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The Mighty Presence of God

by T. Austin-Sparks

Transcript of a message given in a conference, date unknown. The spoken form has been retained verbatim, words which were unclear are in [square] brackets.

We have been, we believe by the Lord, directed in this time back to the book of Nehemiah. And so we continue in our consideration of its message, which is an all-time message. And, as we feel, with a special underlining and emphasis for the time in which we are.

We have seen in this book a microcosm of the purpose and the conflict of all time. This book, which goes under the name of this man Nehemiah, is but a historical representation of the one all-governing purpose of God in creation, in redemption, and in glory.

Nehemiah is a very useful and helpful means of understanding not just a phase of his [time], but the whole Bible and all that the Bible is about. I'm quite sure you would all agree, if it could be stated in just a sentence or two what this mighty volume, this very, very many sides and parts is all about, that would be helpful. If we could read our Bible in such a way that every part of it falls into line with just one thing, that would help us with our Bible quite a lot. And I can give you that key, or I can show you that in this little book we have the key, not only to the whole Bible but to that before the Bible, and if there is an after the Bible, to that also.

The one all-governing intention of God is to have His dwelling among men; that God would have a place where He can in pleasure dwell in His creation amongst men. That is the purpose for which He

created this world, for which He created man. And it is in relation to that one purpose all the history that is recorded in this great book is a part.

We have come to regard the Bible, and especially Christianity, as a matter of quite a number of things. And because this one supreme thing has either not been seen or has been lost to view, we have all the confusion, all the complication, all the difficulties that there are in Christianity and in the Christian life. To really see and to be able to grasp this one thing alone, for it to get possession of our hearts, is in itself a redeeming thing, a saving thing, a delivering thing. We, dear friends, must make it our very deliberate, applied business to reconsider and reconstitute our whole mentality as to God and His will in the light of this one thing.

It will come right back upon us individually, put us right, to save and adjust us, to come right back upon all our Christian relationships, not just the whole matter of Christian fellowship, and all the other aspects of the Christian life. One thing: God may be there. God may be present. God may delight to be present. Finding the conditions which satisfy His heart so that it can be said, "the Lord is there." Because that is one of His names, you know: *the Lord is there*.

Well, as I have said, this is the book of Nehemiah, it gathers up the whole Bible right there on that one thing. And there's a microcosm; on the one hand, in the first instance, of that age-old, *time-less* purpose of God. I bid you reread your Bible in the light of that one thing. On the other side, of course, there is that *persistent* and *determined* effort and purpose of contrary powers in this universe to frustrate and nullify that Divine purpose. So this book is a book of conflict, the book of assailing in many ways and many directions. A book of striving for God's purpose, on one side, and against it on the other. And I repeat, that also is the conflict not of Nehemiah and his people in his day, but of all times. If you want to understand the meaning of all spiritual conflict, all spiritual antagonism, all spiritual opposing forces in this universe, the meaning of evil and evil personified - an explanation: just to see to it that God does not get a place for Himself that He has set His heart on having, in conditions suitable to Himself, the frustration of God's purpose in your life and in mine that God shall *not* be seen in us. That's the battle. That's the battle every day, every day to counter and nullify the Presence - the manifestation of the Presence of the Lord. That's the history of the church's conflict because of this Divine calling. That is the history of the ages: a purpose being countered as far as all those myriads of evil forces are concerned, if peradventure things can be made null and void.

You can see, then, those who have any acquaintance with this little book, that that is what is gathered into it, its few pages. Now, the realisation of God's purpose is shown in this book, so true to principle, to be bound up with the spiritual state of God's own people, a people taken out of the nations in relation to this purpose, being the people where God is, amongst whom the Lord is, where He may be found and known. In the historical, temporal, earthly representation, of course, that was Israel. But you look through Israel to the very much larger, the people taken out of the nations for the name of Christ. And as I have said, the realisation of this great purpose of God to have an abiding place, a dwelling in satisfaction, in pleasure, from which He need never depart, to which He can give Himself without reserve, wholly, completely. That *is* bound up with the spiritual condition of that people chosen for this purpose, in the first instance.

There is the sovereignty of God: He acts sovereignly and He will sovereignly reach His end. But strangely - and this is one of those paradoxes, of which the Bible is full - even the sovereignty of God is linked with spiritual conditions. And this purpose of God is clearly seen in this book and

everywhere, to be just tied in with the spiritual state of the people chosen in the first instance for this purpose.

