; for he himself knew what was in man. Now there was a man..." I do not want to pass over anything without its force striking you. That John put in that word 'now' is tremendously significant. For some time I puzzled over the place of Nicodemus in the Gospel by John. John in his summary said he had written his Gospel with the one object of showing that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (John 20:31), and I could not see how Nicodemus fitted into that, but that little word 'now,' linking with what had just been said and what follows, is a key. "Now there was a man..." Then as we go on we find that this word 'man' is used of Christ, the "Son of man." That title occurs some eighty-eight times in the New Testament, eighty-four of which are found in the Gospels, and eleven of these in this Gospel by John. Forgive this detail, but it is important. Thus John wrote, "Now there was a man," and then later he began to speak about Jesus as the Son of man, or to record His sayings concerning Himself as the Son of man. You will see something very important in that connection in a minute or two. This title is used of others besides Christ in the Bible, but whenever it is used of anyone else it is always without the article - 'son of man'; but when it refers to Christ, it has the definite article - "the Son of man."

The Earthly Man Represented by Nicodemus

You have, then, two people called 'man,' and they are facing one another. On this side is the earthly man. Jesus does not commit Himself unto him. He knew all men in that category, knew what was in that kind of man, what he was made of, how he was constituted, what he was capable of. It is to that earthly man that these other words relate, "There was a man...", and John is really saying and meaning, 'Now there was an earthly man named Nicodemus.' "That which is born of the flesh is flesh"; that is the earthly man. So in verse 13 again, "No man hath ascended into heaven" - that is the earthly man. Perhaps you say, 'Well now, that is doubtful; Elijah did and Enoch did.' But the exactness of the Greek here has this force - 'No man of himself hath ascended into heaven.' Elijah did not of himself, nor did Enoch of himself; but this One, this heavenly Man, ascended Himself. Not so the earthly man - 'no man of himself.' Verse 19 - "This is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness." This again shows us the earthly man. Verse 27 - "A man can receive nothing, except it have been given him from heaven." The earthly man 'cannot' - he has no capacity for heavenly things. Thus we note some of the features of the earthly man - what he is

made of, how he is not going to be trusted by heaven, what his limitations are, what he cannot do of himself, what he cannot receive of himself. 'There was an earthly man.'

The Lord Jesus, The Heavenly Man

On the other side, there is the heavenly Man. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." "Born from above." Verse 12 - "If I told you earthly things, and ye believe not how shall ye believe, if I tell you heavenly things? And no man hath ascended into heaven, but he that descended out of heaven, even the Son of man, *which is in heaven*." Here is the heavenly Man. Verses 16 and 17 - "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son" - the heavenly Man, given from heaven. "God sent not the Son into the world to judge the world" - God *sent His* Son. Verse 31 - "He that cometh from above is above all." Then, of course, you want to read all those other passages which are recorded later on. Take chapter 6, for example. "I am come down from heaven" (verse 38); "I am the bread which came down out of heaven" (verses 41 and 51). You know how much there is of it there, and especially verse 62 - "What then if ye should behold the Son of man ascending *where he was before?*"

The Earthly Man at His Best

An earthly man and the heavenly Man standing face to face - two representative men. Look at Nicodemus. There is a touch of genius (speaking naturally) about this thing in John's selecting Nicodemus and putting him in here - let us say rather there is the genius of the Holy Spirit. Here we have Nicodemus, a representative earthly man. As to his nation, he belongs to the nation that was chosen of God out of all the nations, to whom belonged the oracles and the covenant, a nation peculiarly and particularly related to God (Rom. 3:2; 9:4-5). As to his sect, he is a Pharisee. 'Pharisee' is a Hebrew word which means separated by specific beliefs and practices. Within the chosen and particular nation, the Pharisees were a particularly religious people or sect - you may say the very core of the elect nation; very strict, as we know, in their tithing, in their eating and drinking, their washings and rites; and they held very strictly to the belief in the natural immortality of the soul; yet Jesus says to this representative Pharisee, "Except a man be born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God." As to his position, he is a ruler of the Jews, that is, a member of the National Council, the Sanhedrin. As to his character, he is not a man to be despised. He is a man to be honoured, a perfectly honest man. He is mentioned three times by John. The second occasion is when he raises the question of right procedure in the Council - "Doth our law judge a man, except it first hear from himself and know what he doeth?" (John 7:51). The third time is when beloved friends were bringing their spices to the tomb, and it says, "And there came also Nicodemus, he who at the first came to him by night, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pound weight" (John 19:39). He is out in the open now, in plain honesty. Yet as to his spiritual condition, he is blind, ignorant and helpless. "Art thou the teacher of Israel, and understandest not these things? ...We speak that we do know, and bear witness of that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness. If I told you earthly things and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you heavenly things?" Blind, ignorant, helpless - that is this representative man, the earthly man at his best in every way.

