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The Outworking Of Heavenliness

by T. Austin-Sparks

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The complete heavenliness of our lives in every way, according to the Lord's will, might be brought to our recognition by a very brief survey of the Gospel by John. There is in this Gospel a comprehensive presentation of the outworking of heavenliness in relation to the Lord Jesus.

We need to understand more and more clearly what heavenliness means as to the people of God: that anything that is other or less than the Divine meaning shall be entirely ruled out of our mentality. Some people seem to react to the suggestion or the idea of heavenliness along the line of thinking that it means being quite unpractical and detached from the everyday things of life, and being in a world of dreaminess, and unreality and abstraction. The thought with many is a false other-worldly-ness; that it is as necessary to develop a kind of aesthetic, mystic sense and life somewhere else than where they are. All that realm of things has to be entirely destroyed.

Heavenliness is pre-eminently practical and touches the most ordinary things which come into our lives. The New Testament knows nothing of a heavenliness or a spirituality that makes people incompetent, indifferent or careless as to the duties of daily life, and the relationships here on earth, and all those things. Heavenliness does not mean withdrawal in spirit, or in activity and practical relationship from what are the common obligations of our lives. Unfortunately such an idea has led to a very great deal of confusion and dishonour to the Lord. It has led to the idea that, because we are the Lord's people and we are spiritual, we must always be in meetings, and if we are not in a meeting then we are quite wrong, and we are neglecting something important. Heavenliness may

demand sometimes that a meeting is sacrificed at cost for some interest of the Lord in another direction. There are many ways in which we must recognise and always bear in mind that spirituality and heavenliness are to be made to bear upon every detail of our lives.

To put it quite strongly, the most spiritual and heavenly people ought to be the very best housewives, ought to be the very best business men, and ought to be the very best in whatever sphere they are, and not always be hankering after some other sphere which they call more spiritual. The Lord will never change our situation, our course of life, until in it (provided we are there in His will and He has not definitely called us to something else) we have lived the heavenly life and touched it with heaven, and made what is spiritual triumph there. There were, in Paul's day, saints in Caesar's household, and when you remember who Caesar was, you could contemplate few more difficult situations for saints to live in; but they were living the heavenly life, and they were spiritual even in Caesar's household.

We have said that by way of clearing the ground for a fresh emphasis upon what is heavenly and spiritual.

The Word is: "Not slothful in business, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord" (Rom. 12:11); "Let every man abide in the calling wherewith he is called..." (1 Cor. 7:20), and bring heaven in there, or live in touch with heaven there.

If you read through the Gospel by John you will see something as to what heavenliness means, and its practical outworking.

The first thing is:

The All-governing Fact of Christ in Heaven.

There is a sense in which it can be said that right through this Gospel Christ is in heaven. Physically and in person on the earth, touching its affairs, having to do with many things, and some of them anything but heavenly; some of them sordid, some of them hateful, some of them satanic, utterly evil. Yet in a very real sense it can be said that right through this Gospel He is in heaven. From the beginning we find that, and He makes a statement which sounds somewhat paradoxical and contradictory: "the Son... which is in heaven" (John 3:13). He says that of Himself while here on the earth.

That is where you begin with this Gospel - Christ in heaven. That is where you end this Gospel - Christ in heaven. And all that lies between is but the expression of Christ as in heaven, or Christ heavenly. Everything that He says and everything that He does, is out from heaven. To put that in another way, His crises are never dictated by earthly considerations. He never allows Himself for a moment to speak or to act under the dictates of any considerations other than those which are heavenly. He takes His orders from heaven, He gets His words and His works from heaven, He waits upon heaven for indications for every movement, His life is truly being lived as in heaven, and what would be done in heaven He does on earth, nothing more, nothing less. He is, then, represented from first to last as in heaven.

The commencement of all that relates to Christianity is there. You find that when you move from the Gospels (and it is not without significance that the Gospel of John is the last in the order of things,

and therefore comes next to the fresh movement), which present the Person, the Christ Himself to the church which represents His Body, the commencement of everything for the church is Christ in heaven. You find that as you end 'John' and you begin Acts. As you end the Gospels so you begin the history of the church, and it is as from the Christ in heaven that the church with all its members has to live its life, take its orders, have its government, and never for one moment be dictated to, or influenced by worldly or earthly considerations. If the church had always maintained that position, what a different story would be told! When we speak of the church we must not allow the more general thought to carry away from us the personal and particular responsibility. If there is to be a continuation of the expression of Christ, then it can only be on this basis: that as He was so are we in this world, and that everything is out from heaven. And what else is worth living for? Why have any kind of profession at all? Why seek to maintain any kind of relationship to Christ, if it is not upon the Divine basis? We do not want to keep something going for the sake of something. Surely the all-governing idea of law and purpose is that there should be a continuation of Christ registered here, and there is only one way in which that can be done, and that is according to His own declaration: "As the Father hath sent Me, even so send I you." That is a very comprehensive statement. One word alone there is comprehensive, the word "as". If you could get the fulness of that "as", then you would have the fulness of the life of Christ, and the fulness of the life of the church.

