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Jealousy for God

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"And it came to pass, when Ahab saw Elijah, that Ahab said unto him, Is it thou, thou troubler of Israel? And he answered, I have not troubled Israel; but thou, and thy father's house" (1 Kings 18:17,18).

"And he said, I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts" (1 Kings 19:10).

When we bring together those two fragments - "I have been very jealous for the Lord"; "Is it thou, thou troubler of Israel?" - we find two strangely contrasting and conflicting points of view. On the one side, the claim - truly supported, and undoubtedly true - to have been very jealous for the Lord. And on the other side, this term, this description, used of that same person: "thou troubler of Israel". But the juxtaposition brings out something very significant. To be very jealous for the Lord may inevitably mean that you are a troubler of Israel. Indeed, it usually works out like that. You will give nobody any trouble - I mean spiritual trouble - if you are not jealous for the Lord. But if you are, make no mistake about it, this is how it will come back at you: 'Thou troubler of Israel!'

The Prophet as 'Trouble Maker'

Now, although Elijah seems to have repudiated the charge, and there was truth and right in his so doing, nevertheless the charge was true. Ahab, for once in his life, was telling the truth, but telling the truth in a way of which he was not aware. It is essentially a part of the ministry of a prophetic instrument, to cause trouble. It is inevitable; it is in the very nature of things. For the very function of the prophet came into view when things were not right. If things had never gone wrong, had never needed adjusting, correcting, or bringing to some greater measure of spiritual fullness, there would have been no need of prophets. We should know very very little about prophets, if things had gone

right on as they should have done. The function of the prophets was to keep and hold before the people of God, God's full thought concerning them, especially in the face of certain things that worked very definitely against it. And it is just because of that clash and conflict that the trouble arises.

Elijah's charge against Ahab was a real one; but the 'trouble' to which Ahab referred was not in Elijah - it was deeply inherent in the spiritual condition of the time. Its real root and cause lay there. There would have been no 'trouble', but for people like Elijah; everything would have remained quiescent. When Elijah was there in the country, Ahab knew of it, and searched for him high and low. He was the great irritating, aggravating factor. Though for a long time hidden, nevertheless his very presence in the country was having the effect of dragging this thing out - this spiritual apostasy and corruption, which was, after all, the root of the trouble. It could not go on unchallenged, while such people as Elijah were there. I am not at this moment so much concerned with Elijah himself, as with what he represents: the presence of some living spiritual testimony, embodied; an annoying, inconvenient, aggravating thing, always somewhere about. As you notice in the chapter, Ahab sent throughout the length and breadth of the land, to try to discover Elijah. If only he could get hold of *this*, and destroy *this*, he thought, he could get rid of the 'trouble'.

This leads us to some very definite conclusions. If there is a clash, a collision, between two irreconcilables, there will always be trouble. Given the incorrigible downgrade trend of human nature, and, wherever that is challenged, you will have trouble. That there is such a thing in human nature needs no argument. We know quite well that any kind of turning of that trend upward, no matter in what realm, is always fraught with hard work, with conflict. It is the nature of things to decline. Leave anything in this creation to itself, and it degenerates; we know that to be true. Every attempt, every effort to improve things, in every realm, is fraught with conflict. That is clearly true of human nature. It hates to be bothered, troubled or disturbed; it wants to have its own way. Morally and spiritually, the trend is always downward; if that is challenged, there is going to be trouble.

Israel Exemplifies the Downgrade Trend in Man

How terribly true is the working of that principle and law in Israel! Never in the history of mankind has such an experiment been carried out, as that which God carried out with Israel. God did everything that could be done to make possible an upward trend in the life of a nation. He gave it the very best system of laws and regulations, for every department of its life - physical, moral, spiritual. He gave it the very best conditions, in a land flowing with milk and honey; a land that simply leapt to respond to any little effort to make it fruitful. God showed infinite patience and longsuffering with that people. Never was such an experiment carried out in human history, as was carried out with Israel.

