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## The Cross and the God of Hope

*by T. Austin-Sparks*

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"Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, in the power of the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:13).

'The God of hope fill you... that ye may abound in hope!'

As you know, the apostle has worked his way up to this point through a long and detailed argument. He has covered the whole course of things from Adam's first sin, tracing all its consequences and its outworkings, through all the generations up to Christ; then placing at the end of all that, the Cross of the Lord Jesus; and then, from that point, opening up an entirely new prospect and future. The Cross is the terminal point up to which everything led, and from which everything takes a new rise. Following all that history, explanation and teaching, the apostle comes at length to this all-embracing title: 'The God of Hope'.

As we view the great situation that is presented in this book and in the New Testament, we find ourselves faced with a strange thing, which looks like a paradox. It is this. God has written over the whole course of history the meaning of the Cross in this way, that the only answer that He can give to sin, to evil, to disobedience, and to all the fruit and results thereof, is travail, despair and death. And yet, withal, He is the God of Hope. He is saying that travail, passion, despair and death are *the only way of hope*. That is written in the whole history of God's dealings with men. Ever since Adam's sin, and (in him) the race's fall, God has had to work on the basis of the Cross of Christ. The Cross has been implicit in all God's dealings with men, and not only in general, but with His own people in particular.

The Cross means suffering; it is the very symbol of suffering - we know that. The Cross means travail and anguish - we know that. The Cross means despair. The great cry at the end of that ordeal was the cry of despair: 'My God, My God, Thou hast forsaken Me - why?' And the Cross is death. But, with all that, in God's desire and God's intention it is unto joy; it is unto sheer thankfulness; it is unto hope, a new hope; it is unto life - all the things which are exactly the opposite to what the Cross seems to say.

God is the God of Hope, even when you look at Calvary, and all that is going on there, and see the One there, and hear His bitter cry. If you understand it, and if you look at history - Adam's sin, and fall, and all that in which the race was involved thereby, all the tragedy and the anguish and the passion and the evil of the generations - and see why God, not only allowed it, but had to establish that regime, issuing in despair - the answer, strange to say, is: He is the God of Hope. That is His way of hope, and His only way of hope.

The Cross has always been God's way of salvation, God's remedy. It is a very drastic, a very terrible remedy, but it is God's remedy. And if it is an effective remedy, then it produces hope; it is something with hope - new hope - as its issue. The Cross is not a symbol; the Cross is not an object. The Cross is a mighty power, a perpetual power; an enactment once in history, but a power running through all the ages - we have said implicit in the old dispensation, explicit in this dispensation. From the first sin to the last, the Cross is a power at work.

Now there is one thing against which the Cross stands: namely, a state that is other than that which God intended. That has, of course, many aspects. We are going to look at just one or two of them, they are perfectly apparent in the Bible.

### **The Cross Against a Changed State**

Firstly, the Cross stands over the *nature* of things when that nature has become different. Whenever the nature of things has changed from what God either made it at the beginning, or intended it to be, God has brought in the Cross in some way or another; at once He has introduced the Cross. The nature of man was changed at the beginning; he became something different in nature from what God intended. We all know that by our inheritance. And immediately the Lord introduced the Cross in the law of travail, of passion, of adversity; He wrote immediately over that state, Despair and Death. The Cross stood over against that changed state. The only hope for recovering the divinely intended state, condition, nature of things, lay in the Cross.

The Cross is the great purifying agent - and purifying simply means getting rid of mixture. When there are things which do not correspond or tally; they are of two natures, two realms - two opposing elements; - when there is impurity, adulteration, the Cross stands four-square against it, in order to purify. The very first thing with God - whether in the individual, or in any company of His people locally, or in the Church universal - is its purity, its cleanness, its separation from all iniquity and all mixture. Our Christian life is based upon the Cross, individually, locally, and universally. The Cross sees God's mighty, terrible, eternal declaration against impurity - the contamination and corruption that has come in to make a state, in man and in the world, which He never intended to be.

The only way of purification is by bringing home, in grim reality, the hopelessness, from God's standpoint, of that which is not pure. How true that is, in a general way, as we look out on the world - the hopelessness of an impure, unclean, mixed state of things. The God of Hope demands, therefore, complete cleansing in that realm, and the constituting of something pure, something

clean, something unmixed, untainted. If you look into the Bible, with all its wonderful symbolism of what God's thought is, you will find that His thought is transparency, crystal-clearness. The end of God's work in this creation, as we see it at last in the book of the Revelation, is a jasper stone - something pure, clear as crystal. And it is the Cross and the Blood of the Lamb that leads to that.

