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## The Living God (1938)

*by T. Austin-Sparks*

*First published in "A Witness and A Testimony" magazine, Jan-Feb 1938, Vol. 16-1.*

*"And Joshua said, Hereby ye shall know that the living God is among you... Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth passeth over before you into the Jordan." Josh. 3:10-11.*

*"For they themselves report... how ye turned unto God from idols, to serve a living and true God" 1 Thess. 1:9.*

*"How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish unto God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?" Heb. 9:14.*

*"And it shall be, that in the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not my people, There shall they be called sons of the living God." Rom. 9:26.*

*"...ye are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in tables that are hearts of flesh... And what agreement hath a temple of God with idols? for we are a temple of the living God..." 2 Cor. 3:3; 6:16.*

*"For to this end we labor and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, specially of them that believe." 1 Tim. 4:10.*

*"Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." Matt. 16:16.*

*"...that thou mayest know how men ought to behave themselves in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth." 1 Tim. 3:15.*

*"But ye are come unto mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable hosts of angels... Take heed, brethren, lest haply there shall be in any one of you an evil heart of unbelief, in falling away from the living God." Heb. 12:22; 3:12.*

Without attempting to touch in detail on all these passages, every one of which deals with a different aspect of practical relationship with the living God, we shall seek to gather the whole matter up into a small compass, and bring it down to some simple, direct, precise application.

### **The Living One**

In the first place we recognise the fact that *the God with whom we have to do is a living God*. Perhaps that does not sound very wonderful, very fresh, but I believe that with regard to that, as to everything else, it is possible to wake up to the realisation of a meaning from which we have been very largely estranged.

The God with whom we have to do is a living God! As these passages indicate, and as perhaps most of us have had reason to know, that fact has two sides and conveys two meanings. On the one side it is a fact of infinite comfort to the honest in heart. To begin with, when we turn to Him in honesty of heart it is perhaps the greatest thing to know that we are turning to a living and true God. Of the Thessalonians we read that they turned from idols "to serve a living and true God". The Apostle was glorying in what that meant amongst those believers, for these letters to the Thessalonians are nothing if they are not letters of life. Read them with that thought in mind alone, and you will find that they throb with life. There are all the marks of a living experience, a joyous experience, an overflowing experience - yes, overflowing! so much so that the overflow reached far, far afield, and their faith was spoken of in all the churches. It was not necessary for the Apostle to refer to them, and that because through them the word went out far and wide. It meant something to them to discover that it was not to another religion, not to another system of teaching, not to another association of people, but to a living God that they were turning; not to things, but to a living Person.

It entirely depends upon our apprehension of the Lord as to what our testimony is. If we are turning to teaching, to tradition, to interpretations, to human associations, to Christianity, we are going to miss something, but if we are turning to the living God, in the realisation that He is the living God, we are going to come into life; everything is going to be all living in our experience right from the beginning.

It is not unnecessary to say a thing like that. We said at the outset we wake up, and some of us awoke too late. The thing that kept us asleep - though we did not know we were asleep, except that there was a restlessness, a sense of dissatisfaction, a turning from side to side, and a sighing and groaning - was the fact that we had been associated with Christianity and the things of the people of God from so early in our lives. Our Christianity and our relationship with the Lord was something into which we were brought in infancy, and it had all become a matter of a system of the things of the Lord around us, with which we were quite familiar. We had been taught to say prayers, and go to meetings, and so on. One day we awoke to the fact that this God was a living God. We had been associated with Him in a way for a long time, but He was not personal to us, not a living God.

Forgive me for going back to such an elementary stage, if it is necessary to ask forgiveness, for it is just possible there are some among us whose relationship is of that kind. Maybe you are associated with things related to the Lord, but what about this question of your own personal, inward enjoyment of the living God, of His really being to you a living Person? We must begin back there, and all this is nothing to you unless the Holy Spirit has made it real, or does make it real, in your

experience. I do know that it is true to fact in the life of a great many, that the day comes when, though they have been associated with the things of the Lord for a long time, they suddenly wake up to the fact that the Lord is a living Person. That contains so much for us as we come to realise it. It means everything to us from every point of view. We are the Lord's now! We know the Lord! But, oh, we pass into experiences, and into times which are so difficult, so mysterious, so full of shadows and clouds. We go through periods of deep trial, when everything seems to be in eclipse, and it is all so long-drawn-out; the demand for patience is so great; so much time is being taken, that very often we draw near to the point where we almost feel that, so far as we are concerned, the Lord is not the living God.

