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## The Time of Testing

*by T. Austin-Sparks*

*Transcript of a message given in April between 1961 and 1971 (exact year unknown) at Halford House Christian Fellowship in Richmond, Surrey, England.*

Lord, according to Thy knowledge and understanding of our need, we ask Thee to speak to us. In the name of the Lord Jesus.

Now, that was quite a last minute pressure, that proverbial little bird has whispered to me that you have been dwelling very much in the gospel by Matthew in your studies and meditation. I hope it will not seem impertinence or bad taste if I bring you to Matthew for a few minutes.

I have no idea whatever of what you have been studying, other than the book, so that what I say will be completely from my own communion with the Lord.

And in familiar words in the sixteenth chapter, sixteenth chapter of Matthew, verse 13: "Now, when Jesus came into the parts of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, Who do men say that the Son of Man is? And they said, Some, John the Baptist; some, Elijah; and others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. He saith unto them, *But who say ye that I am?* And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jonah: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but My Father which is in heaven. I also say unto thee... upon this rock will I build My church; and the gates of hades shall not prevail against it."

21: "From that time began Jesus to show unto His disciples, how that He must go up to Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and the third day be raised up."

You will see from verse 21 that a crisis and a turning point has been reached in this disciple relationship with the Lord Jesus. Thus far it has been teaching and objective showing, by His words and His works. You're familiar with all that has gone before, the long discourse called 'The Sermon on the Mount' and then the chapter of parables. All that, now has reached a terminal point. And from that point, or this point in verse 21, the movement is from teaching, to experience. From the objective, to the subjective. And here the *true* nature of Christianity is brought into view.

Everything that Jesus said and did was always with the Cross in full view. Just remember that. Nothing had any real value, or meaning, or practical outworking, whatever He had said (which was a great deal) or whatever He had done (which was also very much) nothing of it had any *real lasting spiritual value* until the Cross was an accomplished fact. He knew that and always had that in His mind and thoughts, for He knew from the beginning that the Cross was the great climax of everything; the great turning point.

So, from *that* time, Jesus began to speak to His disciples about going up to Jerusalem and suffering many things, being killed, and on the third day rising again. This is a crisis. This is a turning point.

That needs to be thought about quite seriously, because we may have all the teaching that Jesus can give, and we may know of all His wonderful works, His miracles, and that really result in nothing until something has *happened, something has happened*. It is on that *happening, that event*, that I want to dwell in these very few moments.

It was what had happened that was the turning point. "Who do you say that the Son of Man is? Who do you... there's many opinions, judgments, ideas, conceptions, but *you*; what about *you*? What have you to say? What can you say? All these other things are guesses, men's minds at work. Now, what about you? Have you got anything more than that - the verdict of human judgment, of mental activity, the reaction upon the objective truth and work - have you anything more than that?" He's pressing this.

Simon Peter comes out with it spontaneously, "Thou art the Messiah, Thou art the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." In itself a new idea, a new conception, you know, that we cannot stay with, because with all Israel's expectation of the coming *Messiah*, they did not always think of their coming Messiah as the Son of God, God incarnate. They called Him 'the Servant of the Lord'. We'll leave that.

This is a new thought, a new idea. That is not the point, the point is the reaction of the Lord Jesus to this exclamation of Peter. What did He say? "Blessed art thou Simon Bar-Jonah, *flesh and blood hath not revealed that to thee, but My Father in heaven*." And in that statement, He cuts clean in between two entirely different realms, and sources, and resources.

### **Flesh and Blood**

What a long way it can go: flesh and blood science, what a long way it could go, to the moon and beyond. Flesh and blood of theology: what a long way it can go. Flesh and blood of organisations: what a long way it can go in the Christian realm. *Flesh and blood...* in mind, intellect, reason, in heart,

emotion and feeling - a long way, it's a big world - in *will* to do, to act, to be busy. It's a big world, isn't it? That's the world of flesh and blood, however big, however full, however wonderful, it's the realm of flesh and blood!

