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## Vessels of Ministry

*by T. Austin-Sparks*

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"Moreover the tabernacle and all *the vessels of the ministry* he sprinkled in like manner with the blood" (Hebrews 9:21).

In thinking about that phrase, "the vessels of the ministry", I am impressed with the largeness of the number of vessels that there were connected with the tabernacle. Here there is an inclusive reference - "all the vessels of the ministry", all the vessels of the tabernacle. If you look at the record of the making of the tabernacle, you will find that there were many vessels, and every major part of the tabernacle had its own vessels. Reference is made to the altar and all its vessels, the laver and its vessels, the table of shewbread and its vessels, the candlestick or lampstand and its vessels. The number is not given, but "all its vessels" is a common phrase, and sometimes their particular use is mentioned. For instance, as to the table of shewbread, strangely enough, it says that all the vessels, made of gold, were for pouring out (Exod. 25:29, 37:16; Num. 4:7). Now, we do not know anything as to the content of the table, other than that it had the loaves, and yet connected with the table there were vessels of gold for pouring out.

That by the way, as to the number of vessels, the variety of vessels; but the specific use of every vessel is something impressive in the tabernacle, and every vessel was anointed with the blood and with the oil. That would be worth looking into in detail, but we shall not do so now. We shall simply take the spiritual implication of the fact that in the Lord's house, and for its service, its ministry, there are very many vessels. They have as many uses as there are vessels - a variety of uses. Every one of them has its own particular function, and all the vessels, no matter how small and

insignificant, and however inferior might seem their function, even to the very snuffers for getting rid of the unpleasant elements of smoke and burnt-out wick, they all come under the anointing. Now, there are the corresponding ministries in the spiritual House of God, but I am not going to speak about them at this time. I am simply pointing out that there are these many vessels, and every one to serve a purpose, and no matter how small their measure and menial their purpose, the same anointing belongs to the small as to the great. They all share the one anointing to fulfil their purpose.

### **The Sovereignty of God in the Choice of the Vessel**

The first thing I want to point out in that connection is the sovereignty of God in the choosing and the appointing of every vessel. This was true of the smallest vessel of the tabernacle. As with the whole tabernacle, the smallest vessel of ministry was according to the pattern in the heavenlies. It was a part of the comprehensive pattern, and the whole pattern came down to it. The Lord never left any place for man to make it out of his own mind, not even the smallest thing to serve Him in the tabernacle. The Lord did not say, 'Now, it is most important that the tabernacle at large, the great framework and these major things, should be exactly as I have prescribed; but as to all the little things that will have to be brought in and will be necessary and useful - well, I leave that to you'. He never did anything like that. Every part, every little vessel of ministry, took its character from the whole heavenly pattern, and was governed by the sovereign thought of God. God sovereignly kept in His own hands the design of the smallest part, both as to its nature and as to its function.

The sovereignty of God as to our place as a vessel of ministry is something that calls for a real attitude and exercise of faith. We are all the vessels of ministry. The sovereignty of God has chosen us in Christ. I expect we are all prepared to agree that Saul of Tarsus was a chosen vessel. As the Lord said to Ananias: "he is a chosen vessel unto me" (Acts 9:15). We will all agree that that was so, as regards Saul, and that it was a Divine sovereign act that secured that vessel from all eternity. But the same sovereignty, the same eternal purpose, governs every smaller vessel. Paul, of whom it was said that he was a chosen vessel, will later on write: "he chose us in him"; not 'he chose me particularly', but "he chose us in him before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4).

Do remember that this matter of election and predestination is related to function, to purpose - not to salvation. It is related to purpose. God has chosen us in His sovereignty, and has chosen us to serve as a part of the whole.

We must set aside the whole idea of typology, just write it off as very nice, very interesting, all right as illustration for the kindergarten, but nothing more than a set of pretty pictures for children, if we are not going to say that the tabernacle, from centre to circumference, from the whole framework to the last small vessel of ministry, represents Christ. It is the one all-inclusive Christ, and in every fragment Christ is to be found. If that is not true, then our interpretation is just playing at things; but if it is true, then every small part is a part of Christ, and is chosen in Him for *the* comprehensive purpose of Christ - God's purpose concerning His Son.

