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A Good Beginning

by T. Austin-Sparks

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We continue a little while along the line of our earlier meditations. You know that we are thinking about the distance which is in the nature of the difference between ourselves and the Lord, which difference and distance constitutes the spiritual pilgrimage or journey of the people of God. The eleven days developed into forty years in the wilderness because of that immense difference that there is between the Lord's people and Himself, and the journey is extended or reduced according to our conformity to Him. The journey is entirely a matter of leaving what we are and being changed into what He, our Lord, is. In our previous meditation, we were especially thinking about the end of the journey, the goal, which is rest, the rest of God.

In the letter to the Hebrews which we have before us now, we know that there is a great deal said - indeed it is the ruling note of the letter - about going on, "*Let us go on to full growth*". Following what has just been said at the end of Hebrews 5 about strong meat being for full-grown men, now, says the apostle, let us leave certain things which are beginning things, and go on. It is this spiritual journey again - going on to an end. This going on and this full growth are all of a piece with the entering into rest, God's rest. You know what going on is, it is going on in rest. We know what full-growth is, it is entering into rest.

There are a lot of God's people who have the idea, who certainly convey the impression, that they think that spiritual growth, spiritual increase, spiritual maturity, spiritual advance, is marked by a tremendous intensity, a strenuousness, a strain which they carry about in their voice and in their appearance. The impression that they make is that the Christian life is a strenuous business and the more intense you are, the more spiritual you are. Let me say at once that that is a very great mistake indeed. We all know that the people who represent the greatest measure of real spiritual life, who have attained unto some of the fulness of Christ, who do represent spiritual maturity, are very

restful people. There is a restfulness about them, there is no strain in look, in manner, in voice or in the impression that they give. They are people who know something of inward rest and you feel rested by being with them, reassured, comforted, quieted; you feel that they have strength in which you want to take refuge, they are as the shadow of a great rock. If there is one thing about a great rock, it is the embodiment of the spirit of rest. If you live among hills and mountains, you know that just to stand or sit and look at them brings a sense of settledness, restfulness; they are there unmoved through all the generations. And that is something about God. We have just been singing - "*for God is rest*", and spiritual growth means that the spiritual strain goes out of our eyes, and our faces, and out of our voices, and that awful intensity, tenseness, goes. It is not a mark of spiritual growth at all. So let us get rid of false ideas about what it means to be a grown Christian. It means to be entering into His rest; we all need that.

So this letter brings the journey into view, but again it is in this sense, that it is not necessarily a long journey. It depends upon us how long the journey is and it depends upon our appropriation by faith of that which is provided for our soul's rest.

Now we shall just think for a little while together about some of the things which are necessary to growth, attainment, reaching the end, going on.

Repentance from Dead Works

This letter to the Hebrews makes one thing very clear and if we can grasp it and get into the good of it, it will be a good thing done if it were the only thing done today. It makes clear that a good beginning is very necessary. We have got to get into a clear place at the outset. That is what it says, in other words, in Hebrews 6. We have said this going on is all of a piece with the journey, the reaching of God's end. Hebrews 6, as you know, is: "*Wherefore let us cease to speak of the first principles of Christ and press on unto full growth, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God, of the teaching of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. And this will we do, if God permit.*" This beginning amounts to getting into a perfectly free place with the Lord, and the Jewish background of the people to whom the letter was written makes quite clear to us what that means - getting into a clear place with the Lord.

You know that the letter is written to Jewish Christians or Jewish believers, those who had come to Christ out of Jewry. That means that they had, in effect, passed out of an outward system of religion which was established here on the earth and had passed into a very clear spiritual place of a heavenly nature and character. You notice how the apostle speaks about these things, the pattern and the heavenly reality. In Hebrews 8 he refers to it - "*a minister of the sanctuary, and of the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man*" (Heb. 8:2). "*Who serve that which is a copy and shadow of the heavenly things, even as Moses is warned of God when he is about to make the tabernacle: for, See, saith He, that thou make all things according to the pattern that was showed thee in the mount.*"

Then in Hebrews 9 you have a further reference - "*It was necessary therefore that the copies of the things in the heavens should be cleansed with these; but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ entered not into a holy place made with hands, like in pattern to the true; but into heaven itself*" (Heb. 9:23,24).

There is a pattern and there is a reality. A pattern was here on earth, given to Moses, but the heavenly realities remained in heaven.

