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The Arm of the Lord

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Most of us, as the Lord's people, would probably agree that there is at the present day a very great need for the Lord to show His power. That might be a personal confession: we would each say, individually, 'There is a great need for the Lord to do something in my life - to do some new thing, some mighty thing, in me personally, and perhaps in my ministry.' Further, many of us would confess that such a need exists in the circle of believers with whom we are connected and related - a need for the Lord to move in power in a new way. But could we not widen the field to the farthest limit, and say that there is a very great need for the Lord to do something mighty in the whole Church and in the whole world?

To whom, then, is the Arm of the Lord revealed in this way? Before going further with that matter, let me present a hypothetical situation.

An Imaginary Situation

Suppose that a very complicated and serious malady has afflicted a patient - let that patient be ourselves, or a company, or the Church, or the world - and a doctor is consulted, who, after serious and careful consideration, with some considerable experience and knowledge, and no small amount of good authority, comes to a quite definite conclusion about this matter, and says he knows he has the remedy. He has no question about it at all. But certain factors present him with considerable difficulty in his desire to help.

Firstly, he has to explain that his remedy is not going to be pleasant - indeed, it is going to be painful; it will go against all the predisposition of the patient; and it will demand real co-operation and

persistence, perhaps over an extended period, calling for much patience and faith. Then, he meets another thing. The patient has heard about the remedy before, perhaps many times, and the reaction is: 'I have heard such a lot about that cure; there has been so much talk about it. I think you are a one-track man, who has nothing but that one thing; perhaps you are even a crank. Can't you vary it a bit? Can't you introduce some other line a little more palatable? Must we be tied down to this one course?' A further objection is: 'You know, this is not a very popular thing. Public opinion has got criticisms about this; there are many different minds on the matter.'

These are things with which he is confronted. What should he do? Should he give way to these deterring factors and abandon the case, or should he get on with the job? Let us look at the matter from another angle - from the standpoint of the patient. What should be the logical attitude of the patient in this matter? Should it not be - 'Well, the situation is serious, there is no doubt about that, and it is very complicated. What are the alternatives? Do I know of any alternatives? Are there prospects or ways and means in other directions? Ought I not to be fair and honest, and give this a thorough trial? Do I sense the seriousness of my condition sufficiently to make me brush aside all public opinion, all personal feelings and reactions, likes and dislikes, and really give myself to this matter?'

Now, that is exactly the position in which we are. The great need in the spiritual life of God's people is widely acknowledged. And yet there are all these arguments flying about: that there is so much talk about this particular thing - we have heard it again and again; that public opinion is so greatly divided on this matter; and that this is something that goes altogether against our grain. But does not the crux of the matter lie, firstly, in whether we realise that the situation is serious enough to warrant our brushing aside all secondary considerations, and really giving the remedy a thorough chance and test; and, secondly, in whether we have any alternatives - whether there are prospects of this whole thing being bettered along any line other than this?

The Only Remedy

Of course you are saying: What is the line? What is the remedy? What is it that you are talking about? Perhaps you have already drawn your conclusion. The remedy, the only remedy, but the sure remedy, for the whole of our spiritual maladies, is the Cross - the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is not pleasant to our flesh, it runs counter to all our likes and predispositions; it is not popular; Christian opinion is greatly divided on this matter of the work of the Cross, and so on... But, after all, we are left with our condition; we are left with our need; we are left with the situation; and whether you realise it or not, the situation in Christianity, amongst Christians, is a very critical one. Take, for instance, the whole matter of divisions amongst the Lord's people. It is a blight; it is an evil thing; it is the working of a deep-seated disease; it is undermining the constitution of the whole Church of God. So we could go round the need, facing it from many standpoints; and we should find that, without exaggeration, the situation is a serious one.

The Word of God offers us this one remedy. It is fully and thoroughly documented; it has the most established authority behind it. Again and again, both in individual life and in collective life, it has proved itself to be the answer. The Word of God offers us no alternative, no prospect along any other line. The Cross is the answer.

Let us look again for a moment at the prophecies of Isaiah. This section that we have been considering, from verse 13 of chapter 52 to the end of chapter 53, shows the Cross to be *the* remedy for a many-sided and most complicated situation in this world. You see here all the things that go to make up the situation. Sin! sin! "He bare the sin of many" - the word there is 'error', 'failure'.