Features of the Heavenly Man

Then by contrast we have the heavenly Man. His nationality is from heaven. "He that cometh from above is above all" - above all sects, above all laws and regulations, above all ritual; that is what John is bearing out throughout the whole Gospel. His position is one of Divine authority; "the Father... hath given all judgment unto the Son" (John 5:22). "As the Father raiseth the dead and quickeneth them, even so the Son also quickeneth whom he will" (John 5:21). His character also is Divine. With

regard to His spiritual condition as over against that of Nicodemus, there is one word that sums up so much - "knowing." Nicodemus was blind, ignorant, helpless. Here is the Lord Jesus just the opposite - knowing, and, because knowing, never being at a loss, never in a quandary, never brought to an impasse. He knew all men, He Himself knew what was in man. "If I tell you heavenly things...", meaning that He could, He knew them. "We speak that which we do know."

Now for the real point of this, we must go back to chapter 1:48-49. "Nathanael saith unto him, Whence knowest thou me?Thou art the Son of God." In the Bible this attribute of knowing man is restricted to God alone. It is attributed only to Jehovah. You remember the words of Jeremiah - "I the Lord search the heart, I try the reins (Jer. 17:10); 'I, the Lord, know.' It is an attribute of God alone, to know man in this way. "Whence knowest thou me? ...Thou art the Son of God."

Now you see what I meant when I said John puts two things together. Jesus is the Son of God; Jesus is the Son of man. The Son of man is the Son of God. Because He has Divine attributes. He knew all men. You notice that this knowledge is both universal and individual. He knew all men, and knew what was in man (or "the man" - R.V. margin); "all men," universal, and "the man," individual. This characteristic of Deity was the thing which was constantly manifesting itself, for in this Gospel by John this word 'to know' in this sense occurs more than fifty times. It was constantly coming out - this that men would call His uncanny knowledge, His supernatural insight. He was never at a loss for want of knowing what to do. He would test His disciples on this very thing. "This he said to prove him: for he himself knew what he would, do" (John 6:6). He was always precipitating impossible situations, and pushing them on to His disciples, and saying in effect, 'What are you going to do about that?' 'We cannot do anything. Two hundred pennyworth of bread will not go very far in a crowd like this!' It was ever a discovery of helplessness because they did not know. And then He would do what was needed, for He knew. Here is the heavenly Man over against the earthly.

The Two Men - Irreconcilable Differences

Now, how are we going to bring this together for a present application? We are brought face to face with these two persons, one representative of the earthly at its best, the other God's only acceptable Man - the only One Who stands with God, yet representative of that new race in Himself which God could receive with favour. He is alone with God, and all other men stand apart. Therefore, except you be born from above, you can neither see nor enter the kingdom of God. There is a great divide between these two men, and it cannot be bridged by argument, by discussion, nor by any kind of explanations sought by Nicodemus. It is a great divide caused by irreconcilable differences, and you cannot bridge it. There is the man who 'cannot.' That word 'cannot' is final - "he cannot see." That man is the earthly man. But there is the Man Who 'can', the heavenly Man. John is showing all the way through this Gospel that when no one else can, Jesus can!

The Two Men in the Individual Christian

Now our point is not just the fact of the difference, nor the fact that we must be born from above, but it is the nature of the difference. At that point, everything begins for the Christian. There is nothing at all for you until you have been born from above; but that is only the beginning. I doubt whether any of us has got very far yet in the recognition and understanding of the difference between these two men, and until we do understand that and mark the differences, we shall get nowhere in the Christian life. You and I are still far more earthly and far less heavenly as Christians than we ought to be. The great divide between our natural and our spiritual life is not nearly so clearly marked as it should be; and that opens the place for the understanding of God's strange ways with us.