"As the Father hath sent Me..." One fragmentary and yet very inclusive word of His can express the meaning of that. "I am come in My Father's name." He made it perfectly clear that that did not mean that He had simply come as an Ambassador, a Representative, Someone Who carries the Name of Another. For Him that meant that the Father was with Him, and all that He was and did and said was the expression of the Father. "Name" in the Scripture does not mean "representative"; it means "content", "character". And He had come as the Father, and so He could say in connection with, and as defining that: "I am come in My Father's name", "He that has seen Me hath seen the Father", "As the Father sent Me, even so send I you." It means that the church is here as Christ. The Name rests upon us, and the church is as Christ. He is implied, involved, embodied; and there is not a separation in this matter, that Christ is one thing and the church is another. We are not referring to the difference of entity, but to the oneness of life, and the oneness of purpose. The Body has many members, and all the members are one Body; so also is the Christ. It is the essential heavenliness of the Lord's people for the Lord's purposes, the Lord's interests here. Christ in heaven is the root and the spring of everything, the governing reality, making the church something which is not in any respect or detail governed by this world, or influenced by the considerations of this world.

The outworking of that begins in the chapters at the commencement of the Gospel, especially in chapters 2, 3 and 4. That is, our relationship to the heavenly Christ is introduced there. There is a very far-reaching truth embraced in these chapters. It represents a mighty change in the direction and the aspect of things. The familiar aspect and direction of things was exclusion from God. Even though you may take Israel, God's chosen and peculiar people, and all the Levitical order and economy; when you have set up the Tabernacle, and instituted the priesthood, and all the service thereof, and have reached your last point and said your last word; you cannot get away from the fact that the whole aspect is forbidding: "...draw not near... lest he die". Certain people in a representative capacity, on a very strict basis, were allowed to enter in, but even they were subject to death if they for one moment violated, ignored or overlooked certain things. It was the carrying out to the end of a long dispensation of what took place in the garden. Man was driven out from the garden and from the Presence of the Lord; and the cherubim, with the flaming sword, represented forbidding. That attitude remained, that aspect remained in its severity through to the end of the Jewish dispensation. You find representatives of Judaism, like Nicodemus, with the one enquiry:

How? The sense of a need of getting somewhere, into the realm, the Kingdom of God. The Lord Jesus changed the whole aspect, and said: "Now the time has arrived when access is possible, a way is being opened: I am the way." What is the way? What is it that removes this forbidding aspect which has governed for so long? It is: "You must be born again." Birth from above, birth from God changes the whole aspect of things; and now, instead of exclusion, it is access. We know the fuller doctrine of access through His Blood, but that is all basic to new birth. So that to get back to God there has to be birth from above, a heavenly relationship, brought about by new birth. Our relationship then with God is altogether heavenly on that basis, that we have been born from above. The very commencement of our lives is something heavenly, the very spring and source of our lives is heavenly. That is basic to our fellowship with God.

In new birth "the flame of a sword" goes. In new birth the forbidding cherubim depart. The way back into the presence of God is open, so that the Lord Jesus can say to a thief in the hour of his death: "This day you shall be with Me in... (the place which has been forbidden; where man has not been allowed to come until I came to open the way) Paradise."

Then we pass on to chapters 9 and 10, and we see the effect of being born from above, of having become essentially heavenly in our life and our relationship. Chapters 9 and 10 show what will result as to our position here on this earth, and it means, simply and definitely: exclusion from this world. It seems that what happens is this, the Lord says to the natural man in his unregenerate state: "If you have a relationship to this world, you can have no relationship to Me, you have no place with Me, you are excluded both from My presence and from My realm, the Kingdom of the Heavens; your relationship with this world puts you outside". Then, when man through new birth enters into the Kingdom of the Heavens, the devil turns round, and takes the attitude that God took and says: "If you have any relationship with heaven you have no place here in my world". The world has no place for the child of God, not even the world in a religious sense. Chapters 9 and 10 show the religious world putting outside that which is in relation to Christ, and thereby proving that it is the world, though religiously so; and to be a heavenly people means that the world has no place in it for such.