And Jesus says, "There's a veto on it, it cannot break this barrier, get through across this chasm. Flesh and blood can do a lot of things and wonderful things, mighty things, *but* there is a limit. And beyond that barrier, My Father in heaven revealing it to *you* - another realm of resource, another realm of ability, capacity, potentiality - another realm! They say, flesh and blood says: this is the work; the verdict of flesh and blood. My Father which is in heaven reveals what flesh and blood can *never* grasp or attain to."

You know, there's a lot about this flesh and blood thing in the New Testament. Think about it. The second chapter of the first letter to the Corinthians is all about what flesh and blood can do and then the embargo upon it, "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God neither can he know them, they are foolishness unto him." But he's talking to Greek philosophers, with their *great* world of knowledge, intelligence, philosophy. The apostle says they cannot understand the things of the Spirit of God, it's foolishness - flesh and blood can comprehend a lot, but the things of the Spirit of God, "no man knoweth save the Spirit of God".

And Paul, as you know in his fifteenth chapter of that letter, brings us right to the end of this mortal life and says, "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven." It's shut out of the kingdom of heaven - all that it is and can do! This is very impressive!

I'm quite sure you see what we are brought to by this word. The Lord Jesus: "Flesh and blood did not reveal *that* to you, but My Father which is in heaven." What *is the thing* upon which real Christianity rests? Something that God from heaven does inside of us. Not all our study. Not all our mental activity, our doctrines and so on, what we call 'our beliefs'. No. It's what the Father in heaven has enacted within us, something *done by Him* that no flesh and blood, our own, or anyone else's, could do.

It brings us to this challenge: what is it that we really have got and where did we get it? Did we get it from a Christian home in which we were brought up? Brought up in a Christian home and so we're, well, Christians. Did you get it from Sunday School? Get it from the preacher? It may come *through* these, but is that the source; not the channel, but the source? From *where* did come what we have got?

Could we, every one of us, say, "No! It wasn't this man or that man, this meeting nor that one, this home nor that, *God did something in me* that no man, or institution, or organisation, however great and good, could ever have done! Flesh and blood does not account for this. It's something that the Father in heaven has done!" Now, the importance of that is going to be seen sooner or later.

Peter made that declaration and then Peter was brought to a time of absolute personal devastation when flesh and blood gave way under the strain. Completely collapsed! You know, when Jesus was on trial, with the cross already being prepared, Peter knew full well what was going to happen on what we call: "Good Friday" (I don't like that name somehow, the Friday that we are coming to this week). Peter knew full well what was going to happen, and in the presence of it he disintegrated, he collapsed! He went entirely to pieces. He was *completely disillusioned* as to the possibilities of his own flesh and blood, how much *that* could endure, how much *that* could go through.

It had to be, it had to be, for this man had ideas that his flesh and blood could do a lot, you know, oh, he could go all the way, he said. "Though all men forsake Thee, yet will I not forsake Thee! I will even die with Thee!" All right, that's flesh and blood talking. Let's see now, put it to the test. And he was disillusioned as to himself, and as to other people. His flesh and blood side was devastated by the Cross. And then he went out and wept bitterly. I expect he sat in his remorse thinking back, "I, who made that great declaration, I, who had such self confidence, self assurance, I... who made such protestations. ! Look at me; what is the good of me?" He survived, survived that ordeal and came through. And I believe it was because the Father in heaven had done something deeper in Peter than his flesh and blood.

You read his letters (we read from one this morning) read his letters and you see that he constantly, repeatedly, refers back to the pre-Calvary days with the Lord, "We were with Him in the holy mountain," - referring back. But something was done, it came into eclipse, the hour of the Cross tested, all seemed to become so unreal at that time, but he survived, he came through, and I am sure it was because something *deeper* than his awareness had been done in Him.