Now Judaism was simply a matter of that pattern of things in the heavens set up here on the earth, all formal and external, pointing on to a heavenly reality, all of which is Christ: Christ - God's tabernacle, God's dwelling-place; Christ - God's priest; Christ - God's sacrifice; Christ - God's new covenant; Christ - the heavenly Christ, "*I came down from heaven*" (John 6:38) "*I am from above*" (John 8:23). Christ - the heavenly reality; all pointing on to Him was this Jewish pattern, and when they came to Christ, they just passed from the earthbound pattern of things to the heavenly free reality, but it had proved to be a very costly way, because these earthly things, even though they be related to God and for God, and although in their inception they may have come from God, having become fixed here, are very tight things. They get a very fierce hold, and in man's hands they become a means of governing and dominating, and if you, by leaving them, infer that you repudiate them, you are not going to escape easily. You will find that they have such a hold that they can exercise a tremendously harmful effect upon your temporal life here, and Judaism was so fixed on the earth and so widespread in every town and every city, and through all the countryside. And everywhere were those who preached Moses and they could make business impossible - the carrying on of your very trade could be made impossible if you did not conform.

That sort of thing is what these believers met, and they found themselves put aside, shut out, excluded, ostracized, and in their temporal lives and their social lives put under a Ban. And with this suffering and this difficulty coming upon themselves and upon their families, they were so pressed that they looked round for an easier way. And all the time there was the strong argument that what they had left was of God, they had abandoned what God brought into being, that God had sealed it through long generations. And when you have arguments like that in times of intense suffering, when you see your children in privation and your whole life being made extremely difficult, it is not easy to stand.

So they contemplated an easier way and they were at least in danger of making a compromise: trying to remain with Christ and yet go on with the old order, having the two things together. And to save them from that going back to dead works, this letter was written to show how impossible it is to arrive at the fulness of Christ along the line of things earthly and bound, even though they be ostensibly related to God; religious things.

Thus there was this emphasis upon the necessity for an absolutely clear place at the beginning, to be with the Lord in a place where everything was of a heavenly and living character, an organic thing. And an organic thing is a thing which is governed by the principle of life, not form, not repetition, not ritual, not tradition, but just life freely working and expressing itself according to its own nature, giving the form of its own nature to the organism.

That is why the Christian life begins with a resurrection. Resurrection is the coming in of a new life. But even in this resurrection, there has got to be a stripping off and an abandoning of those things which bound in death. It was the custom there, and is in the East, to bind up a corpse in grave clothes, to bind it hand and foot, head to toe. You remember when Lazarus came out of the tomb, called by the Lord, he was bound hand and foot by grave clothes, and the Lord said, "Loose him and let him go!" Those grave clothes are what are meant here in Hebrews 6:1 - dead works, "*repentance from dead works*". What are the grave clothes of Judaism? Simply the old earthly external forms, legal orders, of religion. They are to be stripped off. There has to be a repentance from dead works. I think our idea of repentance is usually locked up with some grieving, shedding tears and being exceedingly sorry. That is not the full meaning of the word 'repentance'. Repentance simply means 'a turning away from'. When we repent of our sins, we turn away with sorrow, maybe with tears, but the actual repentance is not the tears or the sorrow; it is the turning away in exactly the opposite direction, leaving that direction of things. Repentance from dead works is leaving the grave clothes.

Perhaps you are thinking that this is hardly appropriate for a gathering like this, for we know this quite well and we have all been more or less delivered, but may I say to you that this kind of thing, these dead works or grave clothes of Judaism, is not just something external, it is a persistent tendency; it is as easy to make anything Christian into a fixed earthly system as it was to make Judaism a thing of the earth. You can make anything into a system here, something that is fixed to which you have to conform. It is a tendency which you find springing up and expressing itself always - a set of doctrines, a certain interpretation, a presentation or a place where such teaching is given, and it has become set - that thing related to that place, and I belong there and we do this and do not do that. That is pure and simple Judaism. It can become at once legal, something brought down to this earth, something that has become set, and as soon as it becomes that, the organic principle is injured.

The approach is entirely from the other direction. You and I will never go wrong and we will not fail to come to all God's thought in every direction and connection and aspect, if we are moving by the spirit of life in relation to the Lord Jesus alone. It will just come about - and this is the beauty of it, this is the rest of it, this is the mark of maturity.

