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Spiritual Ascendency

by T. Austin-Sparks

Transcribed from a message given in July 1958.

Psalm 125: "They that trust in the Lord are as Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abideth for ever. As the mountains are round about Jerusalem, so the Lord is round about His people from this time forth and for evermore".

Those of you who were here on Thursday night last, will have been meditating in the eighty-fourth Psalm. And although I was not here, I should be surprised if something was not said on verse 6 of that Psalm: "Passing through the valley of weeping", passing through the *valley*, the valley of weeping.

After Psalm 84, with all its context in the history of David, of passing through a very deep and dark and bitter valley of weeping, we come to Psalm, or Psalms 120 to 124 which, as you can see, form a little volume of their own in the whole book called the Psalms, or Songs of Ascent - going up. In 84, you're in the valley. You reach 120 and you begin to climb out of the valley, and to sing as you do so. And on and on, right to Psalm 124, it is going up singing the psalms or songs of Ascent.

And so you notice, with Psalm 121: "I will lift up mine eyes unto the mountains. From whence shall come my help?" Psalm 123: "Unto thee do I lift up mine eyes, O Thou that sittest in the heavens". And Psalm 125: "They that trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion. As the mountains are round about Jerusalem".

Here then, we have the people of God where the Lord always desires them to be. We ought to underline the two words "*passing through* the valley of weeping" - that is not the dwelling place of the people of God, that's a passage, something *through* which they pass. But Zion, the mountains, these are the Divinely appointed *dwelling* places of God's people. It is instructive, surely, to note that the Lord established as an ordinance in Israel, periodic ascents, that all their males should go up three times in every year. And those ordinances in Israel, going up, going up, were governmental in their nature - that is, the people were not to be governed by the plains or the valleys, they were to be governed by the high places; they were to be governed by ascents, or to be people of the mountains. They may spend time, perhaps much time, down there, but the Lord would have that broken into repeatedly, and that they should be reminded that that was not really their normal life, their real life was up in the high places. Their life was to be influenced by the mountains. Influenced... and if you could, in imagination, join those caravans, those processions three times a year as they made ready and got on the march, leaving the valleys and the plains, going up to Jerusalem, if you could in thought mingle with them, you would find that they did have a tremendous influence upon the life of the people. These songs or psalms, for instance, became *the* songs for *all* time, not only in the going up. They were born of the going up, they were provided for the ascents on these particular occasions, but they did not just remain the songs of three times a year - they were the perpetual songs of Israel. You read them through, these fourteen or fifteen psalms, you will see how much there is of perpetual, abiding value in them.

But I just want to emphasise this thought this morning, that the Lord's mind for His people is not that they should abide in the deep places and the shadowy places, though they may have to go that way and have to pass through the valleys from time to time, the Lord's provided ordinance, the Lord's thought and intention for His people, is that they should be people of the heights, of the high places. There should be that governing all their life which is above and not beneath.

I have been very much impressed with the very large place that mountains had in the life and ministry of our Lord. You take up the Gospel by Matthew, you will find that it is strewn with mountains. In chapter 5 Jesus goes up into the mountain and called His disciples unto Him, and then gives to them what Dr. Campbell Morgan has called, "The Manifesto of the Kingdom", that wonderful discourse which in itself was on such a high level; a higher level than any other discourse or teaching in the whole Bible. We call it the Sermon on the Mount. Here was the Mount of Instruction.

You pass to chapter 14 and He sends the disciples and the multitude away, and Himself goes up in a mountain apart, to pray. The mountain of Communion with God.

The next chapter 15, we have Him going up again the slope of the mountain, and the feeding of the multitude, the four thousand miraculously - the Mountain of Bread, of Food, for the hungry.

Chapter 17, He takes His disciples up into a high mountain, and is transfigured before them - the Mount of Transfiguration.

Chapter 14, [*should be 24*] He speaks to them in the mountain about the signs of the end, the end of the dispensation, and of His coming, that is chapter 24.

Chapter 26 He speaks to them about His death and resurrection; He takes them apart, and unfolds to them what is just about to happen, but what will be beyond, when He is risen again.

