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The Spoil of Battle (1966)

by T. Austin-Sparks

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It is many years since the following was printed in A Witness and A Testimony, and later in booklet form, and it has long been out of print. We feel that it may be of timely help to the Lord's people and so reprint it here.

"Out of the spoil won in battles did they dedicate to repair the house of the Lord" 1 Chronicles 26:27.

From this passage of Scripture we gather that the House of the Lord is constituted out of our conflicts. The Lord builds from the fruit of conflict. Thus it was in the temple, given through David to Solomon. When that temple was completed it stood as a monument to universal victory; its very substance declared triumph on the right hand and on the left. The silver and the gold, and all the precious things which it comprised, had been taken in battle and wrought into the House of God. What is an illustration in the Old Testament is true in the reality of the New. The greater Son of David, the greater than Solomon, who "is here", builds the House from the spoil of His own warfare, and the warfare of His saints.

I was impressed as I read in this first book of Chronicles, chapter 17:9. The Lord is speaking to David, and one of the things which He says is: "And I will appoint a place for my people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in their own place, and be moved no more; neither shall the children of

wickedness waste them any more, as at the first, and as from the day that I commanded judges to be over my people Israel; and I will subdue all thine enemies". You notice that the Lord refers to the judges over Israel. The Lord raised up judges, as you will remember, to do that which Israel had failed to do completely under Joshua. Under Joshua they were meant by the Lord to utterly destroy all the nations in the land, and completely to subdue every enemy. They failed to do that. They suffered enemies to remain, they compromised, and then the Lord raised the judges to save them from the terrible results of their having failed to make a complete work of destroying all their enemies. But the judges failed, and the Book of Judges is a sad story of the work still incomplete. The Lord raised up the judges to do that which had not been done, but again the judges did not perfect the work. And it is tremendously interesting and illuminating to notice in 1 Chronicles 18 and 19, when the Lord had spoken to David about building the House, how he definitely and positively took in hand to overthrow all those other nations which the judges had not overthrown; and they are mentioned in these two chapters.

Go over them and you will find a list of the very nations and peoples mentioned in the Book of Judges; and David, through the vision of the House of God, seems to be moved instinctively by the Spirit of God to see that the House can never be realised until these enemies are subdued, until they are entirely overthrown. The Lord fulfilled His word to subdue all his enemies, and those very nations were taken in hand and dealt with. When the Lord had given David victory on every side round about, then he handed the plan to Solomon to carry out the building of the House, and the spoil of those battles was the material for the House. The enemy had the resources for the House of God, and the enemy had to be despoiled that the House might be built. That could lead us a very long way and be very illuminating. I want to seek to reduce it to a few words and a small compass which, nevertheless, will provide you with a great deal for future helpfulness and contemplation.

The Twofold Building

There are two aspects of the building of the House of God. We are rather inclined to take more account of one than the other. There is the numerical side. When we think of building the House of God, we think of the gathering in of people, the adding of souls by their salvation and being brought into the truth, and so we think only of the House of God being built in the sense referred to by Peter: "Ye also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house...", that is, we think of the numerical side, the gathering of the individual stones and their coming into their place in the spiritual edifice. Well, that is a true side to the building of the Lord's House, but it is only one side, and only half of the truth.

There is another side which is equally important, without which that will be altogether incomplete; that other side is the spiritual and moral side of the building of God's House. You may have a great number of individuals saved and still fail to have the truest meaning of the House of God. You may have a congregation and not have a church. You may have numbers, and not have the House of God spiritually. The House of God is not only a numerical thing, it is a spiritual and moral thing. That is, it has a character, and that character is what makes it in very essence the House of God. It takes its character from its Head and will eventually, in its consummation, be recognised - not as a great multitude merely of saved souls - but as something which bears the character of its Head, the Lord Jesus. The time is coming when the Lord will cause His Name to be upon His own; that is, we shall receive a white stone, and in that white stone a new name; we shall have a new name, and we shall be called by His Name, His Name will be in our foreheads.

That is all symbolic language, and its meaning is just this: the Lord Jesus will be so fully manifested in His own that as you look at them you will say: 'That speaks of the Lord Jesus.' You will recognise so much of Him, He will be so much in evidence, that you will simply have to say: 'That is the nature of Christ.' You have met Him in them, and in meeting them you met Him. And so He will be universally revealed through His own. His Name is His character, what His Name embodies spiritually and morally will be resting upon them, they will take their character from Him, and so there will be one universal displaying of the character and nature of the Lord Jesus. It will not dispense with His own individual personal being, but His people will be a channel of His own universal expression.