When we get into the realm of the Holy Spirit's activities through being born of the Spirit, we get into the realm of the greatest reality. Let us make no mistake about this, it is terrible reality. You cannot play with flesh, you cannot tolerate the natural life, if you have come into the realm of the Spirit's activity. Carelessly, knowingly, persistently, habitually, admit there any of the earthly, and you meet no other than very God Himself. That is the reality of this difference. You at once begin to discover that you cannot get on. There is a wall, there is a barrier, you are brought to a standstill when you admit any of the earthly into what is essentially the heavenly. These two are so utterly put asunder in God's sight, that, as far as He is concerned, this natural 'cannot,' may not; there is no playing with it. The very first thing is to recognise the impossibility of the natural being brought into the spiritual, the earthly into the heavenly. That will explain all the confoundings. Nicodemus is confounded when he comes face to face with the heavenly Man, and if we are on natural, earthly ground in any respect, we are going to be confounded in that respect by reason of our relationship with the Lord Jesus.

The Earthly Man to Diminish

Hence the strange dealings of God with us. What are they all about? What do they mean? We have to recognize there is reality, we cannot get away from it. Sometimes we would like to run away from the reality, it is so real; God is so real, things are so real. They are working out according to principle. By His strange, mysterious ways with us, His deep dealings, God is winding up the earthly, bringing it to an end, in order to make us those who are heavenly. "Born from above," not only as a necessary beginning, but with a view to going on to fulness of growth and manhood, conformed to the image of His Son; and the course of God's dealings with us is, on the one hand, to confound us in our natural earthly life, and write over it, Impossible! We are made to know that in spirit, in soul, in body, we have no power of ourselves, no attributes, no qualifications, for knowing or doing heavenly things. At our best, we are helpless, blind and in the dark. But that is the negative side.

On the positive side, God is working mysteriously and strangely to bring us into heavenly things, in knowledge and understanding. If you cannot say that is true about you as a Christian, well, look into it, there is something seriously wrong. But it is true that we as children of God do know things that others do not know. We do know - even though it be only in a small measure - what the natural man does not know, and our knowledge of things spiritual and heavenly is growing, very gradually perhaps, but none the less growing. By deep, dark, mysterious, painful ways, we are moving through into a realm where we are coming to see what we never could have seen and what no one could ever see but by a passage through death and being born from above. Oh, we cannot explain all God's methods, we cannot give an answer to all the why's of God's Ways, but what we do know is that we are passing through into a realm that is altogether new in the matter of knowledge, a realm that is different, that is other. All the values of God are of this kind. We cannot bring our natural mind to the things of God and give them interpretation with any spiritual value. However much we study the Bible, it is closed for real spiritual value to every one who has not gone through death to a heavenly new birth. Spiritual knowledge waits upon that. But we must understand this great divide - that these two men are totally different, and there is no companionship, no fraternising between Nicodemus and Jesus: there is no fellowship, there is no understanding: they belong to two worlds, they cannot speak one another's language. Even when One from heaven gives heavenly meanings into earthly things, the earthly man cannot see the heavenly meanings.

The Heavenly Man The Only Real Testimony

Now the Lord is going to get rid of the difference where we are concerned. "Ye must be born from above", and then the differences begin to go. The things which lock us up, which limit us, will go;

things which are impossible are even now becoming the very things of our normal life. We are learning; but oh, it is a deep way, because this earthly man is so deeply rooted, he is always cropping up in some way or other. Understand what God is doing. He is so working in us that, as we move on through this life and then leave it behind, the one remaining impress will be, not how much we have done or said, nor what our activities have been, but that a heavenly man, a heavenly woman, has been here. The value of that is inestimable. That is the explanation of God's dealings with us. If you forget all else that I have said, do not forget that. The one consequence that God is after is to leave such an impress by our having been on this earth - something has come from heaven and registered its heavenliness here in this world. Oh, it may have been rejected, the reactions to it may have been violent: the more heavenly it is, perhaps the more violent will be the reactions to it. That is what John says about the Lord Jesus, but that does not alter the fact that Jesus passed through this world and left the impress of a heavenly Man; and that is the whole argument of the New Testament in every part - that believers are to be here, not for this or that or some other incidental thing, but to leave the impress of heaven here: that God should have a witness here: that heavenly things, things of eternity, things of the Spirit, are the things which matter. Do not think that it is a matter of how much preaching or teaching you do or Christian work in which you engage. Those things may be accompaniments, but if there is not the presence of Christ, the heavenly Man, in those concerned, and in what they do and in what they say, and if the one remaining thing when they have passed on is not, 'We recognised the Lord in that man, that woman': if that is not the result, we have missed the meaning of Christianity. Christianity is that. Therefore you must be born from above, because that alone brings in what is of heaven.