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"What Was in the New Cruse"

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: 2 Kings 2:19-22. Luke 4:20-30.

We have spoken before in this connection mainly of the new cruse which the prophet Elisha called for, and while we may have our thoughts somewhat directed to the new cruse, it is rather more this time what was in it that is to have our emphasis - the salt.

We know very well that salt in the Word of God is a type of incorruption and of the element of permanence because of incorruption. You are familiar with all the details of this story of Elisha and the men of Jericho, and you are also familiar with the details concerning the history of Jericho and what led to the state of things which is here. You will remember the command of the Lord to destroy Jericho, and when Jericho was overthrown and wholly devoted, Joshua pronounced the judgment on Jericho, and held, so to speak, a curse which would come upon the man who would seek to rebuild Jericho. Jericho lay under a curse. That curse was veritably fulfilled in the case of the man who did, years after, rebuild Jericho. He found death coming into his domestic life at its beginning and at its end. Jericho thus lying under a curse partook in its very source of the elements of the curse.

The waters which ought to have been waters of life became the waters of death, and all the produce never reached its full ripeness, but came short; reached a certain point of development and there under arrest fell to the ground and proved all labours to be in vain. Well, that is the situation and we know that story well. In such conditions the men of Jericho came to the prophet, pointed out that the situation of the city was quite pleasant, but all that was overshadowed by the state of the waters

and this hand of the curse. Elisha called for this new cruse and for salt, and he went to the spring of the waters and from his new cruse he cast salt into the spring and all the streams were healed. Get the spring right and everything else is right. The features of the curse were removed and life came in the place of death, fruitfulness in the place of barrenness: fruitfulness and joy came in labour where labour had been a very joyless and disappointing thing. That is a parable. A parable, the features of which are very obvious. Carried into the New Testament we find the historic outworking of it.

The Old Vessel Rejected

That passage which we have read from Luke 4 is one of those fragments which bear upon the old vessel which is being set aside because lying under judgment and a curse. Judaism was that. Israel was now lying under the curse virtually. We know that literally the Lord Jesus in cursing the fig tree showed God's attitude towards Judaism at that time. No longer acceptable. Cursed and dead. Fruitless and of no more service to the Lord. And here in Luke 4 the Lord Jesus is showing that that which *had* been His no more stands in the place of Divine acceptance; that history is closed and Judaism lies under that curse, the marks of which will be right through the dispensation. That is all vanity, failure, never coming to any full issue, disappointing, defeat, breakdown, impotence! That, of course, is very clearly seen in the history of the Jews since that time until now. That as a people they are a removed vessel of the Lord and they lie there where they can never bring forth that fruit to perfection which satisfies the heart of God. But what the Lord Jesus also makes clear in this passage in Luke is that the Lord will have a vessel, and that He goes outside of that people for His vessel, secures it for His own satisfaction, from without, and brings it into the place of life and fruitfulness to His own glory.

These two illustrations taken from the life of Israel are very rich and full in their significance. Elijah and the widow of Zarephath. You will remember the two features of that incident, that the brook failed in one place and the Lord said: "Arise, get thee to Zarephath... I have commanded a widow woman there to sustain thee." And when he arrived there was but the remaining fragment of a meal in the barrel and oil in the cruse. We know the issue, but it also is a parable. The meal is the Lord Jesus in type of the bread, and the oil the Holy Spirit, and the Lord Jesus by the Spirit made all sufficient, a never failing supply where the Lord can find that which really serves His own heart purpose; though it be outside of what has been the governing circle.

Then the second parable of Naaman the leper. You remember the story. There are three themes in that also. "Go wash in Jordan seven times." Naaman after the flesh felt that that was a very great humiliation. "Are not Abana and Pharpar better... can I not wash in them and be clean?" The flesh in its pride finds it difficult to bow to the waters of Jordan. The flesh always does find Jordan a great come down. But there was the way, he could take it or leave it. Your salvation is that way and no other way, and the flesh must come God's way, or have no part in the blessing of the Lord.