And then, finally, in chapter 28, He meets them after His resurrection in the great mountain where He appointed to meet them and gave them their great world commission.

You see, all the way through this gospel, things are related to mountains. Now, of course, every one of those requires about an hour or so for its real value. I have no intention, don't worry, of even starting on them, I am only pointing out that there was *something* about mountains, that found in the very heart and nature of our Lord an answer and a response. When you think of it, Jesus came down and passed this way, this valley of weeping, just in order to take us up out of it. And His whole life, in every aspect, of prayer, and teaching, and working, was a life on a rising plain - a life to lift, a work to lift - it was a return movement to Heaven and to get as many back there with Him as possible. It was a gravitation upward that characterized His life. I am not surprised that mountains appealed to Him, because this low level here could find nothing in Him to please Him at all.

The very nature and life of our Lord was a complete contradiction to what is natural here. In spite of all that men so cleverly argue, the natural course of this world is downward. Make no mistake about it. Talk as you may about evolution and so on, the natural course is downward in every realm, and it is a tremendous battle to reverse that course in anything - in the human body, in nature around you, everywhere in society, in international affairs, everywhere, in everything, the natural course is downward. In spite of education, in spite of what is called civilisation, the trend is worse and worse, down and down... that is nature, but the Lord Jesus is a complete contradiction to that. The whole influence and effect of His presence anywhere, of His life, His work, His teaching, is to *reverse* that natural course, and to *lift*. We know that is true. His presence is a lifting thing. He only came by way of the Valley of Tears to lead us out of it.

Now so much, as you observe, can be said about this matter of mountains, but I just would perhaps focus upon one or two things which are perfectly obvious, that mountains *do* suggest and represent elevation, ascendancy. "I will lift up mine eyes unto the mountains". To take your eyes off of what is here: ourselves and our conditions, and this world, and to set them upon the Lord, high and lifted up, upon His Throne, as Lord over all, is an elevating thing, it's an emancipating thing; it is in itself a lifting thing. "Looking off unto Jesus" is something that will bring us out of our valley of weeping. Just where our eyes are, that will affect our lives very much. "I will lift up mine eyes unto the mountains. From whence shall my help come? My help cometh from the Lord... As the mountains are round about Jerusalem". So it is in *every* sense an elevating thing to be joined to the Lord in Heaven. It is a morally elevating, it is a spiritually emancipating thing, it's a socially emancipating thing.

Dear friends, perhaps what most of us need as much as anything, is a higher level of life. It is a more elevated kind of life. We are too small. You know, the valley is usually a hemmed-in place; a narrow place, a limited place. You get on the mountain, and it is enlargement, isn't it? It really is enlargement. That's why some of us love the mountains so much; it does give us the sense of being liberated from the littlenesses of life, freed from the smallness; all the pettiness. No one who lives amongst mountains can be small. Interpret that spiritually.

Remember the words which have perhaps lost some of their strength for us because of our familiarity with them: "has *raised* us up together with Christ and made us to sit in the heavenlies with Christ". Individually, and collectively as the church, a very, very great deal of the present trouble, the paralysis, weakness, and wretchedness, is because that position is not taken and maintained - *in the heavenlies* in Christ. If we could get up higher, get on to higher ground, and leave so much, yes, leave

all this that belongs to the place of the shadows and the miasmas. It is the Lord's will that we should live on *high* ground - that is what He wills for us.

Then, as the Psalm indicates, it is not only elevation and ascendancy, it is security. "My help... my help. As the mountains are round about Jerusalem, so the Lord is round about His people, from this time forth and for ever". Then the Psalmist goes on with the things that are *against* the people of God, and deliverance, or security for them, is in the high place. Yes, security. Strongholds have so often been built in the heights, haven't they? They are strewn everywhere over the world, the high places for strongholds, for refuges. And our strength, our safety, is to get away from *low* things, mean things, contemptible things, and to get up, get up high with the Lord is the safe place. Down there we are just the play things of all the currents, and influences, and forces that are at work - they *rage* in the low places, in the dark places. To find our strength, our deliverance, our refuge, our security, necessitates that we forsake those low places.