And when Jesus arose, Peter said, "Begotten *again*, to a living hope, over against this utter despair, hopelessness, by the resurrection". What was begotten again, in the resurrection? *What?* What God had done, deeper than he knew. Isn't it the point?

Now, young Christians here, I don't want to seem to make things difficult for them, but we must be very faithful because the Lord Jesus was always faithful with His confidants. From the beginning He told them quite frankly what they were going to have to face if they followed Him. But for us all, young or old, let there be no doubt about it, and most of you perhaps have been to the point where you know I'm talking the truth.

Sooner or later you and I will come to the place where, through the depth of the testing and trying of our faith, the circumstances into which we are plunged, the *seeming eclipse* of all that has been so glorious in the past, we'll wonder if things have been real at all, whether our experience has been real, a sense of the unreality of everything comes over us. Do you know anything about that? It seems to have all faded out, gone into darkness. Where are we?

### **The Time of the Testing**

Now then, how are we going to get through? And I can tell you that if God has ever done anything in you, He is only, on the one side, showing us that it is not in ourselves, in our flesh and blood to go through, but its kept by the *power of God*. Kept by the power of God! And that is something that He has done *in us* which will never die. It will be the basis of our survival. We will come up again.

And blessed be God, as with Peter and the others, not only what was *before* will come back, but something added to it. It's like that! And you know, I'm not sure that the application of this principle is not made repeatedly in the Christian life. We get something from the Lord, we rejoice in it, it's very blessed. And then a testing time comes, sooner or later, a little later on, and we begin to ask questions about that experience, about that which we had, it seems somehow now to have faded; unreal. You go through a time of darkness.

You come up again on the ground of what the Lord did, and we go on and we get some more teaching, some more teaching, some more truth, some more Bible knowledge, more of all that

which makes up Christianity. And then again, a bit later on, the Lord says, "Well, how deep has it gone? Is it only up in the upper story, or is it down lower? *Is this you*, or something which, although it may be in your head, is still objective to your experience? It's not you yourself, it's your preacher, your teachers, your meetings. Have you got it?"

And we'll never know, only as we go through these times of deep experience and trial, and come out and find that yes, it's real, it's real. I think that is all wrapped up in this so-familiar word. And I think, dear friends, that is exactly what Jesus meant when saying this to Simon Peter, "Flesh and blood? No! My Father in heaven... on this I'll build, on this I'll *build* My church and building on *this*, the very gates of hades shall not prevail against it." You'll survive if it's like that, if it's like that.

So, the issue in the end, is just this: how much, really, of the Lord, the Father in heaven, is there in us? Not our "Christian" birth, upbringing, home, Sunday School, meetings, or preachers, or even our Bible as a book, and all our reading. Not that. All good in its place as useful, but in the end, it's how much do people meet of the Lord in us? Well, that is the real test, isn't it? The real test of our Christianity is not our Peter, Simon Peter protestations, but how much of the Lord is met.

And didn't they meet the Lord in Peter on the day of Pentecost and afterward? You meet the Lord in Peter's letters. How much of the Lord am I meeting? How much of real spiritual fellowship on the basis of the Lord is there? Not how much of Christianity! Well, I said we'll be tested on this, sooner or later, perhaps repeatedly, how much it is.

Now, I'm not passing any judgment or saying for a moment that this is not the case with you, but what I am saying is this: understand the meaning of your testings and your trials; your dark times. It is to *prove* what is of God! *Prove* what is of God and you and I, least of all, want to be in a false position. Isn't that true? Do you pray, "Lord, save me from a false position in Christianity. May it be real!" May it be real in yourself and, whatever way we put it, may it be after this kind. Flesh and blood? No, but "My *Father in heaven* made it known to you". *He* did it.

So we pray and ask, Lord, that through all testings and trials, when the Cross is being wrought so deeply to our natural undoing and breaking down, it may be found that there is that which *cannot* be destroyed; God has done it, it is Himself. And it abides forever. So be it, for Thy glory's sake.