So at length Naaman was prevailed upon by wisdom to yield to this way, and he went to Jordan, and he got spiritual perfection and blessing. How? Seven times, - spiritual perfection. How? By dying to himself, and being buried, and by rising again. The death and burial of the flesh in Jordan and the rising in newness of life. All these elements are back of what the Lord is saying. He is pointing out that one vessel can no longer serve His purpose. A new cruse is necessary and a new cruse is that which has had one history in the flesh closed for ever in the grave of the Lord Jesus, and is now a new creation in the sense of a life which is from above in resurrection. A new vessel constituted on

resurrection ground. That is what the Lord seeks for and that is what is here clearly in view in the Old Testament illustration and in the New Testament historic facts.

The New Vessel Brought In

It was that which, of course, came clearly in with the book of the Acts, or with the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. A new cruse. God's Christ had died and been buried, and raised; one whole realm and nature of things had past in His death. Now a new was brought in, and with the book of the Acts, and especially at Pentecost, we see the new cruse with the salt in it. That is, the power of His resurrection, the life which is triumphant over death; the incorruptible life of Christ Risen, within a vessel, by which all futile labours are turned to triumphant labours; by which all failing fruitfulness is turned to permanent fruitfulness; by which all the disappointment of strength and life expended in vain is turned to glorious triumph. Now all those elements are perfectly clear, plain, simply recognised in these passages, and I have very little to do but to just put my finger upon familiar truth for its fresh emphasis.

We know, of course, the necessity for the new cruse. We know it personally. We know quite well that so far as the Lord's things are concerned we by nature are ruled out, that it is all vanity. Not all will acknowledge that. They still think that they can serve God in the strength and equipment of nature, and are trying to do so. And the destiny is written large throughout the Word of God; that in the end it will prove to be labour in vain, that fruit will not go right through to full ripeness; the end will be great disappointment. But we know and have accepted that, so that as far as we are concerned the old vessel of our natural lives cannot serve the eternal purposes of God, and we have accepted that quite definitely and have declared our acceptance thereof inasmuch as we have testified to it in our baptism, and inasmuch as Christ died, we died in Him.

That Your Fruit Should Abide

I hope that you are not thinking of trying to serve the Lord without having recognised that principle and accepted that position. You may try and you may do certain things, but you may take it that it will die, it will fail, it does not survive. You will say: We have been working pretty hard trying to do our best, have done all that we could to make the work successful, but nothing seems to come out of it. It is like working in a cul-de-sac, there is no way through. The sooner you recognise it the better; it will save you a lot of disappointment and wasted time. The Lord must have in us a new cruse, and I trust we can say that we know it is true that in Christ Jesus there is a new creation. Within us there is something which is absolutely new, something which is not of ourselves, it is something of the Lord, a vessel in which is the life which is incorruptible, indestructible, unailing; and that becomes the basis of every kind of fruitfulness that goes through to perfection. Not the energies of the flesh or of nature; not the enthusiasms of our soul; but the work that comes out through the Spirit of life in us goes right through to perfection. The basis of every kind of perfection is the life of the Spirit, within this new vessel of our renewed spirits.

I will not dwell upon the various kinds of fruits that are borne, or various kinds of perfection to which we come, but comprehend them all in the one statement. All that I want to stress is this fact that what the Lord wants, and needs in every one of us, is that which is the testimony to resurrection, which is the working power of incorruptible life. That means that your life and mine will never cease in its value. We may go in the will of God, we may be called from this scene at any time, but in so far as we have wrought in the energy of an incorruptible life, our life goes on in its value and its

fruitfulness here. That is the explanation and the secret of New Testament lives. Why, these New Testament saints are so throbbing with life today! You cannot take up your New Testament at any moment if the life of the Lord is free within you without finding something living. Paul, Peter, John speak in a living way. They are as living today as ever they were to men in the days of their flesh. We have as living communion with them today as ever people did then: being dead they yet speak. It is because then their hearts and actions were in the power of an endless life. And if this world were to go on for as many centuries as it has gone on their word would be still just the same because the nature of this life is that it grows, increases.

