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"I Will Overturn"

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"I will overturn, overturn, overturn.... until He come Whose right it is; and I will give it Him" (Ezekiel 21:27).

You will see, if you look, that those words have an immediate and a much wider context. Their immediate context is the life-ministry of the prophet. His times were to see the beginning and the carrying forward, to some quite serious degree, of the fulfilment of these words. But there is also an expanded context, and the expanse of that context has not yet reached its final phase. But here in the Scriptures much of that expanded context is noted and mentioned. The overturning had begun when the prophet was caused to make this proclamation of Jehovah's intention. The immediate context, then, was that of Jerusalem, and Jerusalem as the symbol and representation of the nation: the nation which was chosen of God for a purpose, God's special purpose: the nation which had been carefully, painstakingly and patiently constituted and disciplined unto that purpose, and then had so lamentably failed, so tragically missed the mark. Unto that nation the words were addressed: "I will overturn, overturn, overturn... *until*...." It was a progressive movement unto Christ's second coming.

The reason? The lost distinctiveness of that nation's life. They had gone out to the world in illicit and forbidden relationship of a spiritual character, and the world had been let into them in a defiling and corrupting way, resulting in that end which is always and ever an abomination to God - mixture. In and amongst His people there was the lost distinctiveness of their life, the lost vitality in the means which God had provided for the realization of His purpose. He had provided tabernacle and temple, priesthood and ordinances, sacrifices and feasts, and much more. He had made a great provision in this way, but all was intended to be a vital and effective means to an end, not as an end in itself. That

vitality had been lost in temple, priesthood, sacrifices, ordinances, and they had all become a formality, a mere daily routine; something being kept up, something just in itself: a great formalism, without life. Vitality in the means had gone and God's deposit was dead in their midst. They had lost the vision as to the purpose of their existence. They had lost both the consciousness and the knowledge of why they were the Lord's people. They were claiming to be a special people amongst the peoples of the earth. They were using His Name, but the purpose for which they were the Lord's people had been lost to their consciousness; their vision of the great object and end of God in choosing them from among all the peoples of the earth had been lost.

You know that that is the cry of the prophets. Their cry is against this mixture, this defilement, and against this mere formalism. Through Isaiah the Word of the Lord came: "*Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet and show My people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sin. Yet they seek Me daily, and delight to know My ways*" (Isaiah 58:1,2a). They were carrying on, but without vision, without purity, without vitality.

All that led to this "*I will overturn, overturn, overturn.*" It was as though the Lord was saying: 'I am not going to preserve mere form, mere shell, mere profession. To Me it is all hypocrisy, unreality. I will overturn.' Why? Because these things, the things that really matter, the things that characterize a people under the true government and in the true energies of the Holy Spirit, are gone. Because of the lack of these things authority was lost in Israel, authority in the nations, an authoritative voice in their own midst. They were not registering in life, in word, and in testimony.

It is a tragic situation when the people of God lose their authority in the world, and they always do so when they mix in with the world, and when the world is mixed in with them.

Then there was lost unity. We see the crumbling of the nation, the breaking up and disintegration, until the only suitable picture is that of the valley of dry bones, very many and much scattered, unrelated, unarticulated, disintegrated.

Then again there was the loss of the position to which God had brought them. He had brought them by covenant into the land and set them there as His own place for them. God's place for the nation was the land, and they lost their position, their God-appointed position, and were cast out of it.

Finally, the prophecies lead to the lost glory in and over the people of God. The glory was lifted up and moved right away, and the Lord says about such a state: "*I will overturn, overturn, overturn*" - 'This cannot go on.'

The Ever Widening Context

You can see the widening context and application here, and I must remind you that Ezekiel overlapped at two ends. At one end he overlapped the ministry of Jeremiah and at the other end he overlapped the ministry of Daniel. You remember the word of the Lord which came to Jeremiah: "*I have set thee this day over the nations... to pluck up, to break down... to plant*" (Jeremiah 1:10; ASVB). 'Over the *nations*.' At the other end - Daniel. We are all familiar with how Daniel in his book is set right in the midst of the nations. We will come to that in a moment. Here is a wide context, in the midst of which Ezekiel is set. There passes in review the rise and fall of the world-powers, of the peoples and nations who have exercised power and influence in the history of this world.

The prophet here, Ezekiel, begins with the first four: Ammon, Moab, Edom and Philistia. You are not expecting, nor wanting, that I should trace their history and give their full meaning. Sufficient to say

that it was Ammon and Moab who conspired and joined hands to hire Balaam to curse Israel. Balak, king of Moab, sent for Balaam to come *"Curse me Israel."* All right, Ammon! All right, Moab!

*"The mills of God grind slowly,
But they grind exceeding small:
Though with patience He stands waiting,
With exactness grinds He all."*

Ammon, Moab, you are going to be grist for God's mill! We will see. The third was Edom: And what a history Edom had as a menace to Israel and the interests of the Lord! And the fourth was Philistia. Oh, we are tired and sick of reading of the interferences with the interests of the Lord by the Philistines - 'uncircumcised Philistines,' as they are called. They were that constant, almost perpetual, menace to the Lord's interests in Israel. These four are brought right into the 'Song of the Sword' (Ezekiel 21): *"I will overturn, overturn, overturn,"* says the Lord. And so it was. Ammon, Moab, Edom, Philistia went to the sword and are no more.

