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Tested Unto Responsibility

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: Judges 7:1-7; John 21:1-4; 2 Tim. 1:14; John 17:12; Heb. 11:32,39-40; 12:1,11.

These passages suggest something which I think may be of help to us from the Lord just now. The thought that is found in them is that of being tested in relation to responsibility.

In the first place, let us seek to open our hearts anew to this fact, this truth, that God has responsibility for His things always in view in His dealings with us. It is a thing which we have heard many times. It is no new thought, but it is a tremendously important thing that it should really be fixed in our hearts as a governing thing. The Lord has before Him, where we are concerned and His dealings with us, this matter of responsibility for His things. You see it quite clearly in the different instances which have been touched in these passages. There is Gideon and Gideon's three hundred. They provided the Lord with an instrument, a vessel, and it was in relation to responsibility for the Lord's interests, or the Lord's 'testimony', if you prefer that word. Everything of the Lord in their day was bound up with them, so far as this earth was concerned, all that was of the Lord was focussed upon and centred in that instrument.

The Preparation of the Vessel

But you see that it was tested very severely and deeply, tested unto that responsibility, and went through a process of steady but drastic cutting off, elimination, sifting out. And Gideon with his three hundred, after seeing those many thousands cut off, might well have given it all up in despair, in

unbelief; might have felt the impossibility of such a situation. Here were the Midianites and the Amalekites and all the children of the East like locusts, like the sand of the seashore for number, spreading themselves over all the earth, and the Lord's interests were bound up with this minute handful. But what a test they had to undergo in order to serve the Lord in so great a responsibility! The Name of the Lord, the testimony of the Lord, the interests of the Lord on the earth are all bound up with that little instrument. But it was tested very severely before it served Him in so responsible a ministry.

And so in every other case the same thing holds good and we are led in every case to see that the Lord allows His chosen vessel to pass into very severe testing with one object in view, and that object is that it shall be a responsible instrument, it shall be able to take responsibility which is no less a responsibility than the preserving of the Lord's testimony alive in the earth. That is no small thing. The Lord, of course, could keep His Name alive and make Himself known and manifest apart from anything and anybody. He is Lord and He could let it be known in the universe that He is Lord in a direct way, but He has chosen to associate that testimony to Himself with a vessel. He has called a vessel into fellowship with Himself to be responsible for no smaller a thing than the very fact of God in His Lordship, His sovereignty, His power, His righteousness, His holiness, His supremacy. Such things are all bound up with an instrument and it is chosen to take responsibility, and God deals with it with that end and that object always in view, that it shall be able to take responsibility.

But the Lord knows the heart, and that is a thing which comes out here repeatedly. In the case of thirty-two thousand in the first instance with Gideon, the Lord looked upon their hearts and He knew that, in the case of the vast majority, there was a state of heart which at once put them out of responsibility. They were put to a test, and the test discovered what God already knew to be true about their hearts. That has to be. He brings about the test which will get rid of that which would be a menace to His testimony and would fail in the crucial hour.

Passing right away from Gideon to those disciples, the Lord knew their hearts and the Lord had to bring them to a place where the knowledge of their own hearts was disclosed to them and they ceased to have any confidence whatever in themselves. They had to be brought to a place where the Lord, and the Lord alone, was their ability to take responsibility. I believe that Pentecost was not just an event. I mean this, that the Lord had prepared His vessel for Pentecost and Pentecost was the answer to a need which the Lord had made manifest in His instrument. Of course, Pentecost was much more than that, but that is one great truth. Now here the happenings of the cross had taken place. The Lord had allowed the whole of their earthly interests to be smitten, their kingdom of God - *their* kingdom of God - not His Kingdom of God, had gone; their place in the Kingdom of God had been cut off, that place of their ambitions in the Kingdom of God, all that earthly side of things had been smitten. And now He Himself coming and going... but it is a very unreal, uncertain, a strange kind of life. It is neither here nor there; neither in heaven nor earth; a sort of suspended life between heaven and earth, and you cannot be sure of anything. That is where they are, and so Simon Peter says, "I am going fishing!" I think that was a reaction to the uncertainty and apparent or seeming unreality of the situation in which they were. He wanted, as people say today, to "get back on to solid ground". He wanted to get into practical realities, "We do know something about the sea, we do know something about fish and we do know something about boats! Let us get back into the realm where we do know, where our own intelligence can serve us, where we are free from all this that is so much beyond us! Let us get back to a practical basis of life!" And it is no accident, neither is it just chance, or one of occasional happenings as things do happen, that that night they caught nothing. And they found that *that* became the uncertain realm for them, that became the sphere where they

could not be sure, and the reality was found at daybreak in the Lord, the risen Lord Himself. It was then that the risen Lord became so much more real than He had been, however often He had appeared to them before. This seemed, in a certain sense, to bring them to the settled reality, and now they were prepared for Pentecost. They had been tested unto responsibility in themselves, found insufficient, totally incapable of standing up to this thing, but having made that discovery, they came to know the Lord in a new way so that He could anoint them, that is, He could commit Himself to them to be the bearers of this responsibility.