The Increase of God

Incorruptible life does not begin, continue, and end in the same degree. It may begin in a spring and end in an ocean. The river of Ezekiel deepens and widens as it goes on toward the sea: an illustration of the life of the Risen Lord. That is why so often in a new movement of the Lord, say in a conference, we may start with a trickle and end with a river. It works again and again. At the end we find we have a great deal more than we had at the beginning. The natural order of things is just the other way. I am not talking about the physical or mental side of things, I am talking about spiritual things. There may be tremendous demands ahead. We can take it that if we are living on this principle of the risen life of the Lord Jesus, all those demands will be met as they are demands which arise in the way of the Lord's will and call. We are working upon a principle which means increase not decrease; life not death; fulness not emptiness; going through and not stopping short. It is just the opposite of nature. The Lord wants everything on that principle.

Spontaneous: Not Organised

And mark you it is spontaneous. It just happens as you go on with the Lord. You find that it comes to pass. The spontaneity of resurrection life is one of the great blessings that it carries with it. Let me especially, for my younger friends, point your attention to the difference between the old dispensation and the new in this matter. If you had been a member of Israel in the Old Testament, you would have had a mass of detailed instructions and commands put in your hand and been told that you have got to keep all that: to go to this meeting and that; be here on the spot when you are required - you *must*, you *must!* and if not then woe betide you. That is the old dispensation. It was something like a very heavy yoke put upon shoulders, and it was not optional whether you went to the feast or not, you had to go. But when you come in to the book of the Acts all that has gone. Don't think those people in the book of the Acts went to meetings because they had to. You do not start with meetings in Acts, you start with living individuals who, because something has happened in them, came together spontaneously and had a good time. The meetings are the outcome of something else.

They have gatherings because they are all brought together by reason of one common thing. It is spontaneous. In the book of the Acts they never put up churches and buildings and put notices outside, and invitations, and circularised the district, and went round asking people to come to the meeting. What happened was that a few individuals became possessed of life, they had that in common, and that brought them together, and they had blessed times together, two's and three's in private houses. That is how it grew. And when the Lord saw there was a danger of their becoming something big in itself, and making something of these gatherings as such, He scattered them into fragments. His order is always to keep things spontaneous and never fixed; life is His principle.

For myself I have long ago finished with that system that demands that I shall do things from the outside, being paid to preach so many times a week, etc., etc.. It must be life or else we will not have it. The new order of God is life. The Lord save us and give us the courage to be perfectly frank, and if we have not got life, to stand back and not allow ourselves to be carried on by a merely accepted system of things.

Now, you younger folk, do not attend meetings because you have got to. Ask the Lord to put life into you that will turn things that are not supposed to be meetings into meetings. It is a blessed thing to see that done. It must not be something that we must do or we will get frowns and looks and so on. No, but the whole thing inwardly answering to the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus. The Lord's new vessel is to be marked in that way by His own Divine life.

Local Assemblies as Vessels

That has not only to be true in the individual way. The Lord does need today to have His corporate instrument after this character. Those companies of His people, local assemblies, and the whole thing spiritually in oneness, in the place where it is not the deadness of the letter but where it is the aliveness of the Spirit.

Israel had all the oracles of God and all the outward framework of things to perfection. It was all going on just exactly as the Word described. The priest still dressed as prescribed in the Word of God, and the sacrifices were still offered, and the orders of sacrifices; the feasts still kept according to the Word, but the whole thing was without life. Everything going on, yet death. It is just possible for us to lose the life and still go on with the order, with the system, the doctrine. We can have all the New Testament doctrine, we may have all the perfection of the framework of the New Testament truth, and just fail to be what is necessary because the power of His life is not there.

Well, what was in my heart was that the Lord wanted a further emphasis upon this, that His thought pre-eminently is that all those who represent Him, and all that which truly represents Him shall have the one predominant characteristic, its hallmark should be the power of Christ's resurrection. I feel that is the place where the Lord wants the hammer to come down once more. It is not in the whole system of teaching that the Lord will find His fullest pleasure, it will be in that that teaching has the life of the Risen Lord flowing through it; and you and I are living vessels of life, His own resurrection life.