They had only to answer to God in any little way, and immediately He blessed. If they did this, in the temporal realm, at once they received blessing for it; at once they were rewarded. They had only got to ask, and He gave. They had only to do, and He came out to them. We often wish (secretly) that we lived in those days, when the temporal responses of God were so wonderful! Yes, even when they were not right with Him, if, in the midst of their criminal attitude toward God, they humbled themselves and prayed, God seemed to forget it all, and to come right out to them. God was carrying out an experiment. Right at the centre of His universe, He was giving an object lesson for all ages, for all intelligences to observe, to read. He put this people there under the most favourable conditions - physically, geographically, morally and spiritually - that He could provide. His attitude was: If you will, I will, and there will be no delay about it.

What is the sum of the whole thing? What is the story when you read it? An amazing story! It is that, in spite of everything, the course is always downgrade, downgrade, downgrade. This is something incorrigible, inveterate. God has shown for all time, for all times, that there is something in man, *in* man, that is deeper and stronger than all the upward advantages that God can give him. Put him in a paradise, and he will turn it into a slum! Give him all the best conditions, and, in the long run, the condition will be one of disgrace. And, somehow, strangely enough, man loves to have it so. If you try to interfere with it, you see what you meet. The dentist and the doctor can be the most hated persons in the world! Is it because they are so evil? Oh, no; there is something irrational about it, utterly irrational. The value is altogether overlooked - simply because it goes against the grain! And what is the 'grain'? How many people would sooner suffer, suffer, suffer, than endure perhaps a few moments' pain, to have the suffering cleared up! You see what I mean - it is a strange thing, this human nature. But that is really at the root of this whole thing.

Is it not strange, that that which can be, or could be, the answer to all need, the solving of every problem, the clearing up of every evil situation, the bringing in of conditions so much more favourable, can become the most hated thing? Is it not strange? Look at the Lord Jesus: look at all that God has given in Him; look at all that He was, all that He came to bring, all that He came to do! He is a challenge, an abiding challenge. Can you find evil in Him? "What evil hath this man done?", asked another man once - a man who knew something about evil, wrong and sin; perhaps few knew more about it than Pilate did. Yet, knowing it all, he had to say: 'I find no fault in this Man' (Luke 23:22,14). And yet this One is the object of malice and hatred, unto murder. Strange, isn't it? He could clear up all the situations, solve all the problems, meet all the needs; and yet - and yet - 'Away with Him!' Anything that stands in the way of man's own disposition, or predisposition, or predilection, having its own way, will be a 'trouble maker'.

Now that touches a principle. You and I, on the broadest basis of the Christian life, are here in this world in this very capacity, to straddle the path of iniquity, of sin - of the very course of man - and to represent a check; and because we are here for that, we shall be called 'trouble makers'. In a very real sense we shall *BE* trouble makers. The trouble will focus itself upon us, and we shall have to suffer for it. The very fact that you are jealous for the Lord will bring you into conflict with that trend that there is in this world, in man. It is going to be a really gruelling business for any testimony for God in this world, because, in the very nature of things, it counters the whole course of this world, which is downhill.

The Spiritual *Versus* the 'Natural'

That is, as I have said, the broad line of the principle. Let us get nearer to the heart of things, so far as what is represented by this chapter is concerned. When the *spiritual* stands to confront the merely formal, traditional, nominal and 'natural', then there is going to be trouble. This is not now merely the reaction from the world: it is the reaction from religion. I would go further, and say it may be the reaction from Christianity. There is a very great difference between formal, traditional, nominal, 'natural' Christianity, on the one side, and spiritual Christianity, on the other; a great deal of difference. So much so, that this also becomes a battlefield - the battlefield of a lot of trouble.

Leave formalism alone, and everything will go on quite quietly. Leave traditionalism alone - that is, the set order of things as it has always been; that framework of things as it has been constituted and set up and established by man; that Christianity which is the fixed, accepted system of things - and you will escape a great deal of trouble. But seek to bring in a truly spiritual order of things, and trouble arises at once. And *YOU* are the trouble maker! The truth is that the trouble lies in the existing condition, the situation, the state; but it is only brought out by your action. And so spiritual

men and women, and spiritual ministry, are called 'trouble makers', because the two things cannot go on together.

That is where Israel was. They had the traditions, they had the oracles, they had the ordinances, they had the testimonies; they had the forms, they had the system - they had it all; *but*, in the days of the prophets, there was ever this vast gap between the 'externals' and 'internals' of life in relation with God. The heart is far removed from the lips. The spiritual reality is not found in the formal. You may have it all - but then bring in the truly spiritual meaning of things, and trouble begins in that very realm. It is the trouble which arises when what is external and traditional comes into conflict with something which is truly spiritual.