Yes, it's a strange thing to say, and yet it is quite true, that even the infinite God of wisdom and power has limited Himself to the spiritual condition of His people. God is limited to and by the people of His purpose, as to their spiritual state. And that, of course, raises a very, very big issue for us. We're called according to His purpose as we are, chosen in Christ Jesus before the foundation of the world. In relation to this great end, God may come and never depart, find His eternal dwelling place in glory and in pleasure *if* we are called according to that purpose. And then the realisation of it, that so much depends upon our spiritual condition, and that, of course, is revealed so much, so fully in the history of Israel in the way of type and representation. Then it brings this whole matter of spiritual conditions very much to the fore, doesn't it? You and I may limit the Lord. Individually we may limit the Lord's purpose. We may in that measure hold up His purpose, pull it back. Our assemblies may do that - limit the Lord and postpone His purpose so far as they are concerned. And as it is true of the individual and of the companies here and there, it is, of course, fully true as to the whole church. The Lord waits for a condition for the satisfying of His heart and providing Him with His place.

Well, we have seen how again and again, as in this book of Nehemiah, there was a condition which made it necessary for the Lord for the time being to suspend His operations. But then, again and again, how He returned for the recovery of that which would provide Him with His means. And this book of Nehemiah is just one of those activities of God in *recovery*.

I'm very glad of that word. I'm glad of that word because it does embody all the grace of God, all the mercy of God, all the patience of God, the long-suffering forbearance of God, all the determination of God not to lose anything if by any means He can conserve it, salvage it, hold it. The story of God's movements again and again for recovery, it's a long, long story of the grace of God. What I have said just now about individuals and local companies *and* the church, are true in this connection: God is not going to lose anything if He can possibly by any means of grace save it.

You or me, we lapse, dear friends, we lapse. *We* put back the purpose of God in our lives. *We* lose a lot of time, a lot of our lives because of those lapses, those departures, because of the conditions we allow to come into our lives and the interests and the dividedness of hearts and what not. *We* lose a lot of our life keeping God waiting. And yet He's not waiting. Even in those times He's doing something, as with this people: the deep work of discipline, of instruction, teaching how unprofitable it is to be out of the will of God.

How little we really gain in the end when, having been called, we do not follow on to know the Lord. Working, yes, in the dark days, deeply, painfully, but working and at length moving again to bring us back, to recover. That's true of many a life, many a life once given to the Lord. That's true of many a company. The Lord does not just lightly, because of some faults, or weaknesses, or failures wash His hands of the whole thing and say "I've done with it." He will return to His purpose if there is any prospect at all through grace and mercy of furthering it. And so with His church, it will be like that. I thank God for the word *recovery*. Where would any of us be today if the Lord had let us go, let us go? If He had not recovered us?

There may be some here this morning, who have gone, who've let go. May I say to you: the Lord is not giving up. You'll go through a dark and difficult time under His hand in which you will learn that

there's no gain in that way. And He'll react again, come back, and seek to draw you back, not only to Himself, but to the purpose of your being called into fellowship with Him. And here this little book is a monument of that recovering activity of the grace and mercy of God.

And now my difficulty - and that clock is always the difficulty - there is so much to which that introduces us. It's quite impossible to say it all. But I want just to say if possible this morning, a little about the identifying of the two main factors in this great matter: firstly, the purpose, and then the power. Then probably you'll have to leave the second until the afternoon, which I feel to be very vital if I may say so here: the power by which God recovers His purpose.

But just to identify the purpose itself. I have spoken in general terms of the purpose of God. I have just brought into view the fact of a purpose and I have said something as to what it is, but we really haven't got to the heart of it. We just have to stand right back, both from this book and from the Bible as a whole, from all the forms, all the representations, all the figures, and all the things which are crowded into this volume, the Bible, and seek to see one all-overshadowing reality. For these, after all, are only representations, pictures, figures, symbols, ways of speaking, ways of teaching. Behind them and over them all is one inclusive, all-overshadowing figure and that figure is God's Son. *He* overshadows everything. *He* stands behind *everything* that is in the whole of this book in all its forms of representation. The purpose of God is concerning His Son. It is Christ who is to satisfy God in this matter of which we are speaking, both to be and to provide for God that in which God can have pleasure to dwell. It is Christ!

