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The Sovereignty of God in Relation to the House of God

by T. Austin-Sparks

Transcribed from a message given in November 1959.

Will you bring together several very small passages of the Word of God, beginning in the prophecies of Isaiah. Isaiah's prophecies, chapter 45: "Thus saith the Lord to His anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him, and I will loose the loins of kings; to open the doors before him, and the gates shall not be shut; I will go before thee, to make the rugged places plain; I will break in pieces the doors of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron and I will give thee the treasures of darkness, and hidden riches of secret places, that thou mayest know that I am the Lord, which call thee by thy name, even the God of Israel".

The prophecies of Jeremiah, Jeremiah chapter 25, verse 12: "And it shall come to pass, when seventy years are accomplished, that I will punish the king of Babylon, and that nation, saith the Lord, for their iniquity, and the land of the Chaldeans; and I will make it desolate for ever".

Chapter 29, at verse 10: "For thus saith the Lord, After seventy years be accomplished for Babylon, I will visit you, and perform My good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place".

The book of Ezra, chapter 1, verse 2, verse 1: "Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying, Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia..." and so on.

And finally, in the book of Daniel, chapter 9, verse 2: "In the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood by the books the number of the years, whereof the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah the prophet, for the accomplishing of the desolations of Jerusalem, even seventy years. I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fastings and sackcloth and ashes. And I prayed unto the Lord my God, and made confession".

These passages of the Word of God, as you realize, compass a history; they embody a history, but a history which declares one great Bible truth, and that is: the truth of the sovereignty of God in relation to His House - the sovereignty of God as related to the House of God.

Now, to stand back from that for a moment, there is no mistaking one feature of history as it is recorded in the Bible. From beginning to end that one feature is the feature of a great conflict. We hardly get into the Bible before we find ourselves in the realm of controversy, dispute, challenge, and conflict. So early, the Lord Himself pronounced that there *would be* conflict. And right on through, almost to the end, that is the characteristic of Bible history. But when we look to see what the occasion of the conflict is, we find two major factors: a primary and a secondary.

The primary factor is the Name of the Lord.

The Name of the Lord

I do not mean any particular designation of God, but the honour, the supremacy, the uniqueness of the Name of the Lord, its supremacy in this universe. It is primarily over that that all the controversy and all the conflict that is in the Bible rages: for its dethroning, for its dishonouring on the one side; for its maintenance, upholding, purity and glory on the other side. The Name of the Lord. But the secondary factor in the conflict is a vessel or a people *for* that Name. Immediately God moves to secure for Himself that where He may put His Name - and it is a people; what we may in the larger term call a 'vessel'. Immediately God moves in relation to a vessel for His Name, you find you are in the atmosphere again of conflict, of challenge, of disputing; the battle begins.

The Name of the Lord lies *behind* everything - that is the ultimate. But the vessel for the Name lies in the forefront of everything. These two are related. What touches that vessel that is in the forefront, affects the Name which is behind, involves the Name. Let us come to the designation of that 'vessel': the House of God.

The House for His Name

Wherever and whenever we touch the House of God in the Bible, it is not long before everything springs into life. It springs into life! On the one side, we touch something which is vital to God, about which He is greatly concerned, over which He is very jealous: God, the Living God is associated with this; to touch it is to touch the Living God; to meet it is to meet the Living God.

In the Bible the House is always alive on the one side; that is, when you touch the House of God, you are not just touching a dead thing, but you are touching something that is alive, that is vital to God. On the other hand, whenever you come into touch with the House of God in the Bible, you come into touch with forces which are inimical, antagonistic to what it represents and means to God. In other words, the House of God is the centre of a whole age-long conflict. I am not staying to gather

up the data in that connection; anyone who knows the Bible knows quite well how true that is: here is something that has got to be - if possible - countered, overthrown, destroyed and nullified.

But for our purpose just now it is so very important, dear friends, that we recognize how closely related are the sovereignty of God and the House of God.

The Sovereignty of God and the House of God

That carries so much with it. That sovereignty will be on our side if we are on the side (to put it this way) of the House of God; that sovereignty is shown in the Word of God to be against all who, in any way, are against the House of God. Perhaps some of the most terrible words in the New Testament are those used by the apostle Paul to the Corinthians, when he said of them as a company (in another connection he spoke of them as individuals, but in this particular passage he spoke of them as a company) when he said: "ye are a temple of God". A company. And then he went on: "If any man destroyeth the temple of God, him shall God destroy" (1 Cor. 3;16,17). God's jealous sovereignty over His House. But if it is true that the sovereignty of God is bound up with His House, it is equally true that the House of God is the object, always, of satanic antagonism - to spoil it if possible.

