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Spiritual Exercise

by T. Austin-Sparks

First published in "A Witness and A Testimony" magazine, Jul-Aug 1952, Vol 30-4.

"But solid food is for fullgrown men, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern good and evil" (Heb. 5:14).

"All chastening seemeth for the present to be not joyous but grievous: yet afterward it yieldeth peaceable fruit unto them that have been exercised thereby, even the fruit of righteousness" (Heb. 12:11).

That word 'exercise' is the word that includes what I have in my heart. The word means what it says. If you heard the Greek word for this English word 'exercised', you would at once recognize another English word. It would, of course, have been impossible for the translators to put the other one in, as you will see, but the Greek word sounds almost exactly like our English word 'gymnastics'. If you like to put it in here you can - 'to those who have been through the gymnastics in relation to this matter of full growth'. 'Exercised' does mean something like that - those who have undergone gymnastics in relation to development.

The Object of Spiritual Exercise

If you look to see the object of this exercise, you will discover that it has to do with just one thing - but a very great thing. It is not just development, getting big; it is what we call *capacity* - that is, ability, or being able for things. That is the Divine object in this exercise, quite clearly set forth in this letter. And capacity, as I am sure you will agree, is a very vital matter. Whether it is in the natural

realm or in the spiritual, it does amount to something to have capacity - to have ability. It is a very distressing thing to find how few, even of the Lord's people, have real spiritual capacity. You will see what that means as we go on. But let us get the object of this exercise in view, that we may make no mistake. It is not just to be something, but to be able for something - that is capacity. In gymnastics you can do it for its own sake, just to develop yourself, just to be something, but the real object is to be able to do things, to be capable of much more.

Spiritual Exercise Related to an Afterward

But here is a strange thing. This is so related to an "afterward". You notice it is afterward that the values of this exercise, of this increased capacity, are to be found. There may be, of course, immediate "afterward"s - there are - but there is always *the* great "afterward": for what we find is that, just when people are beginning to have a bit of capacity - because it takes a long time with most of us - it is time to go home. The gymnasium closes down, we go to the Lord. Life all along has been one continuous exercise. There has been no 'let-up' in the exercise. We do not do it for a term and then work out the values for the rest of our lives. Here we are, those of us who have been on the way some time, and are on the last lap - we are still in the gymnasium, and it seems as though we are going to be there to the end. This whole matter of increased capacity continues to our last day, and the last breath of our last day, on this earth. Then what about it? There must be a big afterward, or life is an enigma, a deep and terrible enigma: so that the Scripture does come in with much emphasis and abundant evidence that all this is for a big afterward. It is capacity for something, ability to do, in the 'ages of the ages'.

Now that opens up a very large realm, and I am not going to enter into it. All I am saying is that it must be so - or I, for one, cannot understand why we cannot get this over quickly, and then for the rest of our time just be doing the thing for which we have been prepared. But the preparation goes on and on and ever on, and it will never cease while we are here.

The Realm of Spiritual Exercise

What is the realm of this exercise? Here it speaks of having the senses exercised. Well, of course, that is very simple and easily understood. In our natural, physical man we have five senses. We have our sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. Those are the five senses of our physical natural life. But there is also an inner man called the "hidden man of the heart", and that inward man has what corresponds to the outer man's five senses. There is a faculty of spiritual sight, of spiritual hearing, of spiritual smelling or sensing, of spiritual taste and spiritual touch, and these senses are very important to the life of the inward man - yes, more important even than the senses of the physical man.

We know how we feel the tragedy of people who have lost any of those outward senses. It is a great loss; it is an imperfect life, a life of limitation. But it is equally true of the inward man. To be without spiritual sight is a tragic loss and a terrible limitation; or without spiritual hearing, that capacity for answering to the Spirit - "he that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith": if there is no capacity for hearing, that is a desperate situation. What loss there is if there is no sensing - sensing as in the matter of smell, so that you at once scent things. I know how wrongly that has been used, in an everlasting attempt to scent heresy and fault and wrong, but there is a right faculty of spiritual scent which is very important. I believe it was to that that reference was made concerning our Lord - "his scent shall be in the fear of the Lord" (Isa. 11:3, A.R.M.) - quick of scent, right on the mark in

scenting what the Lord wanted. And how true it was of His heavenly life: what it saved Him to scent the enemy and what the enemy was up to, to scent what the Father wanted and when He did not want things. It is important to be quick of scent. And so with our taste and with our touch - our contact, and what we register by contact.