There is one thing that we shall have to settle sooner or later, if we are not going to be as it were suspended between heaven and earth in indefiniteness and uncertainty, missing the mark and being misfits, and, as we say, cutting no ice. In Christ, by the grace of God, I am a vessel of mercy, and there relates to me, in the sovereignty of God, by my being chosen and called, a function, a ministry, an aspect of the purpose of God concerning His Son. It is in the sovereignty of God that I

am now in Christ. So far as the initiative was concerned, it was not my doing to get into Christ. I should never have got into Christ by my own initiative; I should never have been brought to the Lord by my own choice. 'We did not choose Him but He chose us': that is perfectly true - the initiative was with the Lord. So we have got to settle down on this fact that we are in Christ, and not by our own choice or initiative, much as we may have longed for it. We would not have done it if God had not done it; sovereign grace has done it. We are in Christ, and therefore we are a part of Christ, and whether it be a spoon or a cup or any one of the numerous vessels, there is a specific function for which I am called in Christ, a ministry of the tabernacle which is my ministry.

You see, the thing which governs this is the numerous ministries. What a variety of ministries! I do not know if it would be true to say that there were not two vessels exactly alike in the tabernacle, but I do know that there were very many vessels and a great variety of uses, and every one was needed. In the same way, if we were missing, something would be lost in the whole tabernacle, there would be a weakness in the whole heavenly system, and that comes down to you and to me.

Now, that is the beginning of service, where we in faith apprehend that. I am in Christ: therefore that means that I have been chosen in Him before the foundation of the world. I am an elect vessel. I may not seem as important as some, but that depends entirely upon the standpoint from which you view importance. Are you viewing importance from the standpoint of size, or are you viewing importance from the standpoint of indispensability? A pin may be as indispensable as the garment which it holds up! It depends entirely upon the particular standpoint from which you are viewing importance. These little things on the tabernacle and on the altar and lying by the lampstand - they were indispensable, and it was that that gave them their importance. Do you think that God ever chose us in Christ out of His sovereignty if He had no need, that He just did it for the sake of doing it, without any real meaning or purpose of importance? Not at all! God is not like that. You look into Nature and you see importance attached to very small things, and if those small things fail, a whole big system may break down. I would like to follow that out and illustrate it, but the statement will be enough.

First of all, the sovereignty of God governs our being in Christ: and that sovereignty means that there is a purpose for our being in Christ, and that that purpose is attached to every one of us, and it may be an aspect of the purpose which is our peculiar vocation or function in the sovereignty of God. Would you adjust yourself to that first of all? Come away from the general to the particular, in your view of life and of yourself; come away from the indefinite; come right away from that questioning, doubting, wondering whether there is anything at all that relates to you, whether you have a place. It is faith that has to take a very deliberate attitude and step in relation to this.

### **The Sovereignty of God in the Making of the Vessel**

Then the second thing is that the sovereignty of God is connected with the making of the vessel; not only with the choosing of its existence and of its function, but with its making. Do you not feel sometimes that perhaps our God is too small, too little - the God that we think of? The God that we have made according to our mind is far too small. To Jeremiah, the Lord said: "Before I formed thee... I knew thee, and before thou camest forth... I sanctified thee" (Jeremiah 1:5). 'I formed you; before you had a physical being, I had known you and formed you and called you'. And Jeremiah responded, "I cannot speak: for I am a child". If the Lord meant anything at all by telling Jeremiah that He formed him and chose him before he had a being, He must have meant: 'Well, you are just as I made you; I made you to serve a purpose like that. If I had wanted to make you differently, I

