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The Voice of the Son of God

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: John 5:25, 28; 11:43; 6:63, 65; 8:43; 10:4,5; 10:16.

It is well known that with John 11 a transition has taken place. Up to chapter 10 a series of spiritual truths and principles has been very largely enunciated and made practical in relation to a number of individuals. With chapter 10 those truths are taken up in a collective way, and from there onward the Lord Jesus is found more particularly occupied with a special company. Chapter 11 stands exactly half-way, with ten chapters on either side. In this position it gathers up all that has gone before, and represents what will be the ultimate issue. Lazarus is central in both position and meaning, so far as Christ's glory is concerned. The company which is found together at the table, occasioned by the raising of Lazarus, sets forth two things (and we must always bear in mind the double aspect of things in the Scriptures, the earthly and the heavenly, the temporal and the spiritual). Those two things here are Israel and the Church. Israel's history will be exactly that of Lazarus. A sickness in which Christ will not intervene. He will deliberately remain away from Israel (as such) - although greatly loved - until no hope remains along any line but a miraculous intervention. Israel will "stink" in the nostrils of the world, and, rather than a remedying, only by a resurrection as from the dead, by the voice of *the Son of God - Jesus Christ*, will they have a Divine future.

The other thing here is that the Church comes right into view typically and in principle with the resurrection of Lazarus and the company as gathered. The Church is the company of those who have their very being only and solely by reason of the resurrection miracle. This is quite clearly and finally stated in the most "Church" part of the Bible, the letter to the Ephesians. "And you did he

quicken, when *ye were dead* through your trespasses and sins... and made us to sit with him in the heavenlies" (2:1,6). ("Lazarus was one of them that sat at meat with him" John 12:2). But, when we have said that, we have not touched the deepest note in the matter. The very heart of this position is found in the words in John 5:25, "The dead shall hear the voice of the Son God".

Firstly, it is obvious that something more than a physical faculty of hearing is in mind. The dead have no such faculty, there must be a hearing which is not natural, which is deeper and more inward than the natural. Nor is it just that by God speaking some actual result occurs. There is a *hearing* which has that result. Briefly then, a living relationship with Christ and its corporate expression in what is called His "Body" - "the Church" - is the result of a hearing of His voice which, while it may come through spoken and audible words, is more than they. It is possible to hear the verbal statement of truth, and that many times and over many years, but not to have heard His *voice*. It is possible, after having heard the truths often and long, suddenly to hear the voice, and the result to be as though we had never before heard at all, all is so new and wonderful. Living relationship with Christ is not an emotional or intellectual or volitional reaction to a presentation of Gospel truths; it is not by an influenced and persuaded signing of a card or "deciding for Christ"; it is not the effect of hot air evangelistic effort in which the soul is played upon, and all sorts of superficial and theatrical elements are brought into play. All this may have an apparent success on a large scale, but - always allowing for the sovereignty of God to reach some hearts through His Word - much of this may only be adding to the great tragedy with which the Church is confronted as one of its most difficult problems, namely a cheap regard for the Christian life, a mass of people who "have tried it and found it disappointing", and a great number of "Christians" who have no real living and growing knowledge of the Lord. The fact that there is so much indifference to Christianity today and so little taking of it seriously is largely due to its having been vitiated and cheapened. No, the basis of everything in the New Testament is that, beyond anything audible, vocal, natural, temporal, earthly, the voice of the Son of God was heard deep down in the human spirit. This may or it may not be a voice of actual words, but when it happens the one concerned is truly able to say "The Lord has spoken to me", or "I know that the Lord has made me aware of His will". It is a voice - a power - *through* words, or without them, but not just words alone.

I said that everything depends upon this. "They that hear shall live". Our very life - in the Divine sense - depends upon it. Our salvation issues from it. But what is true initially is true in principle continuously. For all the major decisions in life (*obvious and unmistakable duties excepted*) it must be on this wise. Paul based his whole ministry, and its specific aspects, upon this principle. When God speaks in this way, something is done, not only said. We know that something has happened to us or in us. Such a knowledge or work in us is absolutely essential to stability. We know of those who have radically and thoroughly changed their strongest positions more than once in the course of a few years. After taking up truth and affirming that it was the greatest thing that God had shown them, they subsequently repudiated it, and changed their attitude to it. When this happens there is only one thing to be said, apart from willful and deliberate disobedience, and that is that they never received it in the first place from heaven, but from men. It came by mental and emotional acceptance, either by hearing or reading and study. So strong was the impact, so seeming to answer a need or provide a way of self-realization, that it was taken up in the soul with zest. And those concerned were not really broken in soul and emptied to the dust. Thus, not being a hearing in the spirit, beyond nature, of the voice of the Son of God, it could not last, and the life has become characterised by lack of permanence. Of course this is quite a different matter from the changes which mark true development and growth. Very big changes may take place here, but not in our basic revelation. It is most important that, as to the basic knowledge of the will of God and revelation

of Himself to us, we are at the end where we were at the beginning, although enlarged and perhaps with a change of merely outward features.