We must see, of course, that Ezra and Nehemiah, with their contemporary prophets and governors, are just one, just one special emphasis in Israel on the temple, the special emphasis in Nehemiah on the wall, but they're - the two are one. They're only two parts of one whole: the temple and the wall.

The Temple: God's Sanctuary

God's sanctuary... it would not be difficult, of course, and certainly would be unnecessary for anybody knowing the Bible, for me to embark on showing how all temple representations in the Bible, that great central thought, everywhere the temple, is in its very constitution a comprehensive representation of Christ.

It is the purpose, however, that must hold us - God being amongst men, God being here, and God finding it possible, may I say it, to *delight*, to *enjoy* being here. It is Christ, dear friends, and only Christ that has brought God into this world. It is by His Son that God has drawn near and offered to dwell with men and to make them His temple. It is in Christ. God cannot realise His purpose, because, apart from His Son, because the purpose is so inextricably, inseparably bound up with His Son. And to identify the purpose, is to see Christ as everywhere, in all things - the answer to this heart quest of God to be amongst men.

You will see how much is gathered into that, the whole meaning of the incarnation, the whole nature of Christ and His person, but we leave all that detail, Christ is the purpose of God. Let us not think of Divine purpose in abstract terms, as some *thing*. Let us see that the purpose is a Person, and there's no possibility of realising the purpose apart from the Person. Therefore, if we are called according to the purpose, it is on the basis of our being called into the fellowship of God's Son. Our realisation, or fulfillment of God's purpose in this very creation and in our existence, *demand*s a vital relationship with the Lord Jesus. It's where it begins.

There's no explanation of existence, the existence of men, or of creation, only in this way: God's determination to have a dwelling and that that determination is realised and fulfilled firstly in the Person of His Son and then secondly in all where His Son is found. You see, the one thing leads to the other: the presence of God and all this wonderful, wonderful thing that God has determined for all eternity, depends upon the presence of Christ and depends upon the *measure* of the presence of Christ. You will find God in the measure in which Christ is present. Does that sound too simple, like a platitude? But, oh, what a lot is bound up with that. God is where Christ is, and nowhere else, and God is in the measure, in His measure present, in the measure in which His Son is there.

If you and I want God in our lives, let us be quite clear about this, that God will only commit Himself to His Son, not to us. God doesn't commit himself to men. Jesus never did that. He did not trust Himself to men. He knew what was in men, He said so; said so. God doesn't commit Himself to you and to me. Men are always trying to take hold of God, get hold of God, and use God, even in religion to use God, to manipulate God, to make God fulfill their schemes, desires, and ambitions and satisfy *them* in some enterprise, some undertaking, but God doesn't commit Himself. He doesn't ever do that. It must be perfectly clear that God *only* commits Himself to His Son, because it is only Christ who satisfies God and provides Him with a sanctuary for His presence, for His dwelling. And what is true of the foundation is true of the superstructure. The presence of God in power, in activity, depends entirely upon the measure in which Christ is there. If God is to be really manifested, our one concern is that the greatest possible measure of Christ shall be found in us and where we are. I know that sounds very simple, but it's here, you see, the *building*, the building of this temple and the *building* of the wall just says that.

The temple is the sanctuary, but the wall...

What is the Wall?

It's the *definition*, it's the *distinction*, it's the *limit* of what that temple represents. It's the *boundary* of the presence of God. It defines what is within. It gives distinctiveness as apart from all else that is in the world outside that wall. It says, "Within, within my limit you discover and know what God is like and where God is. Look at that temple. I am the testimony that God is not only present, but God is like that". And there has to be a distinguishing line and mark between what is of God and what is not of God but that is of the world outside, from which all these counter activities are coming, to spoil everything. The wall, understand, is that which speaks of a definition.

No one will dispute with me the statement that if there is one thing needed perhaps more than anything else today, it is definition, where the Lord's people are concerned. Definition. *Distinctiveness*. Oh, how things have got mixed up, how much more has come in than what is of Christ, what is of God. How confused the situation is, but that wall says, so far as God is concerned, there's to be none of that - no confusion, no uncertainty, no indefiniteness, no indistinctness. It's going to be all clear-cut, clearly defined. It's going to be God and only God and everything that is *not* God is excluded. That is Christ, in extension.

