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Three Phases of the Christian Life

by T. Austin-Sparks

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The Lord has laid it on my heart to speak a little on three phases of the Christian life as represented by three of the letters of the Apostle Paul, the letters to the Thessalonians, the Corinthians, and the Ephesians. The only preliminary word is to point out that what we have to say, or what these letters have to say, is to churches; but churches are made up of individuals, so that the application must be a personal and individual one. At the same time, we must recognise that there is a specific value and importance in the word found in the collective life.

The First Phase - The Letters to the Thessalonians

In these letters to the Thessalonians we have, as we know, the first of the letters of Paul, and there is more in that than just the fact that they were the first apostolic letters. They show to us what an assembly of the Lord's people is at its beginning, and that means, what Christians are at their beginning. There are two or three things characteristic of these Thessalonian believers.

(a) A Thorough Conversion

They were marked by a thorough conversion. You cannot go further back than that. There is nothing before that, so far as the Christian life is concerned. That is where everything begins, and that is, as I have said, not only the feature of the individual believers comprising that assembly, but it comes out in the corporate life and is corporately expressed. So that what is said by the Apostle is said about them as a church, which means that all the members were like this.

"Ye turned unto God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, who delivereth us from the wrath to come." (1 Thess. 1:9-10).

How inclusive it is! That from which they turned, He to whom they turned - a living and true God. You see the foundation of their faith, the object of their faith; a repudiation, on the one hand, of those that, in contrast with Him, were no true and living gods, and, on the other hand, a turning to Him whom they now verily believed with all their heart to be the true and living God.

Then there is added, "his Son... Jesus" - His Son who is coming again from heaven, His Son who delivered us from wrath to come, His Son whom He raised from the dead. What an inclusiveness there is in the foundation of their new life, their new attitude, the basis of their action in turning from - unto. There is a very thorough conversion. It speaks, does it not, of life. That is the key to the Thessalonian position; for, as you read these letters, you cannot get away from the element of life, vitality; they throb with life.

(b) A Widespread Influence

The second thing about them was their widespread influence, and this surely speaks of spiritual energy in testimony.

"Ye became an ensample to all that believe in Macedonia and in Achaia. For from you hath sounded forth the word of the Lord, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith to Godward is gone forth; so that we need not to speak anything." (1 Thess. 1:7-8).

There was no need to proclaim it; they let it be known and they let it be felt that they had turned unto the true and living God. These are marks of a true turning to the Lord, marks of an assembly at its beginnings, and marks of a Christian life in its Springtime - widespread influence, far-reaching testimony, spontaneous expression.

(c) Their Living Fellowship

"But concerning love of the brethren ye have no need that one write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another; for indeed ye do it toward all the brethren which are in all Macedonia." (1 Thess. 4:9-10).

"We are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren, even as it is meet, for that your faith groweth exceedingly, and the love of each one of you all toward one another aboundeth." (2 Thess. 1:3).

Little comment, if any, is needed upon words like that. They speak for themselves.

Here you have three features of this first phase of the Christian life, and so it should be in every case. If we remember what the Lord Jesus had to say to the church at Ephesus in the early part of the Book of Revelation, that they had left their first love, we understand quite well that His desire is that, as it was in the beginning, so it shall ever be. I mean by that, the Lord does not want us to leave this early freshness, to lose this youthful energy, to move away from what, in the Old Testament, He,

in grief over Israel's declension, called "the love of their espousals". The Lord wants His people characterised by these things, and the Lord wants the assemblies to bear these marks; life, in true and thorough conversion; energy, in a far-reaching spiritual influence; living fellowship and a deep mutual devotion to the spiritual interests of one another. That is very simple, but it is basic, it is fundamental. It sets forth the Lord's desire and what pleases Him, and it becomes at once a test and a challenge. Have we that foundation? Is that what is basic to our Christian life? May it be so, and if it is not so, may we have exercise before the Lord that there may be a recovery of this youthful, Springtime life, energy and love.

