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Email: info@austin-sparks.net

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## A Holy Nation

by T. Austin-Sparks

*Transcribed from a message given in May 1960. The spoken form has been retained verbatim.*

In the Gospel by Matthew, chapter 21, at verse 42:

*"Jesus saith unto them, Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same was made the head of the corner: this was from the Lord, and it is marvellous in our eyes? Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof. And he that falleth on this stone shall be broken to pieces: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will scatter him as dust."*

The first letter of Peter, second chapter, verse seven:

*"For you therefore which believe is the preciousness: but for such as disbelieve, the stone which the builders rejected, the same was made the head of the corner, and a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence, for they stumble at the word, being disobedient: whereunto also they were appointed. But ye are an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession; that ye may shew forth the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light; which in time past were no people, but now are the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy."*

These passages belong, as you see, to that very solemn (in some respects or on one side, tragic thing) the truth that all that could and should have been the inheritance and the vocation of Israel was lost by them and to them because of their unbelief and was transferred to the Church, "the holy nation" as the Church is here designated by Peter. It is Peter who has taken those Old Testament words and the word which the Lord Jesus Himself took from the Old Testament and transferred to Himself; it is Peter who has done that.

Peter has a peculiar place in this transition, an interesting place, a very instructive place. The Lord had said to Peter, "Thou art Peter, a piece of rock; upon this rock, (of Peter's testimony, undoubtedly) I will build My Church". There's no doubt about it that in Peter's mind the Stone which was rejected

of the builders and became the head of the corner was identical with the Rock upon which the Church would be built. Peter was the one who heard that statement from the Lord and it is Peter who, so many years afterward, has taken up the thought here in his letter: "the Stone, the Rock, the building of the Church thereupon, there around, I will build". The Lord had in that very connection of the rejected Stone becoming the head of the corner, said "the kingdom shall be taken from you and given to a nation bringing forth the fruit thereof". To Peter He had said "and I will give you the keys of the kingdom". And here is Peter using this very phrase, "a holy nation" answering to that which was in the declaration of the Lord Jesus, taken from Israel as they were set aside, "I, the kingdom of heaven shall be taken from you and given to a nation". Now Peter is here speaking of a holy nation to show forth the excellencies, corresponding to bringing forth the fruit thereof.

Now, Peter opens this letter, as you see, by indicating that he is addressing the scattered of the dispersion over the world; the saints of the dispersion in all these many nations, in all these many nations and places or parts of the earth. And he says, "Ye, ye saints scattered in the nations, dispersed over the earth, *ye are* a holy nation", not you're going to be, but now, as scattered everywhere, you're just a nation in the nations but you are different from the nations. Now our present emphasis this morning is upon this one word, "Ye are a HOLY nation". A *holy* nation. Upon that word "holy" the tragedy of Israel took place; the transference of all the divine intention was effected. Upon that one word the Church inherits all that.

You see, the whole change-over, the terrible tragedy and loss of Israel and the glorious inheritance of the Church just hangs upon one word: holy. Holy; everything rests upon that. If Israel's loss of the divine intentions for that people as a nation is all due to this one thing: failure in what God means by holiness, and if the Church comes in *only* on that ground, then it's a very governing thing isn't it, this matter of what the Lord means by holiness. And we could go as far as to say there is no guarantee of the Church retaining its inheritance and vocation beyond its holiness. It could very well be said of people, even in this dispensation, the Christian dispensation: "it shall be taken from you and given to those bringing forth the fruits thereof". That's the only ground. You, no more than Israel, can claim to stand and abide on mere tradition, on mere history, on mere externals of practice and teaching. The basis with God is holiness and what He means by holiness.

No one can contemplate the awfulness of Israel's tragedy over these two thousand years without feeling that here is the presence of something very, very great, important - and in a sense something very terrible - this matter of holiness. And you know that there are other words into which this one word is translated. It simply means, as we often say: sanctified, separated, set apart for God; many ways of expressing it, but that's what it is. This is something which belongs to God solely and wholly and belonging to God it is *sacred*, it is *holy*, it is *sanctified*, it is *separated* from all that is contrary to God. That is holiness.

Now, for light on this matter we, of course, do have to go back to the Old Testament and we begin with the realization that after man's disobedience at the beginning (and that's the heart of the trouble of all unholiness as is here stated) the whole world, to use the phrase of an apostle, fell into the arms of the wicked one. The *whole world* lieth in the wicked one. The *whole* world lieth in the wicked one. That is the revelation of the early chapters of the Bible isn't it? We need not stay to emphasize or to illustrate or to cite; there it is. God beheld, God looked down and saw that *all* men had gone astray; the whole world lieth in the wicked one. Then God moved to extricate from that world in the lap of the wicked one, a people of a different kind.

