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The Progress of the Lord's Testimony to its Consummation

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Perhaps the test of everything is the matter of our concern for the Lord's Testimony. That is the issue which is involved and which arises. Many things will come up in connection with that main issue. We shall find ourselves challenged on all manner of personal matters. The Lord's Testimony will reach out in a multitude of different directions and touch all sorts of things in us, in our lives, but then the question arises: are we sufficiently concerned about the Lord's Testimony to make response in these personal matters, in these things which come right home to our own lives in an individual and personal way?

I think we must recognize the relatedness of all personal matters to the Lord's Testimony. It is so easy for us to talk about the Testimony, pray about the Testimony, to be very interested in the Testimony, and for the Testimony to remain something objective, perhaps the advancement of truth, maybe some particular truth, the progress of something for which we are concerned, but it is very largely an objective thing, a matter to which we have given ourselves in a way, and so we talk about the Testimony, we pray about the Testimony, we are concerned about the Lord's Testimony.

Now, that is good as far as it goes, but there is a peril there, because our concern for the Lord's Testimony is proved by just how far we are prepared to adjust ourselves on a lot of personal matters, or it may be, upon one particular personal matter. But, whether it be one or more, the point is the Testimony becomes a very personal thing in the very inwardness of our own lives and

touches us, not always in some great matter, but sometimes in something that we would regard as surely having no direct relationship with the great Testimony of the Lord, something that we may surely regard as private, as quite personal, as apart. We ought to know by now that in relationship to the Testimony of the Lord Jesus, there is nothing private and there is nothing merely personal, there is nothing unrelated. We have said that often in relation to the Body of Christ, but what is the Body of Christ? It is only the vessel of the Testimony, so that our secret lives affect the Body and affect the Testimony, and everything that we might call quite private is, after all, related. We are on trial as to the Testimony of Jesus in things which may never be brought into the assembly in a public way but nevertheless affect it.

In the first book of Samuel we see the Lord moving again for His Testimony's sake, coming in through Hannah's prayer, through Samuel, to David - David, God's chosen vessel to bring the Testimony to its final rest in His house. And then, as is always the case, the anticipating of that by the enemy. Oh, it is most interesting to notice how the enemy always anticipates God's moving; the enemy anticipated that movement of God for His Testimony's sake along the line of Saul, who was ostensibly concerned for the Testimony, but was not really so. That is, outwardly, there was all that which made a show of concern for the Lord's interests, but inwardly was not true. So that, alongside a true and pure spiritual movement, there is an imitation, counterfeit movement of carnality, of the flesh. If we had challenged the Corinthians as to their interests in the Lord Jesus, they would have protested very vehemently that they had the Lord's interests and the Lord's Testimony at heart, but there, you see, was the domination of carnality. And through the first Corinthian letter, you have those two lines: the spiritual and the carnal, clashing, at variance, and yet both of them seeming to move to the one end. So it was with Saul and David, and this is but a type, an illustration.

At a certain point in the progress of these two things it becomes manifest that the carnal line is very disappointing, barren and unfruitful. It brings about a state of distress, dissatisfaction, disruption and chaos, and that is the experience of the Lord's people always, sooner or later, when carnality is in the ascendancy and is governing. We know quite well that in the matter of the flesh, the carnal life, we get very sick of it before long. The time comes when it is quite clear that we cannot go on any longer in this way. It is not getting us anywhere. It is not really serving the Lord's interests, it is not reaching God's end. It is paralysing. We know that is so in all matters of the flesh, and so it was in the case of Saul and his regime. It became quite clear that this thing was not what God meant, and the thing had to come under God's judgment. But when that which represented the carnal life in the Lord's people was brought under judgment and a way was made for that which was of God, David came in. God was able to bring His man to his rightful place and we see a wonderful new sense of fellowship, of mutuality, and a corporate life. Up to that point, things were disrupted. Some were saying, 'I am of Saul.' Some were saying, 'I am of David.' It was a Corinthian state, a divided house. But, when the Lord was able to get His way, then the house ceased to be a divided house, and you have wonderful fellowship. Now, what does that resolve itself into?