### **The Purpose of Trial**

So I want to say to those who are tried, to those who are under a cloud, to those who may be tested at this time in that way, that the God with whom you have to do is a living God. He knows exactly what He is doing. You have to do with a living God, and that living God has you in hand, although you do not know it, do not realise it at the moment. You are not forgotten. If this is a living God with whom we have come into relation in Jesus Christ, then He knows all about us, and has His eye upon us; and, what is more, He has a direct interest in us and concern for us; He is not dead to our interests, but very much alive to us. What we are passing through is not an indication of His having forgotten us, abandoned us, or of His having ceased to be, so far as we are concerned; He is dealing with us in the way which is most of all calculated to reach His end. He is the living God.

That can be said on more than one basis of authority. You can go through the Word of God and follow the life story of many of His servants and see that they had good opportunity, had they so desired, to consider that God was not; that if God was, then they had been abandoned by Him; everything in their experience, in their life, in their affairs seemed to say that they had been abandoned, or that God was dead. But you follow through the story, and you find that the sequel always shows that at the time when it seemed to them that God was most far off, outside of their world, He was most active in what He was doing, most directly bound up with their affairs, securing some state, some condition, some position in them which was fitting them for a position of trust, and of honour, and of fruitfulness. Although to them it seemed just the opposite, all the time in their very history He was the living God in truth. You have that made perfectly clear in the Word of God.

There are those of us who also know that in our experience there are times when it seems that God - to use the words of one in the Word of God - "had forgotten to be gracious". But we are able to look back upon those very times to see that, although we knew it not, God was very active indeed, doing something very deep, and today we are living in the value of that. God had not left us. We had to do with the living God, and the living God had to do with us. That is simple again, but let us store it up against a time of need. In so many ways this fact should be of infinite comfort to the honest in heart. The living God is the One with whom we have to do.

### **The Note of Warning**

But there is the other aspect, and we must not leave it on one side in a desire not to touch on unpleasant things; we must be faithful. This statement occurs in the Word of God accompanied, as you notice, by a shadow on more than one occasion. "Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any one of you an evil heart of unbelief, in turning away from the living God". Take heed! It is a word of warning.

Now notice the connection. If you look at the third chapter of the letter to the Hebrews you will see that the point in view was that full purpose of God which He had fixed for His people. The illustration was taken from the life of Israel in the wilderness in view of the land. God's purpose for Israel was their coming to the land, with all its fulness, all its riches and its wealth, and its blessing, but through unbelief they fell short of the land and died in the wilderness. You see the designation "the living God" is used in that connection, which surely means, if it means anything at all, that the very fact that He is the living God signifies that His purpose and desire for His own is all that He can give - fulness! That is what is bound up with a living God. These other gods are always taking away, always robbing, always impoverishing. The gods of the heathen, the gods of the world are robber gods, they would rob you of everything. This living God is supremely characterised by His giving, and ever giving. "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son..."; He "who delivered him up for us all, shall he not also with him freely give us all things". The mark of the living God is beneficence, fulness of thought, and desire, and Purpose, and will for His own, to bring them in. To fall away from the living God means to fall away from all that He has purposed, designed and desired for us, and hence the word of warning.

But let us note this. The Word does not say, Take heed, brethren, lest you fall away from the blessing, lest you miss the good. The words used are "turning away from the living God". All our blessing is bound up with Himself. He is our blessing. In other words, to know Him as the living God is life eternal. "This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou didst send". To know Him as the living God is fulness of blessing. So the warning is lest we, through unbelief, turn away from the living God. It is the question as to God that arises in the heart, the question, the doubt as to God, that robs us. Then the blessing is gone, because in doubting God we rear a fence between Him and ourselves.

Ah, but there is a still more solemn word in this connection. "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God". That is the second passage with a shadow upon it. Now let us be solemn and quite frank. You and I have not to deal with men in the final issue. We have not to reckon with people, with teaching, as such, with places, with any *thing*; if you or I refuse truth, refuse light, withhold obedience, hide something from the Lord; if you and I are in any way unfaithful, it is with the living God that we have to do. It was a startling thing to Achan when his hidden, secret sin was tracked right down in that amazing way. Look at the hundreds of thousands in Israel, and one man among the hundreds of thousands does something which God had to uncover. That man sees an inquiry set up, and watches it being narrowed down from the multitude to the tribe, from the tribe to one of the families in the tribe, until his own personal tent is reached, and he, one man in hundreds of thousands, comes under the finger of God. Achan perhaps thought that he could default in the midst of so big a crowd and it would not be noticed, that he could deceive the elders of Israel and not be discovered. Achan had forgotten that it was the living God with whom he had to do. Such a thing becomes an occasion for that solemn warning, that we should be reminded that "it is an awful thing to fall into the hands of the living God".