How shall I best put it? You know, the Evil One and the evil forces are *tremendously* concerned with getting us down, and holding us down. And if only they can get us down spiritually, get us down mentally, or even physically, they just play havoc with us down there; they tear us to pieces; they harass and worry us day and night, down there, down... that's their drive, their direction - to bring us down.

Our refuge is not to fight on the low ground, it's to flee to the heights, to escape to the Lord in the secret place. I think the Lord Jesus did that Himself. At the time when the pressure was great and He was feeling the harass and drive, and all the down-drag of earthly conditions, disappointments, even with His own disciples, He said: "Let Me get away from it all for a time, up into the mountain with My Father." He came down fortified, marvellously fortified. Yes, it was fortification in the heights. Keep your high place preserved, intact, your place of escape. Keep your mountain of communion with God preserved, because that is strength, that is fortification.

And I close with another obvious thing about mountains. Mountains are the place of vision, aren't they? They are the place of the far distances. It's very true. We come to the end of the Bible, the end of the Bible, the last chapters of the Bible, and we are taken to an exceeding great and high mountain, and shown the Holy City, the New Jerusalem. It's a mountain seen at the end. At last, at last the church has arrived, the heavenly church, and it's the mountain of vision.

It always is like that, so simply, but very truly. Dear friends, again, again, the great need of every one of us, and of the church, is an *enlargement* of vision. Our vision is too small. Our God is too small, our hope is too small, our purpose in life is too small, the salvation which we cherish is, after all, too small. How strange it is that we do narrow things down so much all the time, in every way. We need the mountain of vision! If we lose our vision, there is no doubt about it, we shall disintegrate; we shall go to pieces. It is a great vision that will ever save us, but only a great vision will save us. If we lose our vision, we are done; we are finished; we are beaten. If you have no great vision of God's purpose, and of God's intention, and of God's ability to reach His end, then you will indeed be the defeated play-thing of all that is going on here in this world.

So He took His disciples up whenever He had some big business on hand, He took them up into the mountain. And you and I need to be occupied with big business! That is, we must have large vision.

Now, you say: that's all very true, all very good, but how? Well, after all, the answer is in the very nature of the Christian life itself isn't it? The beginning of the Christian life is something from Heaven; it is something that comes from Heaven to take us back to Heaven: it's Life from above. We all know quite well that from the day that we really come into that vital union with our Risen and Ascended Lord, there begins in us a process of gravitating upward; something has come in that is of Heaven, and we know at once that we no longer belong here. It's the very nature of the Christian life at its beginning, that as we go on, we know that the pilgrimage of the Christian life is further and further away from this world - estrangement of this world and to this world - moving away from it. It brings many difficulties, many problems, some embarrassments, but there is the fact that we *cannot*, as we once did, find our home here, find our satisfaction here. It's the evidence that we are children of Another, a heavenly country. And the consummation of the life of the believer, the child of God, is upward isn't it? To be received up by our Lord. It is all up, from beginning to end.

The point is just this: that we have, as the Lord Himself did, we have to respond to that heavenly gravitation, not cling to anything here, not allow ourselves to be bound by things here; we may have our miserable and wretched time, but we are not to wallow in the mire! We must react with this reaction of Heaven that is in our very constitution by new birth, and say: "This is not my place; this is not my life." The Lord Jesus did that. Continually, continually, He answered to the inward call of Heaven. And in His physical going up into the mountain, He was only responding to an *inward* drawing, to get up out of this, to get up out of this. And I can believe that there was never a more satisfied, utterly satisfied, and gratified heart, than His was, when at last He ascended to His Father! I don't know, but I think, as He went up, as He went up the most perfect sense of relief and satisfaction took possession of Him.

It will be like that with us - it *will* be like that with us at last. It will not be regrets, and sad farewells to this world; no, this is where we belong; this is what we were made for; we were made by Heaven. It will be the answer to everything in our new constitution. Let us now seek grace day by day to repudiate all earth-boundness, and to refuse to dwell in the valley. Though we may have to pass through it, let us see to it that we do not stop there, we do not make that our abiding place. For it is true: "Here have we *no* abiding city, we seek one to come".