I used the word 'natural' a few moments ago - of course in quotation marks, taking it out of the New Testament: it means, literally, that which is merely 'soulish', 'of the soul'. It is important to realise how very soulish a thing can be, even in Christianity. There can be tremendous passion, tremendous earnestness, tremendous enthusiasm, tremendous arguments and conviction; and yet the thing may be far, far removed from what is spiritual. It may be another world altogether. The conflict arises between those two things. When the natural mind is manipulating Divine things; when the natural reason has taken hold of the Word of God and the things of God; when man's own passions and interests are being served through the work and service of God: that can become the ground of a great deal of spiritual conflict and trouble.

Trouble will arise in the realm of religion, and in 'Christian religion', as such, when what is purely spiritual comes up against the fixed system and tradition of men. It can happen as truly within Christianity, as it did between Christ and Paul, and Judaism. There was the tradition, and, in itself, there was nothing wrong with it; there was nothing wrong with what God had given, with the oracles and the testimony, nothing spiritually or morally wrong. But they had become ends in themselves, things in themselves; and the real meaning, significance and interpretation of them was lost; *they* were the things. The temple was the thing: with God it was not the thing; it was only a sign of something else. With them the sacrifices were the things: with God they were not the thing at all; there was only one Sacrifice that was true with God. And so we might go over the whole gamut. The *things* - the forms and the means - were everything, and it was criminal in their eyes to say otherwise, to give any other interpretation than the historical and traditional. That is where they fell out with Paul. He had come to see the meaning of things, he had advanced from the things to the meaning; and they had not. Therein lay the conflict and the trouble.

'Soul' is the Ground of Satan's Kingdom

But now, let us come to the very heart of it. There is the wide circle of the world, of mankind and of human nature; and, within that, the smaller circle of religion, whatever the religion may be. These are realms of conflict when God's full mind is present. But right at the heart of both of those, there is something else, something that is easily discernible right through the Bible: there is the Satanic. Now, if Satan is alive to anything, sensitive to anything, touchy about anything, it is on this matter of the place that the Lord Jesus is to have - and to have, not formally, but vitally; not just historically, but spiritually: so that the Lord Jesus becomes not merely a name in history, not merely a figure in history, not merely a teacher in history, not merely a historic factor, but a vital, potent force in this universe, right up to date. That is the point upon which Satan and his kingdom are most sensitive. They are alive to any little thing that points in that direction, and they recognise immediately a potential menace to their kingdom.

Human nature is a good playground for that. Hence the story of missionary martyrs: those who have touched the raw material of human nature with the testimony of Jesus, with all the terrible conflict, suffering and cost. The natural man - the natural mind, the natural will; that which is merely the soul of man - in moving and working, exercising itself, asserting itself and drawing to itself, in the realm of the things of God, is a splendid playground for the evil forces. You assert any little bit of your soul life, and see what the Devil will do with it! You uncover any little bit of your soul life, and see what a wreck Satan will make of you! It is the whole story of the devastation that results when self-occupation, introspection and self-pity - all the forms of self-life - assert themselves and become accentuated. Does not the evil one just play havoc with people like that! They have opened the door, and he is not slow to present himself there for access.

Now, set over against all that - the natural man brought into the spiritual world (if that is a possibility), or into the realm of God's things - is that which is purely and truly spiritual, that which is of the Spirit. And when those two things come into collision, there is trouble - for they are both great systems - simply because, in the realm which is truly of the Spirit, Satan has no place at all! 'The prince of this world cometh', said Jesus, 'and hath nothing in Me' - the Man who lived in and walked by the Spirit. In all things, in *all* things, He referred and deferred to the Spirit of the Anointing which was upon Him. The prince of this world had *nothing* in Him.

Poor Peter was just at the mercy of the Devil, because, with all his sincerity, with all his well-meaning enthusiasm, he moved in his own soul. His relationship to Christ was one purely of the soul. When Peter came to be a man under the government of the Holy Spirit, that matter underwent immediate adjustment, and you can almost watch the process of that soul-life of his being brought more and more under control.