And all this is so much in keeping with conformity to the image of God's Son. He came, He took responsibility, but He was dependent entirely upon the Father. There was committed to Him a charge, He was tested in relation to that charge, and what a test it was! You have that dozen men, that particular dozen men, given into your charge as your responsibility to see them right through to apostleship. I suggest that you and I would have done a good deal of elimination in the course of three years in having to deal with such, but there was responsibility committed to Him for a vessel, and He said, "*The men which You gave Me...*", and by the language which follows, it is quite clear, as a charge, as a responsibility, "*I have kept.*" "I kept and I guarded them!" What patience lies behind that, what longsuffering lies behind that, what forbearance! "*Having loved His own... He loved them unto the end.*" "*I guarded them, and not one of them is lost, but the son of perdition; that the scripture might be fulfilled.*" "*Oh Timothy, guard that which has been committed to you!*" There is always a deep element of testing and trial with Divine responsibility in view. That is the thought here, that God knows the heart, and His dealings with us have these two sides: firstly, to let us know how incapable we are of taking responsibility for Divine things, and on the other hand, to bring us through that self-discovery to the discovery of Himself, so that we can take responsibility.

Now, that is our history, the history of every one of us, the history of God's dealings with us, but let us especially underline the test which the Lord applies to reveal the unsuspected weaknesses in us. I have no doubt but what all of us will assent to this, that the Lord, if He has done anything with us at all having got us into His hands, it is that He has made us discover unsuspected weaknesses in ourselves where spiritual responsibility is concerned. Is that not true? We thought we could take responsibility perhaps. We may not have been slow to assume responsibility for Divine interests. We have spoken, we have said things, we have talked, we have imparted the doctrine, we have stood in for others, and the Lord has taken us in hand and has brought out, for our own seeing and knowing, things which we never would have believed to be in our make-up which are a positive menace to the Lord's interests, and showed how unqualified we are to take this responsibility. That is true, and many of us, if not all of us, are ready to say, "Yes, there was a time when we would have been more ready and eager to take responsibility in the things of God than we are today, and our greater silence today is because the Lord has shown us our own hearts: the unsuspected weaknesses in ourselves which make us go slow in assuming responsibility." That is a necessary process to the point of safety. "*Lest Israel vaunt themselves...*". You can hear Paul echoing that - "*lest I should be exalted above measure...*". That is only saying in other words, "lest we spoil things for God", *we*, this that is in us.

So the Lord has to deal with a responsible instrument in this way, applying a test to reveal those unsuspected weaknesses in order to get to the place where He can have confidence and where we can become trustworthy, where we can take responsibility. Well, the weaknesses are many, not only too many for us to count, but too subtle for us to discern. We might say this and that are weaknesses in our make-up and we know them, but they are more and they are deeper.

It is so easy for personal interests to interfere with Divine interests. Is that not so? Personal desires lurking; we would not acknowledge them because we can hardly see them, but they are there. That hidden peril of numbers! "*Lest Israel vaunt themselves...*". "*The people... are too many... lest Israel vaunt themselves...*". Subtly that meant, "We are thirty-two thousand strong, this is a great movement, there are a lot of people in this, everybody is wanting to join!" It is a popular thing. Numbers, bigness; always something lurking in the heart along that line, and smallness, reduction, weakness, does not commend itself to the natural heart at all as God's way of sure success. No, no; "If only more would come in and still more!" The subtle lurking peril of that kind of interest which sees things being successful, becoming big, extensive. That is there. When the cross is applied, the offence of the cross...! What is the offence of the cross? Well, I know that in doctrine it is one thing, but in practice it is very clear. The offence of the cross literally in the day of Calvary was that the multitude went, and then the next line went, until it came right into the centre, and then they all forsook Him and fled. Why? Because this spoke of weakness and failure; so utterly was it contrary to success, popularity, or being an effective movement. The cross offended every natural desire to see things happening. It is the offence of the cross, and when that offence works, all our personal interests are exposed and become very evident. Well, we need not dwell more upon that. We get really to the issue of this. These are all truths with which in our hearts we have a painful familiarity.

The Treasure for the Vessel

What is it that constitutes the treasure for this vessel, that which the vessel is to contain? Well, I think it comes out in all of these passages and especially in Hebrews - three things going together. You see the word 'son' is used very much in Hebrews 12. "*My son*". "*God deals with you as with sons*." And we here are quite familiar now with the spiritual meaning of that word, the term of 'sonship', as representing spiritual maturity, and we know that responsibility is vested in sons. That is why God is after sons as being more than children.

But do you notice that two other things are connected with sonship. What is *the* preeminent quality of sonship? Well, you just obliterate that chapter 12 and see. Remember that it is a continued narrative and there are no chapter divisions and read right on through what is chapter 11, into and through chapter 12, and read it all of a piece. Chapter 11 is the chapter, as we know, about *faith*, and it moves right on into this sonship with this great "*Therefore*", taking all those men of tried and perfected faith into view, and "*therefore let us...*", and then passes right on into this chastening, testing, trying, unto sonship, so that faith becomes the pre-eminent quality in sonship, or in other words, faith is the backbone of responsibility. To come to the place of taking responsibility for Divine things requires all that testing and trying by which faith shall be brought to perfection.