could have done so. You think you would have been more suitable if you had been made differently; you think you would be able to do very much better if only you were made differently. You think I have made a mistake in the way you are made. All the time you are saying, "I am not made that way, I am not made for this, I am not made for that"; and you are really saying, "The Lord has made a mistake in choosing me"; or else, "I have got into the wrong place, I am not made for this". It is a thing about which most of us in our lives have had a bad time. Many a servant of God, finding himself or herself in a very onerous situation, a very responsible position, has cried out, 'Oh, if only I had been made for this!' - under a deep sense of being unfitted, unqualified for the work and the position. The thing is beyond us. Are we going to close down on that and say that is so? 'The Lord did not know anything about us when He called us; and the Lord never had any hand either in our being made or in our call. If the Lord had known about us, if He had really known what sort of people we are, He would not have chosen us for this'. That is the world in which we live and reason and argue.

The Lord said to Moses: "I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry...; and I am come down to deliver them. Come now..., and I will send thee...." (Exod. 3:7,8,10). Moses said, 'I cannot speak! You have chosen the wrong one; You need somebody who has a facility that I have not got - You really need a different kind of man!' (Exod. 4:10,13). The Lord said: "Who hath made man's mouth?" (vs. 11). 'Did I make your mouth? If I did, I made it as it is.' It was the same issue as with Jeremiah. "I have... set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, and to destroy and to overthrow; to build, and to plant" (Jer. 1:10). "I cannot speak". Did the Lord say, 'I am sorry, Jeremiah, I have made a mistake - I have got the wrong man!?' No! The Lord touched Jeremiah's mouth and said: "I have put my words in thy mouth" (vs. 9). "To whomsoever I shall send thee thou shalt go".

What does this mean?

It means that there is a sovereignty behind even the way we are made, when God gets hold of us, and He is going to be glorified, not in efficient, able vessels that could say, 'Well, you see, I am thoroughly well qualified for the job that I am in'. If there is anything like that, we shall have to come to another recognition about vessels, which we will see presently. But for the moment let us keep to this: there is a sovereignty in the choice of us, and God knows all about how we are made. He knows all about the disadvantages, the handicaps, the limitations; He knows what lies in the background. He knows all about it, and exactly how we are made; and, knowing all about it, He has chosen us. God did not choose us after we were made. He chose us before. He went back behind everything - and God is further behind things than we realize - behind our lives, behind what we call the misfortunes, what we call the handicaps; He is behind them all. Do you believe that? It is very difficult to believe sometimes. You are so overwhelmed with the sense of your limitations, your lack of qualification.

Is it not just here that we are not only vessels of mercy, but vessels of glory? What is the vessel for? - to show forth its own excellencies, or 'the excellencies of Him who called us'? (1 Pet. 2:9). The excellencies of the Lord can only be seen when they are not overshadowed by any human excellencies; when it is just frail vessels, poor vessels - and His glory. It is only another way of expressing what Paul said to the Corinthians: "Ye behold your calling, brethren". 'Have a look at the calling, the selection, that is represented by the Church in Corinth; have a look at the personnel of the Church in Corinth; see what calling means where the personnel is concerned'. "Not many wise..., not many mighty, not many noble... but God chose the foolish things... the weak things... the base things... the things that are despised... the things that are not, that he might bring to nought the

things that are" (1 Cor. 1:26-28). Sovereignty lies behind what we are in ourselves, to make us then what He wants us to be.

### **The Lord's Sovereignty in Dealing With the Vessel**

The sovereignty that constitutes us for His service, firstly naturally and then spiritually, will then work out in this particular way that the Lord is taking, which, according to His sovereign wisdom and sovereign judgment, is the way most suited to - perhaps the only way to - the end that He has in view. You have to believe that. Why does the Lord deal with me thus? Why do I have this peculiar experience and history, so different from many? Why do I go this way? Why is the Lord dealing with me like this? Every one of us has a personal history with God, and usually in our personal history with God there is plenty of room for a 'Why?'. In His sovereignty, He is taking the way with you and with me which His wisdom has decided is the way of reaching His end where we are concerned. He could not do that with others. He has to do it in the way that He considers suitable to each case. Every vessel has to be shaped as though it were the only one for that particular purpose. God does not work on the mass-production basis with His servants. Every one is a special separate object, and He deals with that one in a peculiar way. There is something about that one's history which is, to the one who is concerned, their own lonely life with God; that is, there is much that no one can share or understand. God has, as it were, singled them out as individuals. That is His sovereign dealing with us. Do you believe that? We have to take an attitude of faith on all these matters, or we shall simply go round in a circle, we shall be suspended, held up, get nowhere, we shall have no particular impact.

