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Faith in Relation to the Heavens

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: Numbers 13:28; Joshua 6:1-5; Eph. 6:16.

We have been occupied with the value of our being seated together with Christ in the heavens. This word comes in in that connection, as to the place of faith, and we are again illustrating from the life of Israel, knowing that their transition from the wilderness to the land was the type of our moving from the plain of salvation, in its more elementary stages and forms, on into the greater fulnesses of Christ.

Jericho is the point of departure. It is at Jericho that the real crisis on the practical side is reached and passed through. There is a sense in which the Jordan is that, but the Jordan is really the basis of everything. Jericho is the proving of that, and brings all the meaning of Jordan into the realm of practical values. Jericho has a retrospective aspect as well as a prospective, and it is that which will occupy us for a few minutes.

Jericho looks back over the whole of the forty years of Israel's life in the wilderness. At the beginning of those forty years the twelve spies were sent over into the land, as we know, and they were in the land forty days, taking account of everything there, and at the end of the forty days' investigation they returned with their report. Ten of them brought up an evil report, and by reason of their report that whole nation, which accepted it, went back into the wilderness and perished. The report brought out the unbelief, the lack of faith which had been in the heart of that people all the way through.

The point is this, that forty years were gathered up, as to spiritual condition, in the result of the forty days. The forty days discovered, fully and finally, the heart condition of the people for forty years.

Forty, as we know, in the Scripture is always the number of probation under testing. The forty years in the wilderness of testing and probation issued in unbelief. The spies went over for forty days, and, although there was another side entirely to that which they brought into view, the state of the people for forty years was such that they immediately accepted the bad side of the report, and the forty days sealed the forty years in unbelief.

After that generation had perished, and God had raised up another generation and led them through the Jordan into the land, they are brought to Jericho, and you notice the point, the link, between the report of the spies and the coming of the next generation to Jericho. The report of the spies was "cities great and walled up". That, for the past generation because of their condition of lack of faith, meant loss of everything. All that God had purposed for them, and sought to bring them into for forty years, was lost, was missed, because of their attitude toward this phase of the difficulty (as well as others), "cities great and walled up".

It is interesting to note that the new generation for its very first test is brought to the cities great and walled up, and presented with that aspect of things right at the outset. You can see immediately that it is a basic, initial and all-inclusive test of faith. It is as though God were saying to this generation: "I am testing you on the same ground as the others were tested, and everything for you from this point onward depends upon your attitude toward Me of faith or unbelief! You will not come into this on any other ground than the others would have come in! If you fail at this point you lose all!" It is a test upon exactly the same basis and with the very same means; a city great and walled up, and straightly shut up. The thing which turned one generation back is now going to be the test as to the going on of the other generation. It is a question of faith in relation to the full position of God's purpose.

The Test of Faith as to Sonship

Having seen that, we enquire into the nature of the probation of the forty years, so far as faith's testing was concerned. The testing of faith in the wilderness mainly operated in three directions or three connections.

You will remember that when God called Israel out of Egypt He referred to them as His son. His word to Pharaoh was: "Let My son go". What God had in view with regard to Israel was the meaning of sonship. He was bringing Israel out on a basis of sonship, to develop in them in the wilderness all that sonship means, so that in the maturity of sonship they might possess the heavenlies. Sonship in all its spiritual meaning and fulness is only realised, attained unto, on a basis of faith's testing. Faith is the ground upon which God develops sonship.

Let us remember that sonship is not merely relationship. Sonship is all that that relationship means. We may be sons in the ordinary sense of being related, but being related as sons we may be far short of our enjoying and using all the privileges and the resources of that relationship. A man may be, from the technical standpoint, the son of his father, but supposing that father is one of tremendous wealth and influence, with great resources which are for his son and technically at the son's disposal, and the son, while being the son, is living in poverty and in no way representing what his father is and possesses! While sonship in the Scripture is more than relationship, it is all that the relationship means. For the development of that, God brought Israel into the wilderness, and the expression of that fulness would come about when they entered into the land. It would be their dignity, their resource, their position, their influence, their power, their spiritual and moral ascendancy being expressed in the land, which had been developed in the wilderness.

That development of sonship is brought about by the testing of faith, faith being tested in three directions or connections.