Character Through Conflict

The building of the House of the Lord, therefore, is not only a gathering of people but it is a spiritual and a moral building up, and that is only brought about through conflict. The Divine economy has been so ordered that, although the Lord Jesus has in Himself secured a universal triumph over all His foes, the foes are still left for us to deal with. The enemy, although defeated, has still been left for the saints to have something to do with, and the Lord has not put our foes out of the universe, though in Himself He has triumphed. He has left them for us to deal with in His triumph, and it is thus that you and I get our spiritual and moral development. It is by conflict, by battle, by grim and terrible warfare spiritually, that the moral excellencies of our triumphant Head are brought out in us.

We triumph in His victory, but we know that faith is so tested in a conflict, so deeply tried in a battle, that it is something more than just objectively holding on, or believing in something in Christ; that very exercise of faith brings out from Him, into our own souls, the strength of His victory. We are made morally one with Him in His triumph by a test of faith which is so grim and so terrible that nothing that is not of Him in us would be sufficient to carry us through. It has to be wrought into our very being, and that is done through conflict in which faith is drawn out; and so, spiritually and morally, we build through conflict, through adversity, in the Divine and sovereign ordering of our lives.

The moral side of things is that which comes out in exercise, exercise of faith in the value of Calvary's victory. It is one thing to have a theoretical appropriation of Calvary's victory and say in an hour of emergency: 'I take the victory of Calvary.' But very often nothing happens, and although you take a position like that, you find yourself called upon to hold on, and hold on, and hold on, and during that time of being called upon by the Lord to hold on, faith is being tested, Calvary's victory is becoming something not objectively taken hold of but inwardly established, and at last that victory is in us as it is in the Lord. But it has become a moral quality in our being, and in the next time of testing it is not a trying to get hold of something, it is there with its roots in us, something has been done in us, it has been made a part of us.

The Battle over Enlightenment

Now this works in various ways, and in numerous directions and connections. You receive an enlightenment, an unveiling from the Lord in relation to truth; an opening of the heavens to see Divine truth as you have never before seen that truth; perhaps it is a new, an entirely new thing, or perhaps it is new light upon an old thing. In any case, it is a new illumination; enlightenment which comes to you with all the freshness, and all the joy, and all the inspiration, and all the uplift of the opening of the heavens; and for a time you delight in it, you glory in it, you bathe yourself in it, and

you have nothing else to talk about but the new revelation which has come to you. And then a point comes where you go right into an awful conflict in connection with that very light. It seems that the first glory of it has gone and you are left asking all sorts of questions about it. You are cold, dead, dark; the thing has lost its grip and looking at it now from this standpoint, the standpoint of this experience, you wonder whether after all it was right or not. What strange creatures we are! Things which have come to us as the mightiest things in our experience can, in given circumstances, be the things which are questioned by us as to whether they are really true at all, or whether we simply picked up something and ran it for a time; there was a freshness about it, and its freshness was its own momentum to carry us on; now it is all unreal, and we go into a time of conflict over truth given to us by the Lord. In that time of conflict we are searched, our hearts are looked into, we are tried. Remember Joseph: "Until the time that his word came to pass, the word of Jehovah tried him." The Word of the Lord tried him; and we have to go over the things which we have been saying and believing, and have to ask ourselves all sorts of questions about them.

The Word of the Lord tries us, but it is in that conflict that spiritual and moral elements are developed, features are brought out. Conflict secures the spoil for further building, and then we come back again, not only on to the original ground of our apprehension of that truth, but on to a very much higher, and into a much deeper and stronger apprehension of that thing, so that it is more to us than it was before, because we have gone into the battle with it, and we have come out with spoil for building; there have been fresh heavenly factors put into it. Something has been introduced into the original thing, through the conflict, which has given it extra value; it is the power of resurrection. Thus the truth of God comes as from God, with all its Divine glory, beauty, strength, and we rejoice in that light for a season, and then we go into death with that very light; but in the battle, in the conflict, the death, the being searched, tried, tested, found out, and driven down to the place where, if that goes, we go, because it is our life, then the power of resurrection begins to operate and we come back with that thing stronger than ever, and in addition with spoils for building. We know the value of that thing as we had never proved it before, because we had never been into conflict with it, we had never tested that armour, never tried that sword; but now something of value has been given to it which we never knew until we went into the conflict with it. It does work that way with an enlightenment.

How many people we have seen leap to the light! They have embraced it, could talk about nothing but the new revelation that had come to them. We are very glad, we are delighted when people do this, but we say: 'Yes, presently they will be tested on that, and that thing will test them.' Then they go into a time of awful conflict and darkness, full of questions as to whether or not, after all, the thing is true, is right. Now the Lord is putting the thing inside. Before it was very largely on the circumference; it was, in a sense, in a measure, objective; but now the Lord is planting the thing into them, and them into it. They will come through and say: 'Before, it was something given to me but it belonged to someone else, now it is mine.' Thus they begin to build with the spoil resultant from the conflict.