It is a new kind of thing and it is altogether a new cruse that is necessary. It is newness of life. The Greek word, *kainos*, means something that never was before; not just freshness. Some people mix the two Greek words. One means freshness like getting up fresh in the morning. This is not the word that is used in connection with this life. It is the word which means a life which never was before, it is brand new. And the Lord does not put His brand new things into old vessels. He must have vessels suitable to the content, and so He must have a new cruse for a new life; and you and I must first of all be renewed by the Holy Spirit, and then His new life being deposited within us will work out in fruit that does not die, life that does not end, work that does not break down; it goes on.

Divine Life for the Mortal Body

There is a very great reality about this. Beloved, because you and I are still here in mortal bodies, because as yet our spirits are not perfected, we are still carrying with us a body of death, we are still

carrying a soul-life which is not wholly sanctified. It is true that we carry right at the centre of our being something that, being of God, is complete and perfect, that is in us, the Lord within us; but we are carrying something else and this is subject to all kinds of sensations and variations. Physical weariness; being possessed of resurrection life does not mean you will never be physically weary; that you will say - If I had the Lord's life as I ought to have I shall never feel tired. It is not true. You still know physical and mental weariness and tiredness, and you will still know the need for getting away in detachment and quiet rest. The Lord does not save us from the ravages which come of going beyond our measure in that realm. He demands that we should recognise the need for rest and quietness, and He does not save us from the consequences of ignoring that. We shall still know physical and mental weariness and tiredness though possessed of resurrection life which in a moment when we are in a state of physical and mental exhaustion can rise up and make us as fresh as ever we were. It in itself never tires, is never weary. The testimony to that life is often borne by the background of our own weakness. The glory of that risen life is manifested by the Lord allowing us to know how it triumphs over weariness. We get to know the Lord and His things by reason of the setting of them. We have to consider - Now does the Lord want me to rest or am I giving way? If the Lord is calling to do something, though you may be tired you can know the power of resurrection to do it. There are times when He does not come in with that power.

The Variations of Soul-life

Then we carry about this soul-life of ours which causes all the sensations from which we suffer. Oh, the variations of our soul life! Some are more variable than others. Sometimes we feel one way and sometimes another, and sometimes we do not know how we feel and there is a swirl and change in our soul-life; and there are times when without any explanation at all a darkness comes over our spirits and a sensation of the unreality of things. Everything at other times may be most real to us, but we may feel now the unreality of the things which were so much to us. That is all to do with our soul-life. It makes no difference to the inner truth of the Lord and our spirit. We go through these variations. Have we not passed through those experiences thousands of times? While in them we raised the ultimate question: Has the Lord left us, given us up, forsaken us; everything has gone wrong, were we deceived?

You cannot have bigger questions than these; yet that passes. You come through and everything is as clear and positive as ever it was. Which of those two things are you going to take as your ground? The variations of your soul-life or the unfailing faithfulness of the Lord and His spiritual things. Our life is not in ourselves, our own souls, bodies and minds, it is in Him within us, and we have to hold on to the Lord. We may be feeling pretty bad physically, there may be a lot that contributes to our feeling everything is all wrong, all false, and unreal, nothing in it. The Lord abides and the Lord works deep down in us, we will come up back to that abiding ground. But faith requires that through the time of the changes, the conflicting elements, and feelings, we say like David: "This is my infirmity, but I will remember the days of the right hand of the Lord." This is me, this is not the Lord. This is my make-up, this is not the Lord. His life is unchanging, incorruptible, unfailing, it abides; it is deeper than our consciousness, deeper than our minds, our souls, and far deeper than our bodies. His work is an abiding work. Let us remember the power of His resurrection: that there is that where death has been defeated and robbed of its power. We may seem to be labouring, very little manifestation of the fulness of fruitfulness, but it is going on if His life is in you; it will go on and it will be manifested at some time or another. The Lord renew us continually as the vessels and make known by us the freshness and fulness of the power of His resurrection.