Let me speak quite freely and in a perfectly homely way. There are two ways in experience as we go on with the Lord. Early on, when we have not had a great deal of experience, we may see something more of what the Lord wants, what He wants as to crucified lives, identification with Him on the part of His people in death, burial and resurrection, and then as to the church, the heavenly, spiritual nature of the church and of the local church as a local expression of the Body of Christ, and we come to see something of that. And then our tendency, oh, this persistent chronic tendency is to try to bring it about, to impose it upon people, strenuously to labour after it, bring an intensity about this thing to bear upon people to realize it. And we do get something, but it is not all that we want or the Lord wants.

The Lord deals with us, takes us into depths, breaks, and empties, and teaches the lessons. And among them the greatest of all lessons that, given that we are in line with the Lord and that we are free for the Lord, detached, we have no bonds, no prejudices, that we are really out with the Lord in a clear place, given that, the Lord Himself is going to do the rest in bringing into being what He wants. And He says to us, "Now you leave it with Me, keep your hands off; your part is to co-operate in prayer, perhaps in giving the word, but see Me do it; don't you force this thing, don't you try to bring it about, don't you try and make a church, don't you try to crucify people; keep your hands off!" There is a wonderful restfulness about a position like that. You say that is passivity; no, it is not. You are in it; in a sense and a way, you are sharing the travail, you are in the conflict, you are paying the price, but you are not doing it. But the Lord is doing the thing, the thing is quietly taking shape, and you know that it is not you who are doing it and who have the responsibility. This is the Lord's work, the Lord's business, and the Lord is doing it. Perhaps you would like it to be done a little more quickly, but it is going on, it is happening, the Lord is doing it. It is an organic thing, not an organised thing, and God is behind this and there is rest for your soul.

Now, that is very simple. There is all the difference between our setting out to make something, to bring it about, to force something, to form something, to realise something, and our being in such a clear place with the Lord and such a free place, that the Lord can just do it Himself. Oh, the necessity for that clear start with the Lord to get free of the old grave clothes. How difficult that is for many who have been brought up perhaps, in a fixed, earthly, religious order of things and system, where it is a matter of Thou shalt, and Thou shalt not, where it is all so legal and where, almost, conscience has become bound up with it because of early training. How difficult it is to get clear, to give the Lord an absolutely free place, a free way, and that is so necessary. Believe me, we are not going to get

anywhere until the Lord has got that free place. The trouble with so many is that they bring over the old clinging system of grave clothes, they are still bound, there are some laws of some kind still holding them tightly, some fixed acceptances, and one of the greatest necessities for spiritual growth and attainment is an abiding adjustableness.

Poor Peter had to learn that. "*Thou shalt never wash my feet*" (John 13:8). "*Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall never be unto thee*" (Matt. 16:22). Well, Peter, you will have to let go that position, you will have to take that back and say, "I once said, Thou shalt never wash my feet; do as you like! I once said, Lord, this shall never come to Thee; I have come to see that is the only way, and I accept that as the only way through!"

Martha had to learn adjustableness. Martha came very hot and bothered to the Lord that day and said, "Lord, my sister has left me to do all the work, bid her to come and help me!" Well, Martha, you will have to learn to let go, you must learn to be adjustable! And she did learn: she did not learn not to serve the Lord. No, she is still serving, but she was serving on resurrection ground on the last occasion. We can call it organic service now, whereas it was organized service before. It was the outward drive and tension and strain of things. Martha had to learn rest in service, the work of life.

Repentance from dead works. This heavenly, spiritual, living position is so necessary at the outset before we will get anywhere; this undoing of so much that has got a fast hold upon us in a religious way does not conduce to rest. It is the same thing, going round and round all the time. It was to that that the Lord addressed His words about finding rest unto the soul. He was not speaking to the world at large. He was speaking to the poor Jewish people round Him, to Israel, and He said, "Ye that labour and are heavy-laden". And He said, "*Take my yoke upon you... my yoke is easy, my burden is light*" (Matt. 11:28-30). If you want to know what He meant, you turn to another place and hear Him talking to the Pharisees, the Jewish religious leaders - they "*bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders*" (Matt. 23:4). What were the heavy burdens grievous to be borne? The legalistic religious system, the bringing of that whole thing which was a pattern of heavenly things and making it the ultimate, the final thing rather than just that which pointed to something else; making it the thing and imposing it on men and saying, "Now then, this and that, and not this and that!" The poor Jewish people were under that chafing yoke of that fixed system brought down to earth, and the Lord says, "Come to Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden!" And in the letter to the Hebrews we know what He meant; it is explained, "These people are making a hard yoke and heavy burden of sacrifices, and priesthoods, and priestly system to be kept up and maintained at your expense. You come to Me, I am the sacrifice once for all, I am the Priest once for all; come to Me, you will find rest to your souls. My yoke is easy, My burden is light!" The weight of a fixed earthly religious order is lifted off and it is life from within, and you need not fear that you are going to lose something. That is the way of realization, of getting through, of getting to God's end.