The prophet passes from the first four to another two, Tyre and Zidon. In chapter twenty-eight of these prophecies you have one of the most amazing, startling and terrible things in the Bible - the king of Tyre. It is not difficult to see right through what is said here to Satan himself. *"Thou hast walked up and down in the midst of the stones of fire"* (Ezekiel 28:14). And this is said in the first context of the King of Tyre, but you can see right through this to another one, inspiring this exalting against God, this aspiring to be supreme everywhere. Read chapter twenty-eight again and see how terrible it is. The Zidonians are in league with Tyre, and the word reaches even unto them: *"I will overturn, overturn, overturn."* And where are Tyre and Zidon? What happened? Well, history will tell you what happened. The desolation of Tyre! It is a tremendously thrilling but startling story. The prophecy was fulfilled.

And then the prophet moves to one: Egypt. After the four and the two he comes to one, Egypt, that empire of antiquity, that wonderful civilization, that great world-power of which many other great powers were for a long time much afraid. But Egypt comes to the sword. The same thing is said: *"I will overturn, overturn, overturn."* And we know the history. God said: *"I will overturn, overturn, overturn,"* and so it was.

And then we move into a still larger context as we overlap into Daniel, and before long the great image of Nebuchadnezzar is brought into full view. That great image, one of the four of the greatest world-powers in history - we are with the 'Big Four' here - Babylon. 'See this great Babylon that I have made!' said Nebuchadnezzar. God gave him a kingdom that all nations and peoples and tongues should bow down before him. How great was Babylon!

Then came the invasion of Cyrus, the Persian, and the supplanting of the great Babylon with the Medo-Persian Empire, which is proverbial. In our daily speech we speak about the laws of the Medes and Persians, by which is meant something that has come to stay for ever and cannot be altered. It lifts itself against Babylon and Babylon comes down, and Medo-Persia takes the ascendancy.

And then another great world-power comes on the horizon. Alexander the Great rises up with his Greco-Macedonian war and treads all other powers under foot and looks for new worlds to conquer. And when he has conquered all the worlds that he can find, he passes in the pageant of empires, and then the greatest of them all appears on the scene: the Roman Empire.

All these are mentioned in Daniel, and they are presented in the great image. The great Roman Empire, the greatest of them all that had ever been, both in extent and in power. Here are the world-nations. Here are the world-empires. And the prophecy extends to them all: "*I will overturn, overturn, overturn.*" Daniel tells us of the overturning when he says, after describing the vision, that there was seen a stone cut out without hands which smote the feet of the great image so that it crashed and crumbled, and was no more. And Daniel says: "In the days of those kingdoms, the God of heaven shall set up a kingdom." A stone cut out without hands: the God of heaven shall set up a kingdom and it shall endure for ever. It was in the very time of the Roman Empire that the stone smote it and it crashed, and in representation it brought all the other empires down with it. "I will overturn," said the Lord.

A New Testament Counterpart

And, dear friends, may I have your forbearance if I remind you that these prophecies are not exclusively concerning Israel in the Old Testament and the old dispensation. There is that in the New Testament which corresponds to this immediate context. This terrible chapter twenty-one of Ezekiel's prophecies has been called 'The Song of the Sword.' If you read immediately associated with these words of verse 27: 'The sword, the sword, the sword, the point of the sword, God's unsheathed sword,' and that by the sword He is going to "overturn, overturn, overturn," I would remind you that we have two corresponding passages in this other realm of the Church in the New Testament. One is in the Letter to the Hebrews: "*I will make to tremble not the earth only, but also the heaven*" (12:26). The other? It is in the coming of the Lord Jesus into the midst of the seven lampstands, and in that comprehensive and matchless description and presentation of Him there is this: "*He that hath the sharp two-edged sword.*" He begins with it at the churches (Revelation 2:12). His is an overturning in churches. The sword is cleaving, dividing, finding out, searching and judging, and there is that which, having so largely resulted in the loss of the specific purpose, falls to the sword of the Lord. These are hard words, but suffer them for the moment. It is like that. The Lord is saying to the churches, as representing the whole Church, the same things as He said to Israel here. 'I am not a bit interested in or concerned with your religious form. I am not a bit interested in or concerned with much religious or Christian activity. "I know thy works!" I am not concerned with your profession. The thing for which you were raised up, elected, and constituted is My eternal purpose concerning My Son, that in *all* things He might have the pre-eminence, occupy the first, the full, and final place; and anything that either falls short of that, or contradicts that, must come under the sword. I will overturn, overturn, overturn.' And judgment begins at the House of God.

Dear friends, if this is true and we are not mistaken, the Church in general is going to meet the sword, is going to be dealt with in this way, and there is going to be a whole lot of activities and works and professions and whatnot that is going to the sword, going to be overturned, overturned, overturned, in order to get to that end which God has appointed.