Transgressions! - a stronger word still, meaning 'rebellions' - "He was wounded for our transgressions". Iniquity! - which means 'our perversity' - "The Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all." Errors and failures and rebellions and perversities - these are the beginning of the malady. Sicknesses, griefs, sorrows - so you can fill in more and more details of the case from the words of this chapter; and when you put them all together, you say: 'That patient is in a very poor state; that indeed is a serious outlook!' And the chapter as a whole has just one object: to show that the Cross of the Lord Jesus is the remedy for it all, the answer to it all. The whole thing is dealt with and cleared up by the Cross.

The Exaltation and Vindication of Christ

But here we must stand back for a moment to take account of two things. At this point a question is asked, "To whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?" and then the rest of the chapter is the answer to that question. That Arm of the Lord is God coming into this situation, coming in with skill, with power, with wisdom, with ability, to deal with it and to clear it up. And the chapter says that the Cross is the Arm of the Lord, coming in against this whole condition. The arm of the Lord is against this state of things. That is the first thing.

But there is something further. The arm of the Lord comes in with a new condition, a certain, clearly-defined end in view, which is nothing less than the exaltation and vindication of Jesus Christ. That is our second thing. The Arm of the Lord is for that, but His exaltation and vindication demand that the Cross shall clear up this situation. Of course that gathers the New Testament into it: it was because the situation *was* cleared up at Calvary that Jesus was exalted and vindicated. Note that the exaltation and vindication of Christ is in power and posterity. Those two things bound this section. Right at the beginning (52:13) we have: "My servant... shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high." And then, towards the end of the section (53:10,11): "He shall see his seed... He shall see of the travail of his soul..." In power: "very high"; in posterity: "His seed" - in other words, His Church.

Now, that brings matters very closely home to us, because the first challenge of all this is as to our concern for Christ's exaltation, and Christ's vindication. That is the issue that is raised. Let us ask ourselves, individually, this question: 'How much am I, personally, really concerned for the exaltation and vindication of the Lord Jesus?' If you were asked this question, personally, in private conversation, I have no doubt you would say: 'I am very greatly concerned about it. Indeed, there is nothing that I would desire and work for more than for His exaltation and vindication. What greater thing have we to live for or work for than this?' You would say that, I am sure. But do we realise that the proof of our concern, and that which measures our concern, is our preparedness to accept the Cross? There is no way to the exaltation and vindication of the Lord Jesus other than the way of the Cross. We shall prove whether we really are concerned, and, if so, how much we are concerned, by the extent to which we are prepared to accept in ourselves this work of the Cross, clearing up every situation that is dishonouring to the Lord.

The Cross the Only Way to This

It is so easy for us to talk or preach about the exaltation of the Lord Jesus. His enthronement, His glorifying - it is wonderful to talk about these things; and of course, this Church of His, the Church of Christ, the Church which is His Body, is a very great thing - the great Masterpiece of God. Yes, we like to talk about it. But the test as to whether all this has a grip upon our inward life is just how much we will let the Cross work in us: for these great things - His exaltation and His Church - are not possible of realisation, except by the work of the Cross in believers.

This is a challenge which arises at once, and it is very searching. It will come to that, sooner or later, in any case, as we go on with the Lord. All our language, all our talk, and all our pretensions, will be challenged by this. The Lord will say: 'Yes - but are you prepared to allow the Cross to work in you in *this* particular matter, and in *that* - in that particular *relationship*, in this thing about *yourself*, and in that thing in your *connections*? Are you prepared to let the Cross deal with *those things*?' The answer to that will prove whether after all we have a concern for Christ's exaltation and vindication. Our concern for these will be shown in our estimate of, and our attitude toward, the Cross.

If, on the other hand, we take the line: 'Oh, we have heard so much about the Cross; it is this one-track thing' - if we can take any such attitude as that, in any way to belittle the Cross, or make it something less than God has made it; if our attitude can be one which under-estimates the importance of the Cross: then that is proof that we have not yet become inwardly gripped by this concern for the exaltation of the Lord Jesus.

Do not forget that He Himself would never have been exalted, but for His Cross. There was that mighty "*Wherefore...*" Wherefore? "...Becoming obedient even unto death, yea, the death of the cross. *Wherefore...* God highly exalted him..." (Phil. 2:8,9). But for the Cross, He would never have been exalted; and, in principle, He never is exalted, except in so far as there is a work of the Cross in His people. It is so clear, is it not, that, if the Cross has not dealt with things in you and in me, the Lord Jesus cannot be glorified in our lives. And as for His Church - the Church would never have come into existence but for the Cross, and, but for the Cross, it can never have a present expression. Its beginning, its continuation, its growth, its consummation, are always by the law of the Cross; and every bit of addition to, or increase in, the Church, whether spiritually or numerically, is by means of the Cross. There is no other way. So it is a very real test and very real challenge to us.