In John 13, we see the Lord Jesus laying aside His garment and girding Himself with a towel and taking a basin, pouring water into it, and washing the feet of His disciples: giving a practical address, a sermon in action and not in word. I have always connected Phil. 2 with John 13, and I think we might just spend a minute or two with that connection. You know Phil. 2: "Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, existing in the form of God, counted not the being on an equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, becoming

obedient even unto death, yea, the death of the cross. Wherefore also God highly exalted Him, and gave unto Him the name which is above every name..." (Phil. 2:5-9).

I just want you to get hold of the elements there. What is in view is the Testimony of Jesus: Jesus as Lord, universal Lord. That governs everything. When we talk about the Lord's interests, it is that that we mean - the universal Lordship of Jesus. God's Man in His place - that is the Testimony of Jesus. While in heaven that is consummated, established, and there is nothing to add to it, there is still something to be done here in the matter, still something to be done in you and in me; that is not consummated in us.

Now, I say that over against our most ardent devotion to the Lord, our readiness to say that we are the Lord's - spirit, soul and body, and that for us Jesus is Lord, that still remains very largely an objective thing. And you and I are in the process of having that made a subjective thing. Surely we, under the hand of the Holy Spirit, are discovering that at least it is quite possible for us to have a controversy on the question of the Lord's Lordship in our lives. Yes, that is the meaning of every bad time we go through. That is the issue involved. Is Jesus Christ Lord? Well, for us, the matter of concern is: How can Jesus Christ be utterly and altogether Lord? Which means, in other words: How can the Testimony be brought to fulness and finality in the House of God? To press it still more closely: How can it be brought about that it is true, so far as I am concerned and you are concerned, true through and through, that we are really concerned for the Testimony of Jesus, the Lord's interests? How can it be brought about? On what ground?

"Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus". If you look at Saul and David closely, you will see that it was a matter of "mindedness". You can resolve everything to that. About David, as we know so well, the Lord said it was a heart matter, "The Lord looks on the heart." He was a man after God's own heart. Well, if you go through the life story of David on the outward side, you might often just pause with that, and have a very serious question. A man after God's own heart... to do a thing like that?! A murderer and an adulterer - Bathsheba and Uriah the Hittite. Such a dark chapter in David's life, and other things, too. A man after God's own heart? What does this mean? It does not mean that this man is outwardly free from every imperfection. It does not mean that he is a man who has got beyond the possibility of sin and failure. It does not mean that you will never be able to detect a flaw in him. But, when God looks at the heart, there is one thing that is paramount with God, one thing which is supreme, and it is just there that you see the difference between Saul and David. David's heart was set wholly upon the Lord's interests in this way, that, if he did fail, if he did sin, when he was called to account, he confessed from his very heart, and went down before God in the deepest heart grief and sorrow.

Now, Saul was brought to book for his sin and he said, "I have sinned." David used exactly the same words, "I have sinned." When Samuel challenged Saul and showed him what he had done contrary to the will of God, Saul said, "I have sinned". When Nathan went into David and by his parable worked up to his point, "Thou art the man", David says, "I have sinned." But Saul followed with, "Yet honour me before the elders of my people." See the difference in David's conduct: before all his household he is on his face before God in the deepest self-humiliation. He has been brought to see how the Lord's interests have been assailed by his action, and it has struck him to the heart. With Saul, the Lord's interests were not the concern; his own interests were his concern. Now, you see, we have driven things back to the heart.

Saul's was away from the throne; David's was unto the throne. The way of the flesh is always away from the throne; the way of the Spirit is always toward the throne. The Name was given on what ground? "He emptied Himself...". The Lord looks into the heart to find just how much self-interest there is.

Now, you can put self-interest in many ways. It may be self-will, self-strength, the strength of our own will; it may be self-concern, concern for our own pleasure, satisfaction, to satisfy our natural likes, to preserve our natural dislikes. We can break this up and apply it in numerous ways, but the whole point is the way of Saul is the way of self; the way of David is the way of the Lord. Although he himself may be very imperfect, yet at heart it is not any form of self-interest. You surely see that right through David's life and when at last he sits in his house and meditates upon the Lord, it comes into his heart to build a house for the Lord. That is the great consuming vision and object of David's life - the house for the Lord.