If you and I are really actuated by a living relationship with the Lord Jesus, having given the Lord an absolutely clear free place where we have nothing that we bring over of a fixed order and the Lord has an open way with us, everything that is in the Lord's mind can be realized and will be realized. It will spontaneously operate, it will work. We shall come to the knowledge of the Cross and its inward working. We shall not have to study it up - we shall come to it. The Lord will see to it that we know the truth. We shall come to the Lord's meaning about the church, the Body of Christ, its nature, its vocation, its order. We shall come to it; it is going to happen, that is all. And while we keep an open way with the Lord, anything and everything else that the Lord has in mind will come, we shall be led into it. It is going to happen because the Lord has this matter in hand and all this comes back to the absolute necessity for our being free unto the Lord.

If we are going to have any 'buts' and questions - "But I was taught... and this is how I was brought up!" If we are going to bring that in, we are going to put something in the Lord's way. I do not mean that we are going to just shed and throw over things that are vital, but you and I have got to maintain all the way along a position where the Lord is free to show us that even things which we have earlier thought and believed to be final and ultimate things were, after all, only stepping stones to something else; they were for the time being important, but their importance was only comparative. The Lord by that means was sovereignly leading us to something else. We must not stay there because the Lord led us there. We must keep quite free for the Lord to lead us past that. That is the spiritual journey, a free place with the Lord.

And you see so many of the Lord's people just stuck, they are fixed, they never move beyond a certain point simply because they have rounded off everything in a kind of finality, and because something is not according to that, it must be wrong, it must be suspect. The Spirit says, through John, "*The anointing which ye have received of Him abides in you, and ye need not that any one teach you; but... his anointing teaches you... all things*" (1 John 2:27). You can take that wrongly, you can say, "Very well. I will do without teachers, I will rely upon the anointing!" That is not what John is saying. If you look at the context, you will see this, that John is speaking about Antichrists, "*Even now have there arisen many antichrists. The spirit of Antichrist is already at work*". Now he says in that connection, "The anointing which you received abides in you and He will teach you about this matter; you will know by the anointing in you whether this is Christ or whether this is Antichrist, whether this is right or wrong; the anointing will teach you. You have no need for anyone to come along and say, 'You beware of so and so, he is an antichrist, a false teacher.' The anointing you have received will make you aware that that is not according to Christ. The Spirit in you is going to bear witness to Christ, is going to keep you according to Christ." That is what John is saying. So remember the context; he does not say you have no need of any teachers at all. He is saying that the Spirit in you will teach you all things in connection with Christ, make you aware what is Christ and what is not Christ, but the Spirit will bring you on in everything that relates to Christ if He has a free way in you, and that is the way of rest.

It is a very blessed thing, a very restful thing, a happy thing, a thing for which to be very thankful to the Lord, when you can say, "The Lord taught me that, the Lord led me in that way; that was something about which the Lord gave me light!" I say that means measure. The opposite of that is that you have it all from men and what you are is simply the sum total of what you have received second-hand. The Lord does not want it to be like that, even in ministry to the Lord's people. The Lord does not want you, because someone says it, that you must believe it and go and do it. The value of ministry is that the Lord Himself can bear witness to the truth and the ministry stops short and ceases in its value to you unless the Holy Spirit makes that thing livingly yours and you are able to say, "Well, Mr. So-and-so said it and I believed it, or I didn't, but the Lord has now shown me that it was right, the Lord has now dealt with me to make that a very living reality to me!" And so we grow.

But the point is that it has all got to be like that: living, organic, not something imposed from the outside, but something at work from the inside and that can never be until we have come on to resurrection ground which means an altogether new, clear, free place is secured for the Lord to start with - the organic principle of Life. Repentance from dead works, faith toward God, foundations laid, then being in a clear place with the Lord, let us go on, we can go on, and, given that clear place, the journey need not be so long.

This is the way of rest; Life is the way of rest, and Life is the expression of what the Lord is doing freely in us, not what we are taking on outwardly. It is a matter of letting go to the Lord and not

holding tenaciously to some fixed established order of things; being the Lord's children, walking with the Lord. I trust that our little meditation will be a help towards that, and open a way for the Lord in our hearts to lead us on to full growth.