The Cross *Positive*, Not Negative

Now here, again, the Spirit of God shows that God's ways and means are always positive and not negative. I want to say that with emphasis; let us underline it in our minds. God's ways are always constructive and not destructive; they are purposeful, and not just ends in themselves. And if God's inclusive, comprehensive means is the Cross, let it be understood, once and for ever, that by the Cross He is working to an end - a large end. The Cross is never intended to end with destruction; it is never intended to end with a negative. God is working for some great thing, and He uses the Cross in this positive way.

You see, the weakness in our apprehension of the Cross is largely due to a *misapprehension* of the Cross. Our idea of the Cross is that it is destructive, it is negative, it is death. We revolt against that; we don't want to be always talked to about this death of the Cross - death, death, death. It is indeed possible so to preach the Cross as to bring in death; but that is a mis-preaching. That is not God's interpretation of the Cross at all. Let me repeat: the Holy Spirit here shows quite clearly that God's ways and means are always positive and not negative; they always have in view something more, and not something less; not an end, but a new fulness.

If only we could really grasp that, it would transfigure the Cross. When the Lord confronts us with the challenge, what do we do? We revolt, we draw back - we don't like it! Why? Simply because we have not seen that, in this application of the Cross, God is set upon securing something more in our lives - in our fellowships, in our companies, in His Church - something more than there has ever been before. That is God's law. God is not a negative God. Other gods are negative gods, but our God is not a negative god. He is not working to bring things to annihilation, He has very large purposes before Him in all His ways and in all His means.

What we really have to see is that, whatever the Cross may negative - and it will of course negative some things - it is God's most positive instrument for securing spiritual, heavenly, eternal values. The Cross is God's most positive instrument for securing the enlargement - not the annihilation - of *that which will abide for ever*. While it is true that the Cross, in the first place, does represent God's 'No', and that we cannot have God's 'Yes' - the Arm of the Lord - until we have accepted His 'No': yet once we are willing to come and accept God's 'No', then the way is clear for us to come right into His 'Yes'. And, mark you, God's Name is not 'No!' His Name is 'Yea and Amen' (2 Cor. 1:20) - He is "the God of Amen" (Is. 65:16) - the Positive, the 'Verily', the God of purpose.

So it is very necessary for us to move on to this settled basis, that God always comes in with a mind to create (or to recover), to build and to increase. If only we could believe that of the Lord - even in our most devastating times, when everything seems to be taken away, and all is stripped from us, when everything seems to be going, and we think we can see an end coming: if only we could believe then that God is working - not to bring values to an end, but to increase them! That must be our ground - that He is ploughing, He is digging, He intends a harvest; He intends something more. He knows why He is doing it in that way - we don't. But we can be sure of one thing: God is at work by the Cross to make things safe for Himself.

The Cross Makes Things Safe for the Lord

Now, just supposing the Arm of the Lord were revealed to you or to me; supposing the Arm of the Lord were revealed in the locality where we live, in the place of work where we are engaged, or in the company with which we are connected; supposing the Lord came out with His mighty arm, and showed that arm in prospering, in increasing: what would happen? Perhaps you will not agree with this, because you feel that it would not be true in your case; but that is just where our hearts are deceived. I can tell you what would happen. You and I would come into the picture; you and I would begin to strut about in this thing, now that it is growing and enlarging and prospering and becoming something to take note of. We should be walking round just like peacocks, with our tails all spread out; we should be metaphorically, if not literally, wearing a badge with 'Superintendent', or 'General Manager', or something like that, written large across it! We should begin to talk about the thing; and if people began to talk about us, how pleased we should be!

That is the infinite peril, and God will not run the risk of allowing that in something that is wholly of Himself. The Lord must make things safe for Himself, so that, if He does stretch out His mighty arm and do something, you and I will not begin to pocket the credit; we shall be a hidden and a covered people.

It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of this. Has this not been perhaps one of the deepest underlying laws of the revealing of the Arm of the Lord through the whole course of Christianity? Why was there that growth, that expansion at the beginning, which has never been paralleled through the centuries since? Because the Church was stripped and peeled and emptied, broken and battered and bruised and persecuted, because it preached Christ crucified as the wisdom of God and the power of God - and the world would not have it. The Arm of the Lord was revealed to that. The Church was not trying to avoid the offence of the Cross in order to find a place in this world. No, it preached the Cross; it was not ashamed to preach Christ crucified. It cost everything - but the Arm of the Lord was revealed.