Now, we have to reduce this very large matter to a few quite definite, practical points. Let us say at once, there are no alternatives to the House of God. With God, there are no alternatives to the church. Because of all the controversies, the conflicts, the confusion in relation to the church, many have sought to turn away from that to some alternatives or substitutes. We know of many who, because of these so unhappy situations and conditions in Christendom, which centre in this word 'church', have turned from all that kind of thing, as they call it, church teaching and church truth, and they have turned to evangelism. They have said, "Well, let the church get on with itself; we will give ourselves to the salvation of souls" - as an alternative, you see. I am not saying that in all evangelism that is the motive, that is the why, but it is true that there is something, perhaps, of almost disgust with what we will call 'churchianity', sectarianism, and all the quarrels and the divisions. That has been thrust aside, and we will get on with the business of soul saving. An alternative.

Others have decided that the course is world evangelization - "Let us take the Gospel to the nations; leave all this about the church, and get on with the great business of world evangelization." Again, all world evangelization is not prompted by that thought or feeling, but we know that it is there. There are others who have said, "Well, let the church get on with itself while we attend to the needs of mankind, of humanity in this world" - the sufferings, the misery and the poverty, and the what-not and they have committed themselves to what is called 'the social gospel' of improving human life for men and women.

Now, I am not saying, for one moment, that these things are not right; in themselves they are, quite right in themselves, but if they are an alternative to the church, see what will happen.

The *vast* amount of energy, and expenditure, and evangelism! How much is the result, a permanent abiding result, without a great margin of disappointment in comparison with what we have in the New Testament? The evangelism of the New Testament - what a tremendous thing that was. How accountable it was and effective! But it was always related to the church. It was church evangelism, not evangelism as something in itself. Evangelization of the world, well it's in the New Testament. See the Gospel going to the nations, the great compass and range in the brief period of thirty years! "Their word", it says, "went into *all* the earth", because it was on church ground. Divide between,

separate these things, and let there be that which is an alternative for any reason at all, and what happens? Well, what a costly thing is world evangelization, in means and people, and what-not, to a result, a fruitfulness, which cannot compare with those thirty years of the New Testament, those first thirty years. And then, remember, the Lord comes back, and sooner or later the whole thing is shaken to find out what is really solid, and real, and true, and the whole matter of the House of God springs into life again. And the very survival, survival depends upon what the House of God represents: that is fellowship, that is intercession, that is relatedness.

Now, God always moves (and here I speak with the Bible in mind) God always moves in relation to His main object. It may be a long-term thing; it may be true that the mills of God grind very slowly, but it is true that they grind exceedingly small. God never departs from His original and primary premise, and that is a House for His Name.

Now you see in these Scriptures that we have read how true that is. We have read the words of Isaiah, chapter 45: "Thus saith the Lord to Cyrus..." and then we have gathered around that these other words, and come back at last to Ezra and to Daniel. Do you know, dear friends, that Isaiah prophesied those words, or uttered those words of prophecy about Cyrus, nearly two hundred years before Cyrus made that decree, or came on the scene at all! Nearly two hundred years elapsed between Isaiah's saying, "Thus saith the Lord to Cyrus". Cyrus was an unknown person when Isaiah uttered those words.

All through that time you have got the completion of the ministry of Isaiah, all his life, the rest of his life overlapping into Jeremiah, and you have all the life and work of Jeremiah. All through those years, and then you have got to add in the seventy years of captivity, as in fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecies - *all those years*, but at last God moves sovereignly in relation to His House. Yes, He has waited long, but here it is; it may be a long way ahead; not of His choosing, but by reason of His people's failure. Nevertheless, so far ahead, God has still got His object, and He is not going to abandon it; He is coming back to it. Let years pass; let there be infinite suffering in the meantime; at length He is coming back to it; He is going to have it. That is New Testament truth as well as Old Testament truth. All this! It is a remarkable thing, isn't it, that the sovereignty of God mentions a man's name before that man was born; the sovereignty of God chooses him as the vessel before anybody knows anything about him; the sovereignty of God details what He will do: "I have girded thee although thou hast not known Me", says the Word. What the man will do, and what will happen, long, long years before the man is in view at all. The sovereignty of God moving right ahead over all that intervenes, because that sovereignty is bound up with His House; bound up with His House, and He is not going to let that thing go *because* His Name is inextricably and inseparably bound up with a vessel for the Name. He must have it, but in the meantime, in the meantime all the suffering, the suffering of the captivity, of the exile.