You and I, if we are honest, need never fall into the hands of the living God in that way, but the point is that anything and everything that is secret in our lives, which represents sin, disobedience, refusal of light, anything that is not of God, brings us into the hands of the living God; it is with Him that we have to do sooner or later. Oh no, you have not even to reckon in the first or last place with those who are in authority over you in the Lord. The most blessed relief comes to such to recognise this, and it is a relief to us all to know it, that the responsibility in the final issue is with God, and that every one has to reckon with God. It is a terrible and yet a helpful thing, a thing which is a strength to us even when we give the Lord's message, to know that people have not to answer to us. They may take an attitude over that message toward the one who gives it, and say, Oh, that is only so-

and-so's interpretation, it is only what he says! Well, you do not get away with it like that. If that should happen to be the truth of God, it is not with the preacher that you have to reckon, it is with the living God.

That brings a terrible responsibility upon us all. Let us remember that for all that the Lord gives us, it is to a living God that we have to answer. Oh, the Lord is looking right into our hearts, and He knows. It is impossible for us to deceive Him. It cannot be done. He knows our inward hearts. He knows our home and what is going on there. He knows us in our business life. He knows us in our relationships with one another, just what we are and what is make believe. Sooner or later we are going to come up against the Lord on every point of hypocrisy, deception, sin.

Now it entirely depends upon our attitude toward the Lord whether the fact that He with whom we have to do, is a living God, is one which brings us comfort, or whether it strikes terror into our hearts. This word must be said. The Lord knows who it is for. You and I are dealing with the living God. That is a blessed fact, but it is also an awful fact. So let us always remember that there is nothing secret, nothing hidden, nothing that we can cover from Him. We cannot take a false position. There is a living God on the spot all the time, who sees right through it all, and presently He will say: Now, let us have that mask off; let us have that attempt at self-deception put aside; let us face this thing out. I know all about it! I have known about it all along; you have never been able to cover it from Me for a moment! He is the living God. That word "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" is a terrible word for those who fight God, and I think it is especially meant for such as oppose themselves to God.

Think of what is going on in this world today. I have been reading a book called "The War Against God". The whole history of long centuries of war against God is given, and it shows how that is developing today to such a tremendous extent that whole nations are making it their one object to throw God out of the world, to get rid of God, to have nothing of God in their national life. Well, that is one side of this thing, and it does not apply to us; but we can say it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God; not an imaginary God, not a traditional God, not the God of the religious systems, however hoary their history, but the living God. The fact is going to come back upon such. He holds the nations in His hand.

It might be that there is someone resisting God, fighting God, rebelling against God, who imagines - though perhaps it has never been put into words, into clear thinking - that he can get the better of God. Oh no, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God"; and that is where we are all to come sooner or later.

Can you rejoice that you are in the hands of the living God? There is no need to be afraid of that. It may be the most blessed thing that ever can be enjoyed, to be in the hands of the living God. On the other hand, it may be the most terrible thing, a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. For the unbelieving and the unfaithful it is neither a welcome thing nor a blessed thing to know that the God with whom we have to do, and who has to do with us, is a living God.

### **The Living Relationship**

Now there is one other thing bound up with this oft-repeated designation "the living God". The fact that He is the living God is intended to make for a living state of things amongst His own people; they are to take character from Him in this very sense and truth that He is the living God. That means that relationship with Him is intended to be a living relationship. Relationship with God today in so many directions, and over such a wide range, is not a living relationship. There is an

acknowledgment of God, there is a form of worship of God, there are rites connected with God; yes, there is a recognition in a greater or lesser measure of a kind of devotion to God, worship of God, acknowledgment of God, perhaps desire for God, but all short of a living relationship with God. Yet that He is the living God means that those who are related to Him should live. He would say, "Because I live ye shall live also". A living relationship with God is possible.

I have no doubt that probably nine out of every ten of those who read this have this knowledge of a living relationship with the living God; He is to them in their own experience, enjoyment, and knowledge as alive as any today, in this world at least. Some of us can say that He is more alive to us, because He comes into closer touch with our innermost being, than anyone else we know. He is the living God. It is not a relationship with some dead order of things, but with a living Person. But I must ask, Have you that living relationship? Are you following a system, an order, or are you in living fellowship with a living God? The Lord desires that such relationship with Him shall be living all the way along. It is a great thing to know that you have access to the living God. You do not know whether a thing is right or wrong? Well, you have the living God, ask Him; He is open, He is accessible, He is alive; you can have dealings with Him. Just to enjoy living relationship with a living God is how He wills it to be. The desire of His heart is that you should treat Him as being a living God. "He that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him". We must believe, when we come, that He is; not feeling out into the universe, the vacant, empty universe. No, we are coming to a living Person; we believe that He is! There is nothing vague about that.