(1) In the Direction of Sense

When Israel was brought into the wilderness, in a typical way they were put into the place where all the resources of sense were useless. By 'sense' we mean all that appreciation and apprehension which comes through our natural senses, and all that working upon the natural life of ability, resourcefulness, energy and reason. Now Israel was cut off from all that. They were taken out of a realm which was all sense. Whatever their life in Egypt was - it may have been largely unpleasant, but it was a life of action; they were busy. Every natural man loves to be busy, to be doing something, and the very last thing that the natural man likes is not to be able to do anything. The one thing against which we rebel, and over which we have our greatest battles is being unable to do anything.

As for seeing, being able to understand what is happening, the meaning of what is going on in our life and experience, Israel was in a place where all that was cut off. The understanding of the methods God was employing was entirely closed to them. They were unable to do anything.

They were unable to see anything. The whole realm of natural resource for getting through this phase of their history was closed to them. In a word, they were *shut up to God*. For their sustenance they could offer no help. A plough is a useless thing in a desert. It is no use sowing corn in a wilderness. If you look to see what Israel could have done in that position you have to come back and say they could do nothing. All that they could do was to obey God, to do as they were told; and when they were not told to do anything: to wait. That is a poor lookout for the active, energetic, resourceful natural man. They were simply cut off from the whole realm of sense, and faith was being tested in a place of absolute inability to understand or to do anything.

If only we could do something, how relieved we should feel! Or if only we could understand what God is doing; if only He would come and tell us all about it, and say He was doing this, and that, and the other; that this will happen today, and that will happen tomorrow! If He did, we could go on without any difficulty at all! But faith does not come into that realm, and patience does not come into that realm of spiritual values; they are ruled out of that realm, and where you cannot see, feel, or do, *faith* is the one thing, or else unbelief. There are no other alternatives. It is faith or unbelief. Unbelief will lead to murmuring and rebellion. That frustrates God's end and closes the door, because God is not just out to get us literally to a certain place; He is out to get us spiritually to a certain place. Spiritual geography is far more important with God than natural geography.

That was the temptation that the Lord Jesus entered into in the wilderness. He was led (one of the Epistles says He was driven) by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. It is a tremendous thing to see the Divine initiative in this. Why did the Spirit drive Him into the wilderness? The word "driven", or "drive" is the word which really means "cast". He was cast into the wilderness. Why is *God* doing that? This is not just a man going to be tempted of the devil. It is God going to deal with the devil through a Man. That is a far bigger issue. The Lord Jesus, when He went into the wilderness during those forty days of being tempted or tested, came in the first place to this situation: it was in the realm where sense was cut off; where He is spiritually and morally forbidden to act in the realm of human resource, or even use Divine resource for personal satisfaction. He was tested on that very basis. His answer was: "Man shall not live by bread alone"; that is the realm of sense, the realm of nature, the realm of the physical. "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God". That is spiritual relationship, that is under a

heavenly control, that is another realm altogether. The Lord Jesus absolutely refused to come on to that level, where sense was the governing factor, and He triumphed there.

Israel was tested on that ground. They failed! Do you see how that principle is taken up at Jericho? What is the usual way to go about a siege and the capture of a city? Bring up your army, bring up your guns, bring up all your resources and make a real attack upon the situation! *Do something!* And something very much in the realm of sense! When it is bombarding a city you can hear that, you can feel that, you have a sense of power about that, of being in it! But march round a city six days! Just walk round the city and say nothing, keeping perfectly quiet! Wherein is the energy, the power, the might? What destructive force is there in going silently round a city once in a day, and doing that for six days and then on the seventh day going round seven times? What power is there? God is testing these people out (if 'seven' means anything at all it means a full cycle of what is spiritual - spiritual perfection and completeness). And so He is bringing them to a point of spiritual intensiveness, cutting off all natural, sentient resource, method, and means. It is faith being brought on to a high level, in order that there might be an undoing of forty years lying behind. This Jericho matter is the destruction of forty years history. It is destroying the whole nature and effect of a natural life brought into a spiritual realm. Jericho is retrospective.

(2) In the Direction of God Himself

The second line of testing as to sonship was in the direction of God Himself. The first very largely relates to man, what he can do, what he may do, what he would do, what he will do if he can. God has vetoed that whole thing, and made faith the basis of his life.