This is a very real inward man, and these are the senses which form the basis of spiritual capacity: these are the things to be exercised, to be 'put through it' for increase and development. In Hebrews 12 you know that the Apostle is speaking about Sonship, and then in verse 9 he uses the phrase "the Father of our spirits" (R .V.M.). 'We have had fathers of our flesh and they saw to it that our fleshly, our physical, senses were developed, that we were kept up to the mark on knowing right and wrong in the natural realm; they taught us there what was true and what was false'. Now we have a Father of our spirits, and it is our spiritual faculties and senses that are the object of His concern. He is concentrating upon the development of capacity in spiritual seeing, and spiritual hearing, and spiritual sensing and tasting and touching. This is what is meant by the full-grown man.

The Nature of the Exercise

Then we come to this exercise. What is the nature of the exercise - if you like, of the gymnastics? - for the Lord does 'put us through it'! Some of you may not have been through gymnastics. I remember the very first time I went into a gymnasium as a youngster, and a vaulting-horse was put in front of me and I was told that I had to take it at a bound. I had never tried that before. I was scared! But I was put through it, I was not let off. No running round that horse, no running underneath it; I had to clear it, and I had to go on till I could make a clean show of it. And in every part of that gymnasium it was the same. It was terrible for a time, but capacity grew with exercise. This word "chastening" means that. We have such an idea that chastening means thrashing. It does not. It is child-training, it is discipline, it is gymnastics. It is being put through it, so that these senses may be developed and capacity increased.

The point is this - that there is no development unless you are given something beyond your capacity. It is true in every realm. It means that the Lord is constantly putting you into situations beyond your capacity. If it is a matter of seeing, and you cannot see, what are you going to do - when you just cannot see what the Lord means, what the Lord is after, what He is doing? Give it up? Say, 'I cannot see' - that is an end of it - and go home? Of course not! We are there for that faculty to be developed and capacity increased. Have we not already proved that through many a dark way? We just cannot see or understand, but we have at least learned something of the ways and mind of the Lord. And in every other way too we are put into positions beyond our capacity. Does that comfort you? Are you out of your depth today? Are you in situations that you just cannot cope with? The explanation is in Hebrews 12.

There is a very great cost bound up with capacity - that is what I find. There have been people of whom we have despaired. We have wondered if ever they really would see, whether they would ever grow at all. They seemed to stay for so long in exactly the same place and with the same measure, and we have despaired. And then the Lord has taken them into a very deep place, breaking and shattering and emptying; and before they are through, things have changed inwardly: they have got a new knowledge of the Lord; they have come out with something which we had despaired of their ever reaching. There is something there now; there is the possibility now that they are going to count for something more. They are *seeing*.

I do not think there is any other way for increasing capacity. Capacity is a costly thing. We had better face it: every little bit of increase means agony. There is a big afterward in view. "All chastening seemeth for the present to be not joyous, but grievous" - and do not expect it to be otherwise - but afterward, and maybe, in measure, in the afterward here, we may be of greater value to the Lord, as He puts us through His school.

Yet, even so, as I said at the beginning, the work goes on to the end. And then what? Well, we may leave something behind for the profit of others, but surely that is not the end. No, there is the great afterward. You notice that this letter puts so much emphasis upon going on to the end, continuing to the end. One thing that we learn in the Lord's school is this - that we must never foreclose on God: we must not accept an end until He says it is an end. Let me put that in another way. How often there comes an afterward, when we thought there was going to be no afterward. We had thought it was all at an end, and then there comes an afterward, and we reproach ourselves for giving up too soon, before we ought to have given up. We give up in our spirits and we cease to run with patience. We go through a black, dark time when we seem to have been brought to the end and there is no more, and the enemy seeks to make us accept that. 'This is the awful end of everything'. And we find, like Abraham and his horror of great darkness, that when it seemed that it was the end of everything, it was only the beginning of something more of the Lord - something far greater - a new beginning. So we hold on, realising that this costly way is a preparation for larger values, though it be "for the present... not joyous, but grievous".