### **The Lord's Need for Our Co-operation**

I close with two other things which are bound up with what I have said. One is that, in His formation of us according to His own thought and intention, the Lord counts upon our co-operation. To use the well-known figure of Jeremiah 18, He may come up against something in the clay which resists His hand, which stands out against the way that He is taking, which is a 'No' to Him, which is a reservation, a lack of compliance, and just at that point the whole glorious purpose may come under arrest. It is just at that point that we may be rendered a misfit, perhaps for the rest of our lives. The Divine intentions of grace may be defeated. It may be at that point that the history of a circle begins. We take a long tour round, and come back to the same place, and find that, after all, we have made no progress: a lot of time has been lost, a lot of value has been forfeited, and we are just back where we were before; we have not got past that. That has to be cleared up, of however long standing it may be - maybe months, maybe years - but not until it is cleared up, not until there is a yielding, a response to the Lord there on that point, do we take up the straight road again.

### **The Lord's Emptying and Filling of the Vessel**

The other thing is this - that God retains the right to fill and use the vessel, and therefore, as a part of His sovereignty, He must empty it of everything but Himself. Paul said: "Most gladly therefore will I... glory in my weakness, that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (2 Cor. 12:9). That is an emptied vessel, a vessel emptied of its own strength, its own wisdom, its own will, its own way; emptied because God reserves the right to occupy the vessel to the full; He will not co-occupy with anything of man. The emptying may explain much. If we have any fullness of ourselves, fullness of any kind that is ours, then we shall not come to the purpose of God until it is all got rid of, and we are emptied out, for it is emptied vessels that God fills. It has always been so.

Here are some tremendous propositions! However challenging they are to faith - and they are challenging - take these steps one by one.

Firstly, am I chosen of God, or is this all my doing? Am I a Christian, am I saved, am I in Christ, because I have done it all, or has the Lord done this? And, if I have been on the way for some time, have I had sufficient experience to know that, if I had done it, I would have been out long ago? It was the Lord who did it, and the Lord who has held me. There is every evidence that the Lord is in this matter, with initiative and sovereignty. I belong to Him; and what does that imply? It implies a sovereignty of God in my choice, in my election, in my being chosen in God.

Secondly, why am I chosen in Christ? Just to be there and just to be saved? Does election and predestination relate to my being saved? Can I accept that - which must carry with it the implication that all are not elected to be saved, and God is arbitrary? Oh no, I cannot believe that! No; election relates to purpose. Then am I elect according to the purpose?

Further, is not that purpose many-sided? Does not the whole Word, Old and New Testaments, show that there is a many-sidedness to the purpose that is centred in Christ? I must, then, have some place in it, which is my place; and, if that is true, does God know all about it, all about me - has He chosen me because I am so suited and fitted and qualified for it? No! I very soon get disillusioned about that if I have any such ideas. The last thing for which I am qualified is the thing for which God has called me. He has to do all the qualifying.

So then, taking it stage by stage, let us get right to the Lord about it - let us settle this matter, and come to rest; it may be with a larger apprehension of the Lord, having a bigger Lord. He cannot be bigger than He is, but He can be bigger than we make Him. Oh, for a bigger God and Lord! That is our need. If we do get this far greater, more comprehensive faith in the Lord, we shall be saved from so much that now brings us into arrest, and puts us out, because of this and that and something else - all implying that the Lord does not understand, the Lord never took this into account, the Lord must have made a mistake. It is not so; the Lord knows all about it.

May the Lord make His word of some help and value, and enable us to take quite a definite attitude, for much may be hanging upon the attitude that we take, and upon our response to the Lord, in this matter.