Before we pass to the second phase, it might be helpful to recognise that there is a peculiar adversity in this first realm. Each sphere has its own peculiar difficulties to encounter, and there is that which is peculiar to this sphere, as you will see in this letter.

The Peculiar Enemy - the World

"For ye, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judaea in Christ Jesus: for ye also suffered the same things of your own countrymen, even as they did of the Jews; who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drave out us, and please not God, and are contrary to all men; forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved; to fill up their sins alway: but the wrath is come upon them to the uttermost." (1 Thess. 2:14-16).

"We ourselves glory in you in the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions which ye endure." (2 Thess. 1:4).

Now in the realm of simple, earnest devotion and abandonment to the Lord, and of testimony to Him and influence on His behalf, we shall always find that the world is against us. The peculiar enemy in this particular sphere is the world, coming along the line of simple - when I use that word I do not mean anything easy - the simple form of persecution, those afflictions heaped upon earnest Christians by the world in its persecution of them. The world would seek to check and set back the life, arrest the energy, thwart the testimony, and break up the fellowship. That is how it was in the early days, and that is how it is now.

The Lord's Method - Comfort and Encouragement

In this first realm, you find that the Lord uses as His method the simple form of comfort, of encouragement. Here the address of the Apostle, or of the Holy Spirit through the Apostle, is simple, direct encouragement, taking account of these things and referring to the thorough-going character of their relationship with the Lord, and to the strength and range of their influence. Oh, it is real comfort and encouragement to be sometimes told that you count for something in the Lord, you represent something. The Lord knows when it is safe to say things like that, and when people are enduring persecution and are up against the world and its awfulness and antagonism, it is usually safe to encourage along that simple line of saying, Well, it is all right; yours is a worth while influence and testimony! That is how the Lord comes to these believers.

The Second Phase - The Letters to the Corinthians

In the case of the Corinthians, we have another phase of the Christian life. If in the Thessalonians we have an assembly at its beginning, in the Corinthians we have an assembly that stands to represent

what it is to be here on the earth. While it is true that in this first letter to the Corinthians reference is made to the Church as the Body of Christ, it is important to recognise that, in the case of Corinthians, it is the local church, or the Church as locally expressed. That is very important. It is in that particular place for a testimony, to set forth Divine thoughts, to give there in that place an expression of the mind of God, to bring into that place God's own mind. That is what we have at Corinth, that which is an expression of God's thought in a location, that which is to be as here on this earth in different places for God. There are two things which sum up the Corinthian position and what the Christian life is to be in that particular realm. One is order, and the other is mutuality.

If you look carefully at these letters, you will see that these two words go right to the heart of them. What is it that is really in view, that is bound up with the Church as locally represented? What is the object of a local body of believers in the purpose of God? Now, lay this carefully to heart, and you can bear it out in the Word of God. The object in view, from God's standpoint, with every company of believers, in any and every location, is that there shall be a growing manifestation of Jesus Christ there, so that all around will have to confess that Jesus Christ is a living and great reality. In coming in there they shall, above and beyond all other impressions, feel His presence and have to acknowledge that God is in the midst. Paul expresses it thus: they "shall fall down and worship God, declaring that God is among you indeed"; that is, God in Christ. So that the thing in view in this second sphere is the increase of believers together in Christ, and the increase of Christ in believers.

Now, one of the troubles at Corinth was that they were not fulfilling the purpose for which they existed as a local assembly. I might say that was the primary trouble. Everything else was gathered into that, and it was made manifest by immaturity. Said the Apostle, "I could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, as unto babes in Christ" (1 Cor. 3:1). Now, these people are supposed to have got beyond the baby stage. That is the point. This is an advanced position, something beyond. We are climbing the spiritual ladder. We have started with Thessalonians, now we are supposed to be a bit higher. We are coming into the purpose of assembly-life, and that speaks of growth in Christ, the increase of Christ unto the expression and manifestation of Christ, a mighty impression of Christ to be given to all around in that particular locality.