If, therefore, the Lord sees any state that He never intended to be, that contradicts His mind in this matter, He will bring in the Cross as a working power; and, where that is found, there will begin to arise a situation. We find we have come to a standstill, God is not going on; we are in distress; we are in travail; we are in anguish; we are in despair; we are coming to death. The Cross is working in that way in order to produce a situation full of hope, full of prospect. The law is very clear.

The first thing we see, then, is that any state that is not according to God's intention has to be cleared up by the application of the great principle of the Cross. There is no hope for anything that is not pure in His eyes.

### **The Cross Against Reduction in Divine Things**

Next, suppose that things have become less than God intended they should be. God intended something full, great, and things have become smaller than He intended. And the history of Christianity is the history of that tendency - it is more than a tendency, a real working - in man's reducing both God and God's things to his own human measure; bringing everything of God, and God Himself, within the compass of man; man reducing God to himself in measure; making God less than He is, and the things of God less than they really are. We can see how that has gone on and is all the time going on, as a trend, as a tendency, as some working. And we are always near that peril of things becoming less than God meant them to be. God intended something very great; and here is loss, or the peril of loss, reduction; things becoming smaller, losing something.

Whenever the Lord sees that working, or that peril, becoming very real, He introduces the Cross, and travail begins, and distress, and suffering; everything comes into a realm of uncertainty and weakness and question. A sense of failure and despair is written - We are not going on, we are not going through. God intended something great, and it has lost something of that greatness, or failed to go through to that greatness; it has become something smaller than He intended. He is not going to allow that; He reacts. And oh, what tremendous reactions history shows in this very connection.

Take just the illustrative case of Israel. While Israel was a chosen people, taken out of the nations for God, God never, never intended Israel to become something in themselves. He never intended that Israel should be the beginning and the end of all His work. He intended Israel to be a 'light to the Gentiles'; to be a testimony to God to all the nations; to be a ministry, a missionary instrument, to all peoples, that all nations should walk in their light, or come into the light of God as amongst them. They were raised up, not for themselves as an end, but for the whole world, as God's apostolic nation, to evangelize the nations with the knowledge of God.

What did Israel come to? To despise the nations; to call them 'dogs', to shut them out, and shut themselves in from the nations, and have nothing whatever to do with them; to look upon them as something to be despised, to be rejected, to be cut off. 'We are the people; everything begins and ends with us.' The nation became something smaller than God intended, and there is no hope in that direction. The end of the story is that Israel, while of that mind, must be put aside, be broken, smashed, brought to despair, to hopelessness.

There is a large lesson for us to learn, and ever bear in mind, that, with all that God gave to Israel, and all that God is willing to lavish upon us, it is not for ourselves, it is not to end in ourselves. Nor is it to be allowed to make us just something in ourselves, that 'We *are* the people'. It is a trust - a trust for all men. The apostle Paul recognised that; and what a tremendous thing his recognition of it meant in his own case, when you think of him as a typical Israelite. His vision and ministry embraced 'all men' - "that we may present *every man*" - not, every Jew! - but "every man perfect in Christ" (Col. 1:28). He is the man who brings in the immensity of things, is he not? - the immensity of Christ; the immensity of the Church. If there is one thing about the Church that is so evident in the New Testament, it is its greatness. How great it is! It takes its character and its dimensions from the Lord Jesus. Any who have seen the greatness of Christ can never tolerate a 'little' church, a 'little' fellowship, - a little exclusive thing that is an end in itself. It must have a universal vision and a universal heart. To get that, any tendency to become something less will be met by the Cross, and there will come in hopelessness, despair, arrest, a sense of no way through, and a great deal of inward suffering and trouble and perplexity.

The Cross is the way of salvation: it is the way of salvation from something being smaller than God intended; but it is a painful way; it is the way of travail. The Cross releases from all smallness. The Lord Jesus made that clear in His own words: "I came to cast fire upon the earth... I have a baptism to be baptized with and how am I straitened till it be accomplished!" (Luke 12:49,50). 'How am I straitened!' But the baptism of the Cross, of the passion, being accomplished, He is released from all His straitness. This is no national movement now; this is not limited to Palestine, or to any other spot. He is released by the Cross from the smallness of Judaism, Israelitishism, Palestinianism! He is released into the universal. But it is a painful way, that release; it is a breaking and a rending. So the Lord would have us ever remember that He does react, and react very painfully for us, if anything that He intended to represent His greatness and His fulness becomes less than that.