That is what God is after. He must have it like that. In principle we know how true it is: get a mixed up state and how much of the Lord do you find there? Get a confused condition, get the world seeping in, and how much of the Lord do you meet? Get what is of man and the Lord is limited. Christ was not like that. He never was. You see, Christ is a sanctuary *not made with hands*, that is, not of this creation, to use biblical language. Not of this creation, not made with hands. That is the

deepest mystery and meaning of His birth. His birth: not of bloods, not of bloods, the mixture of bloods. Not of the will of flesh, nor the will of man, but of *God*, only of God. His birth was an act of God. He is different.

No wonder there has been such an assault upon the virgin birth. Cut that, undercut that, and you will undermine this whole purpose of God to have everything according to Christ. He is not made with hands. He is not of this creation. He is not of man at all. He is of God. And this wall says so clearly: "Christ is different, Christ is other, Christ is not of this world and His kingdom is not of this world. He is apart." In a word: *wholly* of God.

And so it must be, if God is to have His end and in fullness there must be this, this constant work of putting outside the wall what is not of God. Notice this book has a lot to do with it: putting it out. There was a time when an enemy on the inside brought furniture into the house of God but Nehemiah took action and he pitched that furniture out - if the metaphor is not contradictory - lock, stock and barrel. "Out! None of this in here, it doesn't belong. Doesn't belong". And so I expect he pitched it over the wall; at any rate, metaphorically that's what he did. It doesn't belong. And Christ constantly says, "It doesn't belong, it doesn't belong!" And all that does not belong has got to go out. The wall says that - discriminating definition is the testimony of that wall - wholly of God.

Now I'll stop there for the moment, leave you with that. It is not a small thing, dear friends, to be called by the grace of God into this great purpose to give to Him in our own lives, and in our life together as His people, and in this world the answer to the eternal desire of His heart. Is it a small thing? Is it a small thing? If we count it a small thing, if that does not make an appeal to us, if that does not really come to us with strength, if we do not sense the importance and greatness of that, if we can let it go as something said in a meeting, a subject spoken of in a conference, if it does not really register with us as something above all other things, the very explanation of this creation and of our being at all, both in creation and in redemption, the explanation of Christ coming, of Christ living, of Christ dying and rising and going back to Heaven in a heavenly session of priestly intercession of everything else, the one answer, the one explanation is that in you and in me and in us together, *God shall dwell and make His Presence known*. If that does not appeal to you, then I can only say that you are a very selfish person, because the very essence of selfishness is *not* to let the Chief One have *all* that He desires and not to be concerned about it. It must be that we've got other interests.

Oh, no, it's no small thing to be called according to His purpose, to be called to answer to the deepest and ever-abiding desire of the heart of God. And therefore God takes infinite pains to make the place of His habitation suitable for the manifestation of His glory. That is the end. He's coming to be glorified in His saints and to be marveled at in all them that believe. What an end, what an end! Have you ever thought about that? To be *glorified* in His saints. *In* His saints. To be *marveled* at, that all heavenly intelligences look on these saints at last and say, "Isn't it marvelous?" And, you know, angels and archangels do know something about marvelous things! They're not unfamiliar with marvelous things. They have marveled at the creation. The sons of God shouted for joy at the creation. They marveled. They marveled in the birth of Christ. They sung for joy, "Glory to God in the highest." They're acquainted with marvelous things. But now it says, "He shall come to be *marveled* at." Who's going to do the marveling? Who's going to do the marveling? Well, it must be under these principalities and powers in the heavens that His wonderful grace is displayed in the saints, and the angels are going to say it, "The marvel of all marvels that He should be glorified in people like that. What a marvelous thing grace is!" That is the end. He's working toward that, but

that explains His pains, why He doesn't let go altogether and comes back again to recover; why He disciplines, why He allows us to go through deep and difficult ways to, on the one side, counter this that would counter Him, and on the other side to bring in that which provides Him with a suitable ground for His *full* expression.

You and I know something about that discipline and suffering. But we can really understand and interpret God's ways with us, we can see on the one side there was much that had to be countered, had to be broken, had to be burned up in the fire. And we say, "Amen. Quite right too!" But on the other side, we cannot say too much about this, indeed we can't say anything very much about it at all, nevertheless we know that grace is doing something. We *are* being changed. We have more love for God than we once had. And more of the love of God in us than we once had, and changes are taking place. We cannot speak much about that because it's all too slow and too little. Nevertheless He's doing it, and the end is "to be *marveled* at". Christ is marvelous, but not just apart from His saints: "marvelous in all them that believe". May we have grace to *see Him*, all the ground, for His purpose.