Now the second thing which comes up with Israel again and again is as to whether, after all, God is in this thing at all. They said: "Is the Lord amongst us or not?" Because of certain appearances and experiences, difficulties and trials, the ultimate question arose: "Are we not mistaken? Are we not, after all, in a false thing, on a false quest? Is this not all a delusion? Is the Lord really with us?"

You notice that that was the test, in the second place, with the Lord in the wilderness. "The devil taketh him into the holy city; and he set him on the pinnacle of the temple, and saith unto him, If thou art the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee". What was the point? "Put God to the test! Try out this thing as to whether God is with you!" Immediately you begin to try out whether God is with you, you admit that you are not sure at all. Let in that doubt, and you are done. Immediately you have to experiment with the faithfulness of God it means that you have a basic question about God. Those who really believe God do not experiment with God. They do not want to try Him out in that way. If they do things, they do them because they believe in Him, not because they want to prove that He is for themselves.

Sonship is developed along that line of testing, and Jericho raises that question altogether. You can imagine those people, if they had sunk down on to the old level, saying after the first day round: "Well, this is a foolish business! We cannot think that the Lord is in this! It is not like the Lord! Surely Jehovah is something more than this!" No! The whole question is of faith again. It is the basic test of faith. Walking round believing that God is with you as you walk round, and that walk round means something with no less a significance than the Lord Himself. That walk round is involving God. It is in faith.

I am glad that they did not break down at Jericho. The Lord Jesus did not break down at that point. He would not submit to the suggestion to test whether God was with Him: "Thou shalt not tempt (put to the test) the Lord thy God".

(3) In the Direction of Israel's National Supremacy

The third line of testing was as to their supremacy amongst the nations. Looked at in themselves, and looked at according to their own resources and their own position, the suggestion that had been made that they should be supreme among the nations, and that there should not be a nation nor a people that would be able to stand before them, seemed an absurd thing. But that was God's word to them. Read again Numbers 13, and see what the spies said about the nations: giants, the sons of Anak, nations great and strong, cities high and walled up, "and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers". Where is spiritual and moral strength there? Now the people are brought right up against the very gateway to these powers, these forces, in a locked-up city. Now what about supremacy over the nations?

The third temptation of the Lord Jesus was that. It related to world dominion, the kingdoms of the world. He was tested as to His Sonship. "If thou be the Son...". The first generation of Israelites failed because faith failed. The second generation went in, tested, proved, established in faith right at the outset, at Jericho. They went on in the Lord, superior to the nations.

That brings you to faith in relation to the heavenlies. It is faith which brings into effect spiritual ascendancy and dominion over principalities and powers and world rulers of this darkness, spiritual hosts of wickedness and the kingdom of Satan; triumph over it, ascendancy over it. It is faith again. It is faith appropriating all that is true in Him Who is already in the place of power.

This is what the apostle was meaning when he, after bringing to the heavenlies in Christ, concluded that revelation with "the whole armour of God" and said: "above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the evil one". Go back again step by step: fiery darts that come along the line of inability to understand what the Lord is doing. When we are in that position many fiery darts are flying round.

You do not see what the Lord is doing, and why He is doing this, and taking you this way. Then the fiery darts begin to fly. When you are cut off and shut up so that you can do nothing, if you are going to be true to the Lord you have to be still and do nothing for a time, giving the Lord a chance and letting Him undercut the whole of that natural force and take its place and become your energy, your resource. When you come to that place where you are shut up and you know that you can do nothing, the fiery darts begin to fly round again. There are temptations to doubt whether, after all, that is the Lord's will, and so on. So in every connection the fiery darts flew, as they sought to strike home at the very vitals of the faith of the Lord Jesus in the wilderness in relation to sonship. Faith is the quenching power, faith is that which renders them nil.

It is all summed up in this, that for us to enter into all the value of our union with Christ far above all, there must be appropriating faith, and standing faith, in spite of all seemings, all circumstances, and all that the Lord does by way of developing us in sonship. In situations which seem so contrary to the Lord, faith has got to hold on strongly and entire, and we have to establish our position at our Jericho before we can go through.