The Battle over Vocation

The same thing is true in the matter of service and purpose. The Lord gives a burden as to His intention, the purpose unto which He is calling us as His servants, and the vision captures us, the purpose lays hold of us, and for the time being we have nothing to think about or talk about but the burden which He has laid on us; the whole sense of vocation and service has mastered us; we have a vision. Well, we go on with that for a time, by the momentum of the vision and then it seems that

the vision fails, or we get into such a realm of conflict over that vision, and such a battle rages, that the thing seems to go into death, and we pass through a deep and dark experience in which the whole question comes up again: Was there anything in it after all? Have we not been mistaken? Is this the thing to which the Lord has called us? Was it not something we leaped at and, after all, the Lord did not mean it for us? Have we been wrong? I expect most of us know those experiences of conflict, of battle over the vision, but it finds us at length in a stronger place than ever before in relation to that Divine purpose.

Our history is just that; many times we have been into death and conflict with our vision, in which experiences it seemed that the vision went altogether. Many questions arose about it, but we came through and we found ourselves more solidly bound up with that Divine purpose than ever we were. We have gone into conflict and there have emerged spiritual and moral elements by which there is a building up as a result of the trial.

The Battle over a Position Taken

We take a position, we declare ourselves - and how easy it is in meetings and in conferences to take positions, amongst the fellowship of the Lord's people to declare ourselves - that we are going in a certain direction, that for us this is to be the course for ever: 'I never, no never will leave Him'. We can sing these things glibly in hymns: to-morrow may find us reviewing the whole thing, looking round to see if there is not some back-door way out. It is true: these hearts of ours are at best inconsistent. We take our attitudes, we take our positions, make declarations, and for the time being, in the strength of that, we go on, and then we are challenged as to our position.

See how this is illustrated in the history of the children of Israel: "Then sang Moses and the children of Israel..." They got to the other side of the sea and all Israel sang. What did they sing? A song of absolute victory. You would have thought that they were in the land already, but it was not long before they were murmuring against the Lord and Moses. They were tested, challenged, tried by the position which they had taken, and then went through a dark time.

So we, whenever we make a declaration, shall sooner or later be tested by it. (I hope the effect of what I am saying will not be that you will say: 'I will never declare myself again!' If you do take that attitude it may simply prevent the Lord in His purpose). It is necessary, in order to get the spoil, that we go that way. The qualities are only going to be drawn out in that way, and it is quite right that in the measure of devotion we have, we make a declaration, take a position; the Lord calls upon us to do that, it gives Him the ground for testing us out. Somehow in the order of things it seems that the Lord requires declarations before He can do much. If you have never declared yourself, have always had a reservation, have been so cautious, the Lord has never been able to do anything with you. It is when we take our feet off the bottom and launch out into the deep, and say that we are out with the Lord, that the Lord can begin to do things. We are tried by the position we have taken, and tested by our commitment, and those qualities are brought in which are building qualities, the spoil of battle.

Recently I was reading the following:

"Many people are wanting power. Now how is power produced? The other day we passed the great works where the trolley engines are supplied with electricity. We heard the hum and roar of the countless wheels, and we asked our friend, 'How do they make the power?' 'Why', he said, 'just by the revolution of those wheels and the friction they produce. The rubbing creates the electric current.'

"And so, when God wants to bring more power into your life, He brings more pressure. He is generating spiritual force by hard rubbing. Some do not like it and try to run away from the pressure, instead of getting the power and using it to rise above the painful causes.

"Opposition is essential to a true equilibrium of forces. The centripetal and centrifugal forces acting in opposition to each other keep our planet in her orbit. The one propelling, and the other repelling, so act and re-act, that instead of sweeping off into space in a pathway of desolation, she pursues her even orbit around her solar centre.

"So God guides our lives. It is not enough to have an impelling force - we need just as much a repelling force, and so He holds us back by the testing ordeals of life, by the pressure of temptation and trial, by the things that seem against us, but really are furthering our way and establishing our goings.

*"Let us thank Him for both, let us take the weights as well as the wings, and thus divinely impelled, let us press on with faith and patience in our high and heavenly calling."
(From "Streams in the Desert")*

That is only another way of stating the case. Light and power come from conflict. And so the Lord builds His House with the spoils of battle, and allows the enemies to remain for our overcoming, inward enemies and outward enemies, in order that He may get the beauty and the glory for His House.

The Lord lay His finger upon this word, and show us that when He gives a vision, an illumination, a call, we respond and then reverses come in. Difficulty and opposition are no contradiction of God's revelation or call, but are intended to bring us into something which is more than merely an emotional realm in relation to truth and service; they must bring into a place of strength where we can be counted upon. Says the Lord Jesus, "I will build my church; and the gates of hades shall not prevail against it" - because of its moral quality. Because of its moral virtue it is established for ever.