But faith - what is faith? Is faith an abstract thing? No. Faith has its own object, its own attraction, and so you come back to Chapter 11 and you find that the thing which governs that chapter is a prospective feature, so mightily prospective that it goes even beyond death and it really nullifies death. It sets death aside as though death had no meaning. They all died, but what is that?! They looked beyond. Their faith took them beyond that. They saw, they looked, they apprehended, they lived beyond death by faith. What is this faith then? This faith has to do with a life which cannot be swallowed up of death.

Now, you put these things together and you simply resolve the whole matter into this: Responsibility for the things of God is a matter of responsibility to maintain a testimony of deathless Life through faith. And that constitutes for us all the business that ever we shall want, that is calculated to occupy

us very thoroughly. I mean, that is a desperately grim business, that is real business. There is no romance about it, there is no sentiment about it. If we really are out for business, here is a business which is calculated to engage us to the last ounce. What is it? Taking responsibility for Divine things. What is that? Taking responsibility to preserve the testimony of Life triumphant over death, and that calling for a tremendous faith because of the conditions over against which that testimony has to stand.

Let me bring that right down to simple and practical application. Beloved, you and I never before knew as we know now, how real this Life and death matter is. It is not just a matter of nations locked in war, and which of these nations is going to win. That is not our chief concern, is it? But what we are feeling is this awful impact of death. It is a terrible thing. It is like a dense terrible cloud hanging over all the time that is trying to smother us, to press us under. It is so difficult to rise up, it is difficult to sing, it is difficult to listen to the Word of the Lord, it is difficult to have any vision for anything of God yet to be. We seem to be more and more beleaguered and shut in and the cause is death wrapping us around. That is what it is. The Lord has been saying all these years to us that the testimony of Jesus is the testimony to Him as the Living One Who became dead and is alive unto the ages of the ages and has the keys of death and Hades. That is the testimony of Jesus to be borne here in the power of a deathless life, a death-conquering life. That is the testimony unto which this vessel has been chosen. How much we have said and accepted about this battle for life being *the* battle of the ages. God is undoing that which came in through Adam, by His Son, through His Church which is His Body. These have been great truths. We are right in it now. Never were we more deeply and terribly in it. The Lord is seeking, has been seeking, to show us those weaknesses of our own hearts which can never stand up to this, but also through that disclosure to make us know Himself and Himself alone as our only, but our sure, resource for this testimony.

Perhaps this city may be feeling it more than any other place on the earth. There is not only the spiritual, but there is the psychological aspect of this thing. When men sit in council and devise and plan and scheme with all their devilish arts and crafts concentrated upon one spot on the earth, there is bound to be a registration of that. And then the devastation and the actual destruction and death working everywhere, that is bound to affect the atmosphere. But lying behind it is the fact that it is from hell, it is the breath of hell. Here you are right in it.

We are in our business now, not only here, but of course it expands, and in the realm of things spiritual, geography does not count for a very great deal. If you are in the heavenlies, you are suffering the impact of this wherever you may live in a day like this.

It is terrific, and we see the issue - we are either going to die or triumph. There are no intermediate stages in this matter. We know quite well we are going under and out or we are going through.

Now, the Word of the Lord to us is just this. Responsibility for Divine things is that to which He has called us, that for which He has disciplined us, chastened us, put us into the school of sonship, and with us rests no less a thing than the testimony of Jesus; not with us only, but with every true devoted child of God. That is the meaning of the Body. No people on this earth were ever more directly and definitely in the business of the ages than the Church is today, if only it recognised its calling. We here are enlightened to some extent on these things, but this is not doctrine with us now! It is grim, terrible, awful reality: responsibility with us, but blessed be God, we are not in the Old Testament and we are not the other side of Pentecost. We are this side. The Spirit is seen as the Spirit not only of a risen Lord, but an enthroned Lord, and by that Spirit we can take responsibility

and we can win through, carry the sacred deposit to the end of the journey, and place it at last in the sanctuary. *"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me the crown..."*. Well, that is all by way of reiterating old truths, but bringing them up to date as to their practical meaning.

May the Lord enable us all to take a new stand where we say, "This Life and death matter is the thing I am in! By the grace of God knowing as He has made me know, the hidden weaknesses of my own heart, I take hold of Him as the Life and the hope again, and stand to preserve this testimony of Life, yes, Life against hell, against all the powers of darkness and death raging in this universe focussed upon this place! God must here have His testimony preserved!" It is Life; fight for it, beloved, stand for it, resist death faithfully here, even if you die, in one sense, in your testimony. Stand firmly here in this city before principalities and powers, before angelic intelligences, and before the Lord Himself. The value is recognised, although men may see nothing of it. It is there. The Lord knows what it means that a few of His people on this earth defeat the lord of death in the Name of His Son. May it be so!