Christ is linked with the Father. "Father" is used 111 times in this Gospel. The other thing that runs right through the Gospel is the antagonism of the world to Christ. So that all that is of the world is not of the Father, therefore it is against the One Who is related to the Father, and against all others who are so related. The world seems to uncannily detect something that is not of itself, and a strain comes about without anything having been said. When the child of God moves among those of the world there is nothing in harmony. We are born of the Father; therefore we are not of the world, and the world has no place for us. That may become increasingly so as we go on, for it is not a matter of the thing being wholly of the world, but it may be only partly of the world, and we shall find that we come into collision with the world. The more heavenly we become, the less possible it is for anything that has a taint of the world to give us a place.

In chapters 13 and 14 we have another aspect. It is:

The Heavenly Ministry.

In chapter 13 there is this clause: He "rises from supper". Chapter 14 closes with: "Arise, let us go from here". Indicating that they were in an enclosed place, and within that closed place certain things were being said and enacted, which are in themselves complete, conclusive. When those things are said and done then the purpose of that place is finished: "Arise, let us go from here".

While we are here, there is something which has to be learned; and within that upper room the Lord was giving to His disciples the nature of their heavenly ministry while they remained here in this world, though so much apart from it.

Here again we will say one thing only, which may touch a good deal. The central idea of ministry in chapter 13 is that of fellowship and maturity in the getting rid of anything that is not of the Father: He "rises from supper, and lays aside His garments: and He took a towel, and girded Himself. Then He poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciple's feet..." (v. 4,5); "If I then, the Lord and the Master, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet." What is feet washing? The dust of the world has gathered and collected. As they have proceeded on their way, as they have had to walk in a dusty, polluted, unclean, evil world, they, although not unclean inwardly, are touched by the evil around. The believer becomes all too conscious of the fact that in the daily walk some influence or something has happened which breaks in upon the fullest fellowship with the Father, interferes with the real intercourse with heaven - comes in and touches with a measure of death the heavenly life - and there is a sense of having touched earth, the world. This is common to the saints while here, and the ministry among the saints is to mutually seek to help one another to get rid of those earthly influences which would impede spiritual progress. That can be worked out and applied in numerous ways.

While we are in this world we shall often find the clearness of our heavenly atmosphere interfered with; we shall find that it is not always possible to be moving in the crystal clear heavenly blue. There are things which annoy, provoke, try, which easily pull us out of our heavenly life and bring us into defeat. The ministry among the saints is to seek to help one another in those things, washing away the touches which impede spiritual progress, washing one another to get rid of things which have come in to interfere with the business of heavenly life. It is the only way of real spiritual advance, and the Lord says here: "You must minister in a heavenly way to help one another, so that the earth does not get too firm a hold, things of this world do not grip, and that things which arise in the way do not become abiding impediments to spiritual progress". That is a ministry amongst the saints which must be a heavenly ministry by a heavenly fellowship and communion, so that progress is maintained.

Chapter 14 especially brings in the two great things of faith and love. Chapter 14 is very precious as it introduces the resting place above. Now we must not get materialistic in mentality. We must not begin to visualise mansions in heaven: "In My Father's house are many mansions (resting places) I go to prepare a place for you". We have sentimental hymns about His preparing a place for us. Let us dismiss all such sentimental, visionary thoughts. The place is prepared, and now Christ above gives us a place of rest in Himself. We now, here in this world, ought to know accordingly what it is to have our resting place above. It is necessary for us day by day to know the resting place in the heavenlies in Christ. He has fixed a place of rest for us in the heavenlies. Only as we live as the Lord's children apart from this world, can we know rest. We know that it is contact here, and affairs here, that disturb our spiritual rest, our quiet assurance. It is all that the Lord Jesus has been for us that has prepared the place of rest; all that He is there for us which is our place of rest. He has given us a place of rest because of the fulness of His work for us, and we must know even now, what it is to rest in the completeness of Christ's work in heaven, and find our resting place there.

Chapter 16 brings in:

The Heavenly Resource.

The Holy Spirit comes into view, and here the Holy Spirit is introduced as the Life, the Light, and the Power of the Lord's people, so that they may be maintained as a heavenly people here by the Holy Spirit.

Finally, to come to the heavenly Testimony as signified in one final verse, the last in the book: "And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that should be written."

You may say that surely that is an exaggeration, or else John had a small idea of the world. Books have been written about what Jesus did ever since John's day, and the world is not full of them yet. But even there there is a thought, a truth embodied, and it just suggests that John had come to a place when he wrote this Gospel where for him the Lord Jesus filled the universe; that he saw nothing beyond Christ. For him Christ was bigger than the world, and that is the Testimony with which the Gospel closes. And that is the Testimony with which the Acts begins. That is the Testimony upon which the church is launched. Christ is bigger than the world, filling all things. That is a heavenly Testimony. It takes a heavenly people to give that Testimony in reality. That is the church's Testimony, which makes it the heavenly people; for as much as the heavens are greater than the earth, so the heavenly Christ is greater than this world. We must have relationship with Him on that basis.