And what is true of the whole Church will be true of any local company of believers. If the Lord sees unreality, sees hypocrisy, mere formality, making His Divine things just an end in themselves, sees us turned in on ourselves and not ministering to and forging toward the great end, progressing and developing as we go on with this increasing fulness of Christ, the Lord will, sooner or later, overturn that local company, upset it, will bring the sword in and will scatter and will break down and overturn. It is the history of many a company of the Lord's people who have become merely formal and traditional, having lost their vitality and their vision.

And let us come nearer. It will be the history of individual lives. As soon as you and I resolve everything - teaching, doctrine, practice, and meetings - into some *thing* which is just a rota being

carried on, and it loses that great, mighty, dynamic vision of the purpose of God, and loses that tremendous impact of a sense of purpose, then our own individual Christian life will come under the sword. We will just go to pieces and will have to come to this place: 'I have been on false ground, I have been in a false position. My position has not been true, nor real. All the teaching that I have received is simply something in my head, in my mind, and not a vital part of my very being. The Lord must overturn.'

That sounds very hard. But would we have it otherwise? Is it not His faithfulness to do that? To get to reality and to save a remnant that has the root of the matter in it?

The Throne Above All Thrones

What is the teaching of all this? In the first place, over all the thrones we have already mentioned there is a Throne, another Throne, which is seen at the beginning of Ezekiel's prophecies: "*Above the firmament... the likeness of a throne... and upon the likeness of the throne was a likeness... of a man upon it above*" (1:26). *Above!* That spreads over all these kingdoms, dominions and powers. To use a fragment from Daniel: "*Thou shalt have known that the heavens do rule*" (4:26). 'The heavens do rule.' There is a throne over all, and that ought to comfort us.

I have been saying hard things, painful things. Perhaps you say, gloomy things, depressing things. But what is the lesson? Over all these terrible things there is a Throne. What is the explanation of the downfall of all these world-powers? There is one explanation. Every one of them sought to take the place that was eternally appointed for God's Son. God had appointed Him "heir of all things" (Hebrews 1:2). That is the Scripture. God's Son was destined heir of this world and its kingdoms. God's Son is the rightful ruler of all nations. And every one of these had stretched out a hand to take to itself what belonged by eternal covenant to the Son of God. Spreading from Ammon and Moab, in a very limited scope, spreading out and out and out until Rome spreads itself over all the world, to possess it, to rule and govern it for their own ends. And God said: 'Wait! That is My preserve. That is the preserve of My Son. Don't touch that. Don't lay a hand on that. That is sacred to My Son. Touch that and I will overturn, overturn, overturn until He come whose right it is: and I will give it to Him.' That is history.

Contemporary History

There is a still wider context. There have been a lot of things since Rome went down. And in our own lifetime we have seen this thing happen. We do not like mentioning it, and we do not like mentioning the names, but we have to in this very context. What about Hitler? Hitler aspired with his ambition and ambitiousness to dominate all the nations of this world: to bring them into subjection to his ideology and to his control: to take them. And we know how viciously he repudiated Jesus Christ and His Church. 'All right, Mr. Hitler,' says the Throne above, 'that is the prerogative of the Son of God. Hands off!' And we have seen the awful wreckage and ruin both of Hitler himself and of his regime, the awful devastation, and the terrible story of his end. Christ's rights were interfered with, so 'I will overturn.'

And we have seen Mussolini having made for him a great relief map of the ten kingdoms of the Roman Empire to stretch the whole width of a great hall, setting up a statue of himself and proclaiming himself as the last Caesar of the restored Roman Empire. 'All right,' says the Throne above, 'so far shall thy proud waves come and no further.' And look at the shame of his end! "*I will overturn, overturn, overturn.*"

But contemporary history! Our present time is seeing something bigger than any of these. Bigger than the biggest of the old 'Great Four,' Rome. Bigger than these that I have just mentioned. Something is spreading itself in the denial of God and the denial of the Son of God and the denial of the Church of God, to be the great world-power. And the Throne above says: 'If you can't read history, you will learn in experience.' And the same destiny and doom is coming to it. Make no mistake about it. Why? Because this world was made for Jesus Christ. And the day is coming when the Scripture will be fulfilled: *"The kingdom of the world is become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ"* (Revelation 11:15).

*"Jesus shall reign where'er the sun
Doth his successive journeys run;
His kingdom stretch from short to shore,
Till moons shall wax and wane no more."*

But note! While that is a glorious prospect, it is a terrible outlook from another standpoint. And it is a challenge. It is a challenge to us; it is a challenge to our assemblies; it is a challenge to the Church of God; it is a challenge to the world. The purpose of God is to gather together, to reunite, all things in Christ, things in the heavens, things in the earth, *"that in all things He might have the preeminence"* (Colossians 1:13). That is the purpose of God. It is of the most minute application in our lives. It is the object with which the Holy Spirit is working in our spiritual history. It is the explanation of this world's history: the rise and fall, the glory and the shame of world-powers, empires and dominions. *"He must reign until He hath put all His enemies under His feet"* (1 Corinthians 15:25).

That is the message. The Lord make the application!