But more than that, He is the rewarder of them that diligently seek. Every time you come to Him do you believe that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek? How far does your belief carry you? Does it enable you right on the spot where you are to thank Him when you seek Him, because you believe that He has answered? O Lord, I thank You that You do not deny me that which is in accord with Thy will; I have it. To give thanks with request is His order. "In everything by prayer... with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God." That is faith. That is not imagining, making yourself believe that you have it. It is faith taking this position: He is a living God, and He is the rewarder of them that diligently seek, and if this request is inspired by His Spirit, in line with His will, whether I actually enter into possession of it at this moment or not, I know that He hears and answers, and I shall come into it. Faith may be tested. Many of us have asked the Lord for that which is revealed as His will for us in His Word, and we have been kept waiting a long time, but the day has come when we have found ourselves in possession of the answer. There was no noise about it, it just happened. He proved Himself faithful. By such experiences we have learned to thank the Lord on the spot. Whether our prayer is immediately answered in our experience, or whether the possession is postponed for a year or two, our confidence is that we are coming into the answer, and so we give thanks. That is faith that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him. God loves that ground, that attitude, that kind of living relationship. It is a relationship which is taking its character from Him, the living God.

If He is the living God, then our knowledge of Him ought to be living, and where life is in the ascendant there is always increase. It is only when life is fading that there is decrease. When life is in the ascendant - and this life may always be in the ascendant, there need be no winter time in the life of the Spirit - there is increase in the knowledge of the Lord, living knowledge of the Lord. It is altogether different from book knowledge, altogether different from information about the Lord; it is living, personal knowledge of the Lord, and knowledge that is ever growing. We have to do with the living God, and He would that our knowledge of Him should be living knowledge, a knowledge in which there is life.

So we could go on touching upon point after point as to what it means to be related to a living God, but in this comprehensive word it is that everything is living where you have the living God.

### **The Supreme Testimony**

Now we come to the closing word, which has to do with the pre-eminent evidences of the presence of the living God. If you have felt that all that has been said so far has hardly touched you, or has hardly had an application in your case, I have no question about the last word. I am quite sure you will get something now. The pre-eminent evidence that the living God is with us, what is it? "Hereby", said Joshua, "ye shall know the living God is among you... Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth passeth over before you into the Jordan." Some of you will want that explained, and others will not. "Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth passeth over before you into the Jordan." First of all, Jordan is always a type of death, and at the time when those words were spoken Jordan was at the flood, overflowing all its banks. It was, in type, death at the flood-tide, the mighty flood of death overflowing all banks. Then, secondly, the ark of the covenant is the Lord Jesus Christ in type. He is typified in that ark of the covenant.

Now then, Jesus Christ goes right over into the flood-tide of Jordan, and immediately that ark comes into touch with that flood-tide, the flood gives way, and is forced back. The waters are made to stand up and give a passage to the people of faith. What is the supreme evidence of the living God being amongst us? It is that we know Jesus Christ as triumphant over the power of death in our experience: for, having met death in its full power, its full force, its flood-tide, He triumphed. It was the flood-tide of death that was encountered at Calvary; death, in all that death means, something far beyond mere physical death, even all the terrible, wicked power of spiritual death. The Lord Jesus went into the flood of iniquitous death, and death's power was taken from it, and it could not overflow. He broke the power of death and its curse, and made death stand back. "He tasted death in the behalf of every man". He has delivered us in His own victory over death. He stands for the testimony of a life which is incapable of being swallowed up by death. Thus the cry is, "O death, where is thy victory; O death where is thy sting?" "Thanks be unto God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." What is the supreme evidence that the living God is amongst us? That we are enjoying the power of a deathless life, or in other words, are living in the blessing of Christ's victory over the power of death. You have a life in your heart, in your spirit which cannot be overwhelmed and overpowered by death. When death is all around there is life. "Hereby ye shall know that the living God is among you."

The testimony, then, to all the world, to the universe, is that the Lord of life is in the midst of us, and is making Himself manifest in that very nature, in that very character, in that very designation "the Lord of Life". Hereby you shall know, not that your doctrine is correct, not that you are sound, not that you are orthodox, not that you are true to the conditions, but that the living God is among you in the power of His triumphant life in Jesus Christ over death. You and I may know the living God amongst us like that all the time.

The enemy would destroy that testimony, because it is the pre-eminent evidence of the presence of the living Lord. The assault, therefore, is always upon that testimony of life. God has been manifested to us as the living God in Jesus Christ, who says, "I am he that liveth; I became dead, but I am alive unto the ages of the ages, and have the keys of death and of hades", the authority over all.

So may we remember the fact which governs everything: that our God is a living God; He lives.