What a tremendous lesson for us!

We are brought back to this chapter in Isaiah. This chapter, which is the quintessence of the New Testament and of all God's ways, shows that the Arm of the Lord is revealed to that humbled, emptied, despised, broken and crucified Servant. It is an abiding law. Let there be no mistake about it - if you and I have an assertive spirit, a self-confident spirit, a 'managerial' spirit, or anything like that, the Arm of the Lord will not be revealed. But if we find that He is stripping, emptying and pouring out, seeming to bring to nought, we may be sure He is doing it to make things safe for Him to stretch out His arm. Do you believe that? I say again - He is the God of the positive and not of the negative; He will stretch out His arm if only He is allowed to complete, to perfect, that work of undercutting everything that would take glory from Himself. You and I do not know how much there is in us of that kind, do we? We think we have just about touched bottom, we have come to the end; there is nothing left in us. But what would happen if the whole situation suddenly changed - took the upward road, and began to enlarge? *We* should come in again - our inveterate flesh would at once begin to assert itself! The Cross is the great clearing instrument; it is the only way of the glory.

The Central Place of the Cross

Now, I want you to note what a wonderful place this chapter occupies in Isaiah. You will recall the analysis of these prophecies. The first thirty-five chapters are occupied with a wide sweep of judgments, beginning, as always - note that - with the people of God. That is a Divine law: how can He judge the world until He has judged His own people? Chapters 36 to 39 form a short interlude dealing with Hezekiah; and then the final section, chapters 40 to 66, is occupied with restoration and rebuilding. Now, midway in the last section, which has twenty-six chapters, and is occupied with the new prospect, with recovery and rebuilding, comes this chapter 53. Is that not significant? It gives the Cross the central place in building, in recovery; and that is always true, is it not? But perhaps you might react, and say, 'Isaiah is ancient history - far away and long ago!' I would therefore like to put in here a long parenthesis.

This whole sequence that we have just considered is carried right into the dispensation in which you and I are living. It is brought in, or introduced, in Paul's letter to the Romans; and (as we shall see in the next chapter) it is completed in that same Apostle's first letter to the Corinthians. You remember the letter to the Romans. The first section opens up the sweep of Divine judgment over the whole race of Adam; it is God's 'No'. It leads up to the focal point of chapter 6: the Cross. That chapter is placed over against the whole situation which has gone before, declaring that the Cross says for ever 'No' to all that. But when we pass from chapter 6, through chapter 7, into chapter 8, we find we are moving out of that old situation into a new, from the negative to the positive. In chapter 8 we come into an altogether new prospect, an altogether new opening up. "There is therefore now no condemnation..." All that which was condemned has been dealt with in the Cross. We are "in Christ Jesus"; and 'the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made us free from the law of sin and death'.

This new and wonderful prospect, then, is in view. What does it amount to? It says this: God, who ever had in view the building of His wonderful and glorious Church, "without spot or wrinkle or any such thing", looked at the situation among men, in order to find that which would serve as a foundation for His building. But what did He find? He found the state of things that is described in those early chapters of the letter to the Romans. What a description it is - the sin, the corruption, the tangles, the complication - a hopeless picture of human depravity. That is what He found when He came to lay a foundation for His glorious Church, and He said: 'I cannot put a foundation on that; I cannot found My Church upon that. I must clear the ground, clean up this whole situation, burn it in fire' - and so the Cross did that. The Cross, in the intense fires of judgment, like the mighty Brazen

Altar, dealt with that twisted, distorted tangle of human nature. Now God has His foundation - Christ crucified. Now He can proceed to build His Church.

This is the interpretation of the Cross. It is God's means of getting rid of everything that makes it impossible for Him to do what He wants to do, to carry out what He has in mind. He has a mighty purpose in view, but He finds things in the way, and He says: 'These must be dealt with.'

Let us, however, in closing this chapter, return to the positive note again. When we hear the phrase, 'The Cross', let us guard our minds against that sudden uprising - 'Oh, the Cross again, the Cross again, the Cross! It is all death, it is all crucifixion, it is all negative!' That suggestion must be resolutely refused - it is Satan's twist given to God's most wonderful instrument for realising His glorious purpose. When we hear 'The Cross', let us say: 'Ah, that means prospect! That means a clearing of the way; that means something more, not less; that means that God's Arm is going to be revealed!' Let us join with Paul in saying: 'God forbid that I should glory in anything, *save* in the Cross...' (Gal. 6:14).