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God's Jealousy for Principles

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: 1 Sam. 7:1-2; 1 Chron. 13:1-14.

Though God has no favourites among men, and is not prejudiced against people as such, yet He is very jealous for principles, and perhaps in the Old Testament there is no incident which more emphatically demonstrates that truth than the one contained in 1 Chron. 13. Again and again, in what looked like real severity, the Lord dealt with His greatest servants on the point of principle. His severity with Moses over the second smiting of the rock, in not allowing him to go over into the land, is so marked that often our hearts have failed as we have thought about it. And here again we are almost shocked to note His severity with David, when all the intentions were so good and it did seem that there was a movement in accordance with the purpose of God. There is no question as to real, whole-hearted devotion to the Lord, and yet we have this severe reaction of God to something which, though not at the moment clearly recognised as such by those concerned, was a violation of principle.

God Cannot Overlook Principles

Of course, the explanation must lie in the direction that where precedents are concerned, that is, the laying down of foundations for all time, God shows in particularly obvious ways what His attitude is toward principles. These things were to be written in the Bible, and God knew it. The Bible was to be the book which contained the revelation of God's mind for all the coming generations of human history, and it would not do for God to overlook violations of vital principles and let them pass, lest at any time His people should begin to build something upon a wrong foundation. So, of necessity, correction had to be very severe when provision was being made for the guidance of His people in

all generations. That is the explanation of the seeming severity of God in such instances as we have cited.

God's End Must Be Reached in God's Way

But when we look into it to see what is the nature of it all, we find this, that disaster can only overtake if there is the holding of a testimony in substance - the truth, the ideas, the doctrine, the form - without the principles of that testimony being observed. It is easily possible for this to happen, with the result that there is a fundamental contradiction to the very position which is taken. David was quite right in his conclusion that the ark was in the wrong place and that it should be moved, because God's purpose for it was not being realised. So he acted upon a broad conclusion as to God's will and purpose, but without the underlying principles of that purpose being discerned. Thus, while he moved toward the right end, he moved in a wrong way, and he involved something that was of most sacred concern to God in the matter of Divine principle. This is a very solemn lesson to our hearts - that we may be in the terms, the substance, the doctrine, of the testimony of Jesus, with the best intentions and in undoubted devotion to the Lord, and yet there may be real arrest and delay because there is something hidden from our view which the Lord cannot recognise and accept; and disaster may come upon all our efforts and undertakings, and upon the whole movement, for that very reason. God does not desire simply that certain decrees and truths shall be executed. His desire is that there shall be spiritual discernment and faithfulness in relation to spiritual principles. The two things must go together. Ways and means to God's end are just as important as the ends themselves.

That is clearly what comes out here. Uzza and Ahio were the wrong people. They had no right whatever to have been put in that position. That is the first thing that is wrong in principle. It is made perfectly clear by the sequel. The cart was an altogether wrong idea. It was originally suggested by Philistine diviners who were in league with demons that had subtly, secretly, crept into this whole movement. Oh, how subtly and deeply laid are the intrigues of Satan, that even a man like David can be blind to them and caught! The ark had been in the house of Abinadab for years, and these two sons of Abinadab, Uzza and Ahio, had grown up with it and apparently had never studied its history and God's clearly prescribed word about the manner in which it should be moved. They had never gone to what they had of Scripture to see the meaning and nature of the thing that was in their home. Familiarity had bred contempt, and the ark had become like some personal possession of theirs and they took it in charge. It was all wrong. The Lord Jesus, Who is here typified by the ark, though calling men into fellowship with Himself in a Divinely ordained way, never has committed Himself into the hands of men, to be taken charge of by them. His testimony in that sense will look after itself: God Almighty is in it. He does not need the custodianship of familiar men who have themselves taken possession of His things. Everything was in a superficial state, and because of that the deep principles were not discerned - hence disaster.

The Enmity of Satan Against Christ Involved

What does it mean? What does it all amount to when you put it in its full setting? Here the throne has come fully into view. This is all a part of a movement for bringing the throne into its full place. In the Bible, David is God's supreme type of His Son in kingship, so that it is not so much the throne of David that is in view as the throne of God or of Christ. It is Christ on the throne of supreme authority that is being typified here.

Now, from a long way back and a long way down, there creeps up something sinister, coming hiddenly up through this device of the Philistine diviners - an insinuation of Satan which, in the light

of all that we know now with all the Bible in our hands, works out in this way. Satan is in some way going to interfere, if he can, with Christ's coming to absolute authority, and to do it he must insinuate something of himself that will of necessity bring the judgment of God upon the whole thing. It is subtle, clever, far-sighted; for what you have here is the ark in relation to David and full kingship, and then disaster arresting that whole movement simply because God's eye saw in it the insinuation of something of the devil that had come in to corrupt this whole testimony; and God could not accept it. If we were to take things like this as things in themselves we might think that such severe dealings are hardly justified, that God might let pass such faults and failures; but God sees the whole and how it affects the ultimate question of the place which He has appointed for His Son, and He says, 'No! That relates to the greatest issue in this universe and it cannot therefore be allowed to pass.' God is not establishing the throne of His Son upon anything of Satan. That is what it amounts to. It is tremendous.

So we have to get a sufficient reason for such severe action of God; we have to justify Him. We must not simply say, 'Here is a man whose heart is all out for the Lord, who is sincerely seeking to serve Him, and then the Lord smites it all. It does not seem fair; it seems cruel and unkind.' We must justify God. He is only justified when you can see that something which touches the ultimate issues of His eternal purpose is involved, and that He could not let that pass in the light of the greatness of the issues. And that is just what was happening here.

Natural Man's Hand the Hand of Satan

So we turn to ourselves and ask, how does this apply to us? It means this, that we must always seek that our devotion to the Lord is instructed devotion, that it is zeal which is according to knowledge. It was otherwise with David. Not that he could not know; he could have known. The exercise which followed this incident shows that he had the knowledge at his disposal, but he was carried away at the time by all that was happening, he became in some measure superficial and emotional, and overlooked a vital principle. How easy that is! We can see a good deal of this in history. This was what you might call a revival movement in Israel. There were all the marks of revival, in a way. The ark had been in the house of Abinadab all those years. The people "lamented after the Lord"; and here is movement, and their mourning is turned into joy. All seems to be going well - and then the whole thing is arrested. That has happened again and again in Christian history. A revival; yes, undoubtedly a movement from the dead state, from the state of utter arrest; people began to think things were going at last; and then arrest. The Reformation was arrested. There came a point at which those great reformers were held up. They did not go right through to God's full end, they stopped somewhere. When you look to see why, you find at a certain point that the hand of natural man came upon the work, and that hand is the hand of the enemy. There is something behind the natural man's taking hold of the things of God which is the insinuation of Satan; and God stands back, removes His hand of blessing, the whole thing comes to an untimely end and does not go through. There must be not only apprehension of the truth but deep-rooted consistency with Divine principles if the movement is to go through to fullness, if the end which God has in view is to be reached without interruption and tragedy. It is a big lesson for some of us who have responsibility, but it is a lesson for all who are related to the Lord's interests. We must see that, while the Lord wants zeal and utterness and wholeheartedness and desires His ends to be reached, it is very necessary for us to have spiritual discernment, that we do not overlook some principle which is essential to God in the reaching of His ends. A close walk with the Lord and prayerful attention to His Word under the illumination of the Holy Spirit can alone bring us that discernment.