Now, here are two things which are most intimately related to spiritual growth, and therefore most intimately related with the very vindication of the church, that is, the justification for the existence of believers in any one locality.

(a) Divine Order

I am not going to stay to speak much about it; I am going to point it out and ask you to go back with it, and you will see that that is a governing thing. The Apostle had to say, "The rest will I set in order when I come" (1 Cor. 11:34). We see, then, that his letter too was intended to set a lot of things in order which were out of order. There was disorder at the Lord's table; there was disorder in the family life; there was disorder in social relationships; there was disorder in business relationships; there was disorder in domestic affairs; disorder between husbands and wives, and wives and husbands; there was disorder in the assembly meetings, people getting out of place from under their Divinely appointed and required covering; all sorts of disorders. The result was immaturity, failure to increase, to grow, and therefore failure to fulfil their Divine calling. You may take it, beloved, that if the Divine order is not recognised and established, and we are not in it, there is arrest in our spiritual life. We shall not move, and God will always be having to come back to that point where the disorder is and where it arose and where we failed to recognise the truth, and to

accept it, and go on. He will say, 'I cannot go on with you until you have righted that.' Order is essential to growth, and therefore order is essential to the church's life, the church's purpose.

Let me repeat. God puts companies of His people in localities in order that Christ may come in there, and that in ever-increasing measure, and a disordered local assembly sets Christ back, keeps Him out, and leaves that assembly a contradiction; or, if it be the case of individual lives, who are supposed by the Lord to have a related life with His other children, such lives are a contradiction, and a cause of limitation, and of an exclusion of the greater fulnesses of Christ.

(b) Mutuality

How rich this first letter to the Corinthians is in mutuality! "When ye be come together" - then what happens? Each has a psalm or something else. Again, in the twelfth chapter, we note the interdependence of all the members of the Body. One member cannot say to another, I have no need of you. Each member is there with a contribution to make to the rest and to the whole, an indispensable contribution. Each one is there for that purpose, to make a contribution. God wastes nothing, and when He made this human body, He did not make one tiny part without a purpose in relation to all the rest. So that, if one member suffers, all the members suffer. Something is lost if that contribution is not made. The whole suffers loss. It is a law, a principle, the law of mutuality, and that is a law of increase, a law of growth. If some living tissue of the body does not function, so as to make its contribution, to serve its purpose, then the body will not come to its full stature; it will fall short, it will be under arrest, it will be dwarfed. But when every faculty, every part, every member, is working, is contributing to the rest, to the whole, the body makes increase, it grows. That is a law of growth.

Now, let me apply what has been said. If any member has an unrelated life, if any member is living an independent life, a detached life, if any member is failing to make his, or her, contribution to the local assembly (now do not get out of what I am saying by the back-door, in the idea that you can contribute to the whole Body of Christ without any fellowship with believers on the earth; this is Corinthians we are in, and that is a local assembly), if any member fails to make contribution to the whole in the local assembly, then that member must correspondingly suffer loss, and the local assembly must also be curtailed, held back in its growth toward the fulness of Christ which it ought to be making, and then the registration of Christ outwardly in testimony and in power also suffers. You see the individual responsibility. Now, let me ask you, have you a living assembly-life, in which you are really making a personal contribution? Now, do not think that coming to any company of the Lord's people in a locality and hearing two or three addresses on Sunday is assembly-life. It is not. You can go anywhere and hear preaching. That is not assembly-life. Assembly-life is when you have come together and there is mutuality. That is the only way of growth. You are not going to grow merely by hearing three addresses on Sunday. It does not necessarily follow that you would make even a little growth, were you to listen to addresses every day of the week. No, you will grow when you come together with the Lord's people and take your share, contribute. Mutuality is the way of growth, and that is why the enemy likes to scare people from opening their lips, or, should they do so, to give them such a time afterwards as to make them say, I will never do that again! The first time I opened my lips, I said, Never again! But the Lord has seen to that. You see what I mean, "Each one of you hath..." You have to come and in mutuality build up one another, and then that influence will go out, and life will be maintained. There will be the preserving of the primal elements, life, love, and energy, by mutuality. Have you assembly-life? Look after it. It is indispensable to your spiritual growth, and it is indispensable to the Church's witness here on earth.