I believe the Lord (I do not know whether I am on dangerous ground in saying this, I am sure you will not misunderstand me) was very patient and forbearing, and in some measure overlooking of faults with David because that heart was so set upon His interests. I believe the patience of the Lord, the forbearance of the Lord with many of our faults will be the greater if the Lord is able to look behind the weakness and faults and see a heart that is not for itself in any way, but for Him. Perhaps that is the history of most of us, for we are all terribly conscious that we can throw no stones at David, that it must be far from us to judge others. We know the failure and the weakness of our own lives, failures which, but for the mercy of God, would have driven us away from God many times. But our history is just the history of the Lord bearing and forbearing and showing infinite patience and longsuffering, and holding us because He was able to read something in our hearts which was wholly toward Him.

Now you see, beloved, the Testimony all comes back to that; the Lord's interests all focus upon that. The Lordship of Jesus Christ rests there: this mind in you which was in Christ Jesus, who emptied Himself. The apostle is not for one moment suggesting that we have anything as the Lord Jesus had of which to empty ourselves. As we look at ourselves, we surely would plead with the Lord that we might be emptied. But nevertheless there is the fact that, in our realm, there is need for emptying. We hold on to something - that is the trouble. He had all the glories of heaven and equality with God and they were His by right, but He did not consider them something to be held on to, grasped at. We, in our poor, wretched, miserable way, hold on to things, hold on to a position, to our own way, to some personal interest, and while that is so, the throne recedes; the Testimony is merely a matter of words, something objective.

It is not true that you and I are really concerned for the Lord's Testimony if there is that personal holding on, but if the mind is in us which was in Christ Jesus, that settles everything. Has the Lord all the time to do a breaking down work? Has the Lord all the time to try and wrench us open to get at us, to get us to respond and be compliant? That is not the mind of Christ in us. It is not being forced or driven and got up into a corner by the Lord and hammered until we give some kind of a reluctant yielding - we can hardly call it "response". We cannot do anything else, so we let go. Oh no! The mind that was in Christ Jesus was spontaneous and voluntary. *He emptied Himself.*

Now, that is one side, and it is the dark, not the pleasant side, but the Lord knows in what way it is necessary for such things to be said. But there is the other side for us all. Every true child of God, who really gets into the hands of the Holy Spirit and is at heart set upon the Lord having His full end

reached, will be brought into deep waters, into times of darkness. I do not mean spiritual darkness with regard to salvation and so on, but I mean that darkness of the mysterious ways of God: trial, adversity, suffering, the fires of testing, when everything that they have will seem to have been put into the crucible. They may have had much wonderful experience, and they may even have been greatly used by the Lord, but the Lord has some further piece of work to do in that life and so all that has to be put aside and for the time being it fades out and seems to be nothing.

The Lord has something more to add, some enlargement, and while we have all that other, we are clinging to it and it is in the Lord's way. We have to be brought to a place where we have nothing in order that we might have more than we have ever had. What is the Lord really after? He is emptying, but the Lord never has a negative goal in view. Remember that. God's goal is the throne. God has highly exalted Him. There was the emptying - that is the negative side, but it was unto the ever-greater filling. Whereas He had the fulness of God and equality with God alone, now through the emptying He has that fulness and that equality, with many sons brought to glory; a vast addition. "Bringing many sons to glory". The grain of wheat which is alone has now been changed to the much fruit. God always has the positive end of increase to every bit of that which necessitates on our part some more emptying. It is not that *the Lord* is emptying us. The Lord is bringing us into situations where He gives us the opportunity of *emptying ourselves*, that is, of letting go to the Lord. That is the way to the throne. That is the way to the Testimony's fulness, that is the ground upon which it is proved whether we really are concerned for the Lord's Testimony.

Now today, the question for us is this. You say you are concerned for the Lord's Testimony. All right. Now, here is one particular thing in your own personal private life, and all your profession of interest and concern for the Lord's Testimony hangs upon that. It is just there.

The Lord give us the grace of self-emptying, the emptying of the strength of our own will, even in the things of God, in spiritual matters, as well as in the natural and every other form of that Saul life which will be barren, bring us to paralysis, and die under the judgment of God. Oh, may a clear way be made for that which is a heart for the Lord!