But what was the deepest cause of the suffering? And putting our finger upon this, we touch this whole matter at a very vital point. What was *deepest* cause of all the suffering and all the delay? It was the lack of a *heart* relationship with the House for His Name. Oh, the House was there; the House was there, it was *called* the 'House of God'. That is, the building was there, and a name was on it, the name of Jehovah. The ritual was carried on every day; the whole framework and formality proceeded; but you know from the prophets that this people's heart is: "far from Me, saith the Lord". There was not a *heart* relationship with the House. The thing was but an object; something that was kept going; but the people had no correspondence of heart with the jealousy of God for its

purity because of His Name; for its livingness, because He was the Living God. It was so cold, so formal, so hollow, so unreal!

The cry of the prophets was always about this heart matter. How the Lord tried to bring that home to His people through such men as Hosea and Ezekiel, whom He brought into deep and terrible suffering and sorrow in public, so that everybody could see. This man, this young prophet, whose wife has died; this other young prophet whose wife has been unfaithful, and gone after other lovers; and it is all brought out, that everybody could see the tragedy in their lives, and say: "Oh, isn't this terrible? Isn't this terrible!" If they had any sensibility, any feeling at all, it would touch their hearts; but it didn't! And when they asked what the meaning was, the prophets said, "This is just but an expression, a representation of you and the Lord: unfaithfulness; loss; and you are not touched! You're not touched." This prophet, when his wife dies, has at once to go out before the people with his face anointed; no sign whatever of mourning, or of grief, or of tragedy; and the people say, "This is a scandal! A man who's lost his wife, and he is showing no sign of sorrow. It's a scandal!" And at once the prophet has his message: "Yes, but you have lost more than I have, you have lost far more than I have and you don't care!" You see, this is all on this matter of a heart relationship with what is of God. While it was like that, it was still keeping up the temple service; outwardly the House was there, but there was no heart there. That's what brought all the suffering.

So the Lord had to bring them back to the place where they cried: "How can we sing the songs of Zion in a strange land?" See? The heart is waking up now; longing for what has been lost, which can no longer be had; a sense of the *need* of that, the *need* of it, and they can't get it - a consciousness that it is not just an empty form, or framework, or even teaching, but it is something vital and consequential to their very life, this House of God. That's how it must be, dear friends. We must have such a relationship to the House of God that it is vital to our existence, essential to our life; and to lose that is to lose what we *most* need of all things in this life. The House of God.

But then, in order for it to be like that, something has got to happen somewhere. And that is why I read the words from Daniel. Daniel, away there in the midst of it all in Babylon, said, "I learned from the books the times spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, the time: seventy years. And I prayed, with fastings, sackcloth and ashes, with supplication..." And I didn't read his prayer, it's a heart-rending prayer, that prayer of Daniel in Babylon. And do you say that that had nothing to do with, no relationship with the going back of the remnant to rebuild the House? I say it did; I say that was God's pivot of delivery and recovery: the man in Babylon who prayed like that. And until somewhere, somehow, there is that which will get to God in dire anguish about the situation, in travailing prayer over His House, the thing will go on and go on. He must have that; it has always been God's way. We can go through the Bible and see how true that is, that even in the great sovereign movements of God, His sovereignty has not been separate from someone who entered into His travail. It is like that. The factor of travailing prayer must be present in reality.

We must close, but note, when we are in line with God's object and purpose like that, and it has become really a heart matter of suffering to us, and God has a people, has a people who are so committed to the thing which is so close to His heart, see what wonderful things God does! The facilitation of His House; the means provided. We have got to read Ezra haven't we again, and Nehemiah. Read how the Lord stirred up the spirit of this pagan king who knew Him not and how by his decree every, every means was provided.

God is sovereign over all resources, over all means, and they are supplied. God is sovereign. Get into line with the thing that is nearest to His heart and you get into line with the operation of that sovereignty, on the one side: to provide, to meet all demands; on the other side: to meet the enemy. But it is not for me to close there without saying that even when the remnant got back and started on the building of the House, there were still enemies, and there always will be. Always will be. Those Samaritans gave that remnant a terrible time, even to the point of suspending operations for some years - the peoples fought, but there are always enemies about where the House of God is in view, make no mistake about it. But now we must finish on the note where we began: the sovereignty of God is related to that thing.