Now, just as in the Thessalonian sphere and position there is a peculiar enemy, so there is a peculiar enemy in this sphere.

The Peculiar Enemy - the Flesh

If it is the world in the Thessalonian sphere, it is the flesh here. You have only to look back again to this first letter to the Corinthians. You can change the term if you like and say "the power of nature". Paul expresses it in this way: "Each one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ" (1 Cor. 1:12). Each one saith, I. Are you not crucified? Do you not speak as men? That is how men speak; that is the course of nature; that is the natural thing. It is according to nature to have preferences amongst people, to have your likes and dislikes with regard to those who minister. I like this one's style of ministry, and I dislike that one's style, and if I know that one is going to minister, I am not interested and stay away! That is nature, the flesh, carnality. So, right through that letter, the enemy of God's purpose, expressing itself in so many forms, is this flesh, this life of nature. When there is mutuality of life and we are found together in mutual expression, contribution and building up, it will not be long before the enemy tries to insert or stir up some flesh. It may be in the very contribution itself: it may be that someone will begin to speak as of themselves to make an impression, and so on. In some way the flesh will be always near at hand to be injected by the enemy into that mutual life to destroy it. It is as well to recognise, therefore, that in Corinth the need is of Jesus Christ and Him crucified; the Cross in its application to the flesh, as to the world in Thessalonians.

The Lord's Method - Admonition and Warning

Now the Lord's method of coming to Corinth is of necessity different from that in Thessalonica. There it is simple comfort and encouragement, but in Corinth it is admonition, admonishing, warning.

The Third Phase - The Letter to the Ephesians

Here we have what an assembly is "cosmically". I know that is beyond some. It simply means, in the wider range. It is not only the earth, the world, but includes what is around and above and beyond it, and reaches to the furthest range. Thus in this letter to the Ephesians you have that which is here, but is not bound by its location. It is affecting things far beyond. Here is the difference between the Body in Corinthians, and the Body in Ephesians. In Corinthians, it is essentially local; in Ephesians, it is universal, it is the whole Body. So here, there is not only its testimony on the earth, though that is seen: as you notice, the relationships are touched again here; husbands and wives, wives and husbands; children and parents, parents and children; servants and masters, masters and servants. That has a very real practical place here on the earth. We must never get so far up in the heavenlies that these things are lost sight of and have no real place. That is a snare of the enemy. But then, when that is right, and the assembly-life too is right, we come into the cosmic range, into touch with principalities and powers, world-rulers of this darkness, spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenlies. Then you go beyond that to the super-heavenlies where Christ is, far above all rule and authority. That is what we mean by "cosmic". It reaches right out to the whole spiritual realm. That is the Ephesian sphere of the Christian life, and it is there that we really come into our supreme and essential vocation.

You notice that here, in Ephesians, the thing does not begin with our conversion, nor does it begin with the setting up of a local church; it begins back in eternity, before times eternal. We are taken right back there in Ephesians, into the counsels of the Godhead, to "the eternal purpose". That is the phrase characteristic of this letter. We are right back there before time with the Godhead, in the plans and purposes to be realised through the ages and consummated in the ages to come. We are taken on to the after times, when time shall be no more. This is timeless. Then we are called into this purpose in Christ Jesus, and this purpose is dominion with Him; the Church in union with the Christ who is far above all principalities and powers, and ruling with Him in God's universe in the ages to come. It is moreover seen as learning now by the Spirit how to rule, and in real exercise of this rule in the heavenlies as it makes increase in the knowledge of Christ. We have here the heavenly and eternal vocation of the Church, and this is the third and highest sphere of all. Here it is a question of