Further, in the moment when God speaks thus to us in Christ, eternity has broken through time; the super-temporal has been registered upon us. All that belongs merely to time and earth has been suspended, and in that moment that which was in God's mind "before the world was", and that which is His thought unto the ages of the ages yet to be is brought to our lives. Our very existence is bound up with it. I do not mean that our continuity is involved and that there is the peril of annihilation; but the very fact of our existence, of our having a being at all, is now to have its meaning for us, or has drawn near. Yes, it is, for all Divine intention, an eternal moment; "Upon this moment hangs eternity".

Then again, and closely related to what we have just said, it is most solemnly important to recognize that this hearing of the voice of the Son of God is a sovereign act of God. That is, it is when and as He alone chooses. Unless God speaks, all men's speaking is dead. Neither those who are in view nor those who are concerned for them can choose the time. That sovereign decision is most clearly seen in Christ's attitude over Lazarus. There were many human factors at work, and He was involved in misunderstanding by His behaviour, but, nevertheless, He would not move until the time of God had come. The point for the moment is this: when that voice is heard it is God's time, and we can never say if or when that time will be again. In the passages at the head of this message, we have included that strange one, "Why do ye not understand my speech? Even because ye cannot hear my word" (John 8:43). God had spoken, and they had not responded. and now they *cannot* hear, even when He speaks. On the Damascus road only Saul heard the voice. Those that travelled with him only heard the sound (Acts 9:7. marg., 26:14). There is a recorded instance of the same thing in the life of Christ (John 12:28,29).

Then, a question arises. What is the first and immediate effect of God speaking to us? It will not necessarily be exhilaration. Mere exhilaration may mean something false. Usually there will be no *natural* gratification resulting. Our natural interests and likes will have little or no place. Exhilaration is not necessarily *life*. If it is only exhilaration we should pause and examine ourselves. There is a great difference between rest, peace, and quiet joy, and mere exhilaration. It may more likely be a solemn awe and fearfulness, but with quiet reassurance.

The first effect of hearing the voice of the Son of God is the gift of faith. What could not before be contemplated now becomes possible. What was hopeless - and we knew it - is now a living prospect. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ Who according to His great mercy begat us again unto a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead..." (1 Peter 1:3). It is a resurrection hope. How hopeless and impossible the situation was with Lazarus until he heard the voice of the Son of God! Now, Paul says, "by grace have ye been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8). He also says, "Faith cometh by hearing" (Romans 10:17). But it is the kind of hearing of which we have spoken. The strain goes out of life when faith in God enters, and the impossible mountains are no longer impossible.

We are nearing the end, but two things remain to be mentioned. If the dead are to hear the voice of the Son of God and live, it will only be the dead who do so. We have seen that the Lord Jesus was very deliberate in His determination that Lazarus should really be dead before He came on the scene. He first used figurative language. "Our friend Lazarus sleepeth", but His disciples did not know His meaning, wherefore He said emphatically, "Lazarus is dead". The sisters knew what the

state would be ordinarily after four days in an Easter clime and tomb. Was Lazarus dead? Indeed he was! This was essential to the Divine principle. We are too much alive, in our own efforts, interests, struggles, ambitions, activities, works, etc. to stand a chance of hearing this voice of the Son of God. Therefore our works are so much "dead works". There is the life of nature, but not the life of God. So many voices fill our ears, religious as well as worldly, and a mixture of both. If the greatest thing that can happen to mortals is to happen to us, we, like Paul, will have to be smitten to the ground and hear a voice (Acts 9:4). How often, under the hand of God has it been that the end has been the beginning. We have been brought to a place of despair and utter helplessness, so that like Paul we have "despaired of life", not only or necessarily physically, but spiritually. But afterward we have found that this was sovereignty at work in relation to an entirely new thing. There really is no hope until we are dead.

"I lay in dust life's glory dead, And from the ground there blossoms red Life that shall endless be".

Finally. What is the nature of your relationship with Christ? You may believe in the Christian doctrine of the Deity of Christ, and believe in it very intensely. But if it is only doctrine, a tenet of the Creed, an objective fact concerning Christ, it will not carry you through the terrific experiences which lie in the path of true Christians. John said that the object of his writing his Gospel was that we might believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and that believing we might have life in His name. But he took pains to show that those who did so believe, had an experimental basis for their faith. How and why do you believe? Can you say truly - "because something has happened in me for which there is no accounting apart from God Himself. Emotions, reasonings, persuasions, cannot account for it. Human personalities, psychology, or any human or natural factor cannot account for it. It required God Almighty, and I found Him in Jesus Christ. It was the voice of the *Son of God*, and I lived, and live".