We have His move with Abraham, and here, dear friends, with all your interest in the life of Abraham and the incidents in his life and all your study and reading of that life, remember that the *heart* of

everything where Abraham was concerned was this one thing: to separate from this world. So the Word came to Abraham "Get thee out of thy country, from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, get thee out!" Now this is a literal geographical movement but contains a spiritual principle: a *getting out* of that realm lying in the wicked one.

So Abraham went out from Ur of the Chaldees, in a typical sense he went out from this world in the wicked one. And then God promised him a son. He made promise of Isaac and went away and left him, as He so often seems to do after He's made a promise - He leaves for a long time. But, you notice, with one object; *why* did God promise and then not fulfil His promise for so long and leave Abraham so tested and tried by His promise, by His Word? Why? For this one thing only: that that son had got to be different from all other sons. That son could not come the natural way. That son could not be like all other sons of this world. He *must* be God's act. And so God saw to it that although He promised, the natural way was impossible, simply closed down; no hope along that line. And when at length Isaac was born, he was God's miracle, something *not* of this world but of God.

But even so, God is going to ratify that and confirm that principle. The day came when the lad had grown to youth, the Lord said to Abraham "take now thy son, thy only, only son whom thou lovest and offer him" and so to death Isaac must go, in which all the *natural* ties were severed and broken. And Isaac being brought back as, in figure, by resurrection from the dead, was simply put on supernatural ground again, the heavenly, divine, supernatural ground of things was confirmed by God in that event. See what God is doing? Putting everything on *holy* ground.

You know, God can give us things that are undoubtedly given us by God and we know it at the time, and then *we* lay hold and impinge upon them and hold them to ourselves and so our natural life comes right in on this matter to take hold. The Lord takes us through drastic experiences to sever our natural selves from divine things, to keep them *holy*; because even our affections are not always pure, not always holy. God put everything on *that* ground, outside of this corrupt, devil-ridden, devil-governed world. And who will not say that that is the state of the world today. He did it with Abraham - that's where He made His start toward a *holy* nation. A holy nation... He laid the foundation in holiness.

When His promise and covenant with Abraham had reached the stage of a nation being in existence and Israel is in Egypt, in the world, no doubt about it - in the lap of the devil, the evil one, if Pharaoh is a type of the prince of this world. You see, the Lord takes pains to show what a tyrant he is; takes pains to show us how evil he is. I venture to say there is no one in this place this morning and there are few people in this world, who would put up with half of what Pharaoh put up with without letting those people go. And so God went through plague after plague, right up to the tenth in death itself, for one purpose: on the one side He is showing the nature of the evil one, how *evil* he is. On the other, well, He met Moses as you know, out there in the desert at the bush alive with fire but never consumed, and this is the man who is going to bring that people out of the power of darkness, out of the bondage of the prince of this world, out of this evil kingdom. And God meets him there and what does God say? "Put off thy shoes from off thy feet for the ground and place whereon thou standest is holy" is *holy*. The instrument must in figure, in type, be separated from the evil ground, the evil act, the evil kingdom. No one can lead another soul out of bondage who is still in bondage himself. No one can help other people into a life in God who is not separated from this world. So the very instrument, Moses himself, has to come onto holy ground, consecrated ground, separated ground, with what? Fire! *Fire* between this world and that. Between God and the evil one there is a fire which never dies. A fire which draws the line of distinction between what is holy and what is not holy.

To Egypt he goes with his commission and we know the story, he's there in a kingdom, in a world which is repudiated and got to be brought out but it is by virtue of precious blood, the blood of the Lamb, the blood of the Passover; by the mighty efficacious blood of a Lamb without spot or blemish. Separated... by precious, holy, blood. This is Peter speaking again, "Ye were not redeemed with corruptible things of silver and gold but with precious blood, as of a Lamb without spot and blemish". And then, you would think that that had effected it.

Forty years there in the wilderness and what is the one thing that comes out so clearly during those forty years? That, although they are out of Egypt, Egypt is not out of them. For though they are geographically separated, spiritually their hearts are still back in Egypt, they're talking about Egypt, hankering for Egypt after all. And so we come to Jordan, the mighty overflowing Jordan, lying between them and that life as a nation which is to satisfy God, fulfill a holy vocation. And the Jordan flows deep and strong between. Their heart's in Egypt and at last their heart's out of Egypt. You see the principle is working all the time. God is carrying this thing very deep.