Power

We may need power to live the Christian life as simple believers; we may need power for our local Christian life as an assembly; but, if that is true, how much more do we need power in this cosmic realm, where we are meeting principalities and powers. So here, in this letter, we have the greatest things about power in the New Testament. "The exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe" (ch. 1:19); power for effectiveness in the spiritual realm. I think there are three words which particularly characterise this letter to the Ephesians. They are power, effectiveness, and fulness. "The church, which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all" (ch. 1:23). What a comprehensive fulness that is, how vast! "Unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think..." (3:20). This is a letter of superlatives because it is in the spiritual realm and range of eternal vocation. We are called to that.

So we must not just be Thessalonian converts and believers, however good and beautiful and lovely that life may be. That must be true of us, but we must not stop there. We have to be a company of the Lord's people in a location, under Divine order, in mutual upbuilding, that there Christ may with increase come into us for a testimony, an expression of Christ there. That too should be true of us. Are we in that? Even so we must not stop there. We must not just remain the local. We have to go on and come to this highest vocation, or form or phase of our vocation. It is that great testimony in the heavenlies unto principalities and powers, that universal expression of spiritual dominion, something more than the local. It is the universal. These are three phases of the Christian life.

The Peculiar Enemy - The Powers of Darkness

As the first and second phases have their peculiar enemies, so has the third. We are very familiar with the enemy of the Ephesian position: "Our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world-rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenlies" (6:12). Here, not through the world, nor through the flesh as such, though these ever provide a ground of assault, but in this realm we above all meet the enemy in naked spiritual directness. The thing is so much more utter here. You are conscious that you are right up against evil, naked evil, pressure. You cannot account for it in any natural realm. It may not necessarily be coming through any seen, perceived, tangible channel or instrumentality, but it registers itself right upon your own spirit and your own soul and your own body in a direct way. This is the work of malignant, evil powers of death, seeking to swamp, to crush, to submerge, to drive you out. Is that true? It is true - that is, if you know anything about this realm. Well, it is a good thing to know our enemies and then we know where we are.

The Lord's Method - Exhortation

What does the Lord say to the Ephesians? To the Thessalonian position He sends comfort and encouragement. To the Corinthian sphere He sends admonition and warning. To the Ephesian sphere He sends exhortation. "I... beseech you to walk worthily of the calling wherewith ye were called" (4:1). That is exhortation. So the Lord exhorts us to walk worthily; and what is the worthiness? "In all lowliness and meekness..." That is in chapter 4 and it is all one piece with what follows in chapter 5. The worthiness of this calling, of this vocation, effectiveness in the realm of evil forces and powers, real fulfilment of this ministry right out to the bounds of the spiritual universe, is very closely bound up with, "Husbands, love your wives", and, "Wives, be in subjection unto your own husbands". It is all in Ephesians. I mention that, not necessarily to focus upon some particular point, although the point of relationships and order and Divinely appointed positions is a very, very vital one in spiritual effectiveness and the defeat of the Devil. If these things are not observed and established, there is an impingement and grip of the Devil which you cannot shake off, and of the terrible possibility of deception. Oh, that we would take God's Word as it is! God's Word says this, and when God's Word says a thing, we can never say that this that God has said is less important than that that God has said. If there are great things said by the Lord in Ephesians about the heavenly and eternal purpose, there are also these things which God has said; and when God says a thing, it carries the importance of His own mind behind it: and God has said, "Husbands, love your wives"; "Children, obey your parents." Oh, how important! The Devil can destroy your effectiveness in his realm by getting you tripped up on these things, by getting disorder there. If the Lord says a thing, He knows how much is bound up with a violation of such principles. Whenever He speaks, He has that great adversary in His eye, and He is taking precautions. So He exhorts, "Walk worthy"; and walking worthy is this and this and this. It is all touching the great calling, vocation, from eternity to eternity.

May the Lord make all these things true of us all.