Perhaps I should pause to safeguard this, by saying very emphatically that it is not wrong to have a soul. No, God has given us a soul, and it is our soul which has got to be saved. But the point is - what is the base upon which and from which we operate, the instrument that we are using, the ground of our living? Either it is the soul, which is the seat of our *self*-life, in every sense; or it is the spirit, which is the seat of the *Divine* life.

Here, then, is the explanation of the conflict. Satan works hard to get hold of 'soul'. He can lead everything out on to a false stream in that way. A thing that may start in the Spirit, can at some point, without sufficient watchfulness and prayerfulness, be led right out on to a false trail, and end up as something altogether different from what it was at the beginning.

But, to return to this eighteenth chapter of First Kings - Baal and all the rest of it - the heart of the thing is this. It is not Baal, it is not Ahab, it is not Jezebel: it is the evil powers; and *they* are after this man Elijah. Behind Jezebel, there are evil forces set upon the destruction of this man, because his very presence means a breach in their kingdom. He is the man in touch with God, in touch with the Throne. In him and by him, *that* throne becomes imminent - that throne is present. And these two thrones, these two kingdoms, are against one another.

'Trouble' Inevitable with Spiritual Sight

When, therefore, there is the purest testimony, the fullest expression of what is of God, the heavenly over against the earthly, the spiritual over against the carnal or the natural, the enemy gives a turn to things, a twist to things, and lays the responsibility at the door of a spiritual and a heavenly ministry. He says: 'You are the cause of all the trouble - you are the troubler!' But no. The trouble lies deeper than that, and in another realm. The truth is, there is something here that, in its very

nature, *must* create trouble, *must* be a source of trouble, so long as God's known will, His revealed mind, is being violated; while the full expression of God's purpose is being withstood. To bring in something that stands for that, there is going to be trouble.

It is a costly thing to have seen God's full purpose and thought concerning His people. It is always a costly thing. The Lord Jesus set a very vivid example and object lesson of this truth right in the foreground, in the incident of the man born blind (John 9). There is no doubt that the Lord intended that man to represent Israel and Israel's condition at the time. He gave that man sight - and what happened to the man? "They cast him out", that is all; they cast him out, they excommunicated him (v. 34). That is an object lesson, an instance of this very thing.

If eyes have been opened; if, in any sense - not officially - you have become a 'seer' - one who sees: it is going to cost you a lot, it will involve you in a lot of trouble. This matter of 'seeing' does that. It was Elijah the *seer*, over against the *blindness* of Israel. It is a costly thing to be a spiritual man or a spiritual woman in this universe. It is a costly thing, yes, very costly, to hold to a heavenly and spiritual position. It is a costly thing to hold for Christ's full place; it involves you in trouble. It is a costly thing to have light - if it is true light, God-given light. It is a costly thing to have life.

But remember, it is here, in this, that the power is resident. It is with this that God is found ultimately to be committed. You know the story again. God will have no compromise with the thing that lies behind. 'Take the prophets of Baal!' They were all slain. There is no compromise with that spiritual thing. But God is shown as to where He stands, to what He is committed, and where the power is.

For I suppose that, if Elijah represents one thing more than another, he does represent spiritual power. When we think of spiritual power we always refer to Elijah - 'in the power of Elijah'. It is proverbial. Why? Not because of anything that he was in himself; no, not because of the man. He was a man in touch with the Throne; he was a man who had seen; a man who was committed, of whom it was true that he was "very jealous for the Lord". God was with Elijah.

John came 'in the power of Elijah' (Luke 1:17); he was the Elijah of his time. The Lord Jesus said of him: "If ye are willing to receive it, this is Elijah" (Matt. 11:14), though John himself denied this (John 1:21). Elijah is a sort of phantom in a certain realm. Poor Herod was scared of his life - he began to see things, to get strange ideas - when he heard about Jesus: some suggested to him that this was Elijah returned to life, but he thought it was John the Baptist risen from the dead (Matt. 14:2; Mark 6:14-16). The fellow just lost his mental grasp of things. This Elijah man counts for something. Power is with him; the verdict is with him.

And - let there be no mistake about it - in the end it will be found that God *is* committed to that which is utterly committed to Him for His full purposes. It is costly; it causes much trouble; *but* - the issue is with Him, and He will look after His own interests.