And you pass on to later history in that nation when they go into captivity and exile, and a remnant comes back. You remember that crisis in the book of Ezra when they've come back and the house is being restored, beautified; a crisis arose. It was over one thing: the people had married foreign wives and the whole thing was spoiled, came under arrest. It was as though God said, We are not going on with this. And you read again what Ezra did over that, brought everything up short on this question of mixed marriages. All again a figure of the spiritual mixture which God will not have. Unholiness... the mark and line of distinctiveness between what is of God and what is not of God, drawn fast and hard.

Well, what are we going to say to all this? That's a very brief, imperfect survey, but dear friends, do you see that the very beginning of the Christian life, the very beginning of the Christian life, rests upon this one historic law of God right through the ages which He cannot overlook. The beginning of the Christian life is called being born anew, or more correctly, born from above. What does it mean? It means *all* that Isaac's birth and resurrection meant in figure; it means this, that by our very new birth we are translated out of the authority of darkness into the kingdom of the Son of God's love. By our very new birth, our conversion - call it what you will - the very beginning of the Christian life is an *absolute separation of two kingdoms*; a transference from one into another. One is an unholy realm into which we are born and to which we belong by nature. The other is a holy realm, "You are a *holy nation*", a nation separated from this world unto God. New birth means that, oh, that that was made clear to all right there at the beginning how utter this thing is.

The Lord Jesus left people in no doubt about this; a cleavage utter and absolute. He would take risks with people, you would say probably: oh, why put them off, why run the risk of offending them, why discourage them saying "Except, except, except" all the time? Ah, He was taking all the risks necessary about this because the reality, the awful reality of this: you CANNOT, you *cannot* inherit the kingdom of heaven while you cling to this kingdom inimical to God, in any way. The two things cannot go together. One is unholy. The other is holy. And by new birth we cross a line which is a very broad line, as broad as the Red Sea and as the Jordan, as broad as the cross of the Lord Jesus. New birth... it's a life of holiness that we have taken up or entered into; a life of holiness, separation unto God. Complete separation unto God. It's to be a walk in holiness. How much the New Testament has to say about this, a walk in holiness that is separate unto God in heart, in spirit, in life, from this world. And if we knew it, a very large degree of our education, our spiritual education and our discipline in the Christian life under the hand of the HOLY Spirit, has to do with those things in us which are mixed up, are mixed up; we're trying to make the best of two worlds. We are trying to keep together, in compromise, things which before God do not belong and are going to spell

disaster for us, mark you, disaster for us as truly as ever it spelt disaster for Israel: going to lose the kingdom. It's a tremendous thing.

The Lord calls for distinctiveness of life and testimony, real distinctiveness of life and testimony. Is our life, dear friends, is your life and my life in this world in our connections and associations and so on, quite distinct, no mistaking to what realm we belong, to Whom we belong? No mistaking it? Or are we mixed in, compromising, keeping on good terms with this world and its people under the devil's hand? If so, we stand to lose terribly. We do. What sort of a testimony have you got where you work in your business and its associations? What sort of a testimony have we got in the church? Are we really registering and making our mark in the church, do we count in the church or are we passengers? Is there something quite distinctive about our lives that says that man, that woman, that young man, that young woman is utter for God, there's no doubt about it, you see it all the time, they are *utter* for God; they are not playing at things, there's no compromise with them. Now this sounds hard, but it's necessary.

Do you see what's involved? Dear friends, the secret of power is holiness! It is. The secret of power is holiness. If our lives are powerless it may be due to this lack somewhere, somehow, of this utterness for God, this separation unto God, of some kind of compromise somehow, somewhere, with the prince of this world who's robbing us of our spiritual power and vitality on his own ground. The secret of power is holiness; whatever you forget, remember that!

The secret of a testimony that counts is a holy life. It is not our teaching, our truth, our practice, religious ordinances and so on, our forms; it is nothing of that. In the first place our real testimony is the testimony of a holy life. It counts far more than all our words, it really does. And remember, this being true, this is the secret of divine support. The Lord will commit Himself to His own ground: holiness. The Lord will stand by those who stand for Him in His nature. The Lord will look after such. And whatever we may have in this life, in this world, we may have a lot but mark you, if we haven't got the Lord with us at last, it's no gain. It's no gain, it's a terrible loss. Israel had the ordinances and the oracles and the tradition and all that; a mighty lot that they had, but at last they lost the kingdom. They lost the kingdom; it was no gain was it?

Well now, what are we concerned about? What are you concerned about, what am I concerned about? I can focus it all down to this one thing: I'm concerned about the Lord being with us and the Lord committing Himself to us and I'm concerned about a testimony in power, a life that counts for God, leaving a mark for God, being remembered for what was of God. This is the only justification of our having come this way at all. And as I see it, all that depends upon this utter separation unto God, gathered into this word: holiness. "*Ye are a holy nation*". May we answer to the description and to us will be the preciousness.