### **The Cross Against Human Wisdom**

Once more, when anything becomes governed by *human wisdom*, by the mind of men, when it becomes brought into bondage of the 'scribes', the Lord has always brought in the Cross against that. You see it again in Israel. The Cross has been introduced over against that situation where the scribes and the rulers of Israel gave to Divine things their own human interpretation, imposed upon the things of God their own mind; created this great and intolerable burden to which Christ referred - simply the mind of man imposed upon Divine things. And it always means bondage. The Lord is not going to allow that. And so He reacts again, and there comes an *impasse*. And what is the nature of this new crisis? Absolute bewilderment; a situation where you do not know what to do, where to look, in what direction to move; how the situation can be resolved. It is altogether beyond human wisdom. It is an *impasse* of confounding, confusion, and despair. What can we do? what shall we do? how is this situation to be met? At every effort you are defeated.

The Lord has got to rescue us out into the realm of Divine revelation from any merely human or mental holding of Divine things. It is a tremendous thing that the Lord must have - this realm where He is perfectly free, if He wants to, to give new light that may seem to upset all our interpretations - all the mental power of the scribes and the Pharisees - to upset the whole thing.

That is what you find in the New Testament, in the book of the Acts. Here is Peter, a representative of Israel; here is Paul, one of those interpreters of the law, who held everything within the limit of their own minds, and said, Our word is final! Our interpretation is the authority! You have to bow to it! What is the Lord doing with men like Peter and Paul, and others in that book? He is bringing them up against situations where, if God does not now come in with some new light and some new

revelation, they are at a standstill. He was taking them altogether beyond their best traditions, their strongest convictions, and their settled interpretations, and was making them see that the Bible meant more than they, with all their learning and knowledge, had realised it meant.

Yes, Leviticus 11 stands true about unclean creatures and reptiles not to be eaten. Does the Holy Spirit contradict that when He tells Peter to 'Arise, kill and eat'? Not at all. Leviticus 11 had a meaning that Peter had never seen. He is up against something now that seems to contradict his knowledge of the Scripture; but in principle it does not - it just does not. One can only hint at that. You see, we bind the Word of God, and do not leave God free to enlarge the revelation, that He is meaning to give new light. And if that is a peril, or if we come to the place where our interpretations are made binding and limiting, He will bring in the Cross, and bring us to a place of utter confusion, where, if God does not now give us some new light, we are finished; we have not got the wisdom for the situation. What is He doing? The God of Hope is getting rid of a hopeless situation. And it is always hopeless when man is the last word in anything!

### **The Cross Against Legalism**

Finally, when things have become a legal system, bringing anything of God into bondage, God has reacted with the Cross, and it has been a terrible, devastating reaction. The breaking of legalism, of bondage to the Law, was a terrible business, and it always is. The Lord is not going to tolerate anything like that - making His things of the Spirit a tyranny of law. He will react for the Spirit's complete liberty in all things.

So we see that the Cross stands between a pure, unadulterated state, and a mixed, and therefore impure, condition. The Cross stands between the full intention of God and something less than He intended. Yes, the Cross demands fulness, not imperfection, not something less even in degree. If the Cross really is a working power anywhere, it will never allow a standstill. It will always demand a going on, and ever on, because it opens the way for that.

The Cross stands between a knowledge or a wisdom that is without life, and spiritual knowledge which is life. Adam made his choice, his bid for knowledge, and he got it without life. The "tree of life" was shut up - he had knowledge without life. God does not stand for that. We know how even religious knowledge can be lifeless and dead! It may be true of us, that we have a lot of knowledge - but where is the commensurate life? The Lord is against that, and He says: I cannot go on; we must have some trouble about this; we must have some pain, some anguish about this - all the knowledge must have a corresponding life. The knowledge must be living, must be linked with life. You can eat of the 'tree of knowledge' - I mean that other tree of knowledge, the knowledge of the Lord, of heavenly things - but even so, you must have the "tree of life" to keep the balance. Knowledge and life correspond, go together. The Lord is against any state other than that.

Again, form, exact form, perfect form, in teaching and in practice, without power, is something that God will not allow. Teaching and practice may be perfectly right: yes, but what about the power? Israel had the oracles, had the Law, had all the truth, but where was the spiritual power? None at all. The Cross will act to put that right. There is nothing to be said against 'correct' procedure and accurate and sound teaching; they must be; but the Lord will see to it that by keeping things on the move, in exercise, in travail, in trouble, the whole question of power becomes a very real one. We have got so much teaching, but we have so little power - it must become an anguish, a real anguish. All that we have, and all our way of doing things which we think to be so right, of New Testament order, must have a corresponding power and impact. And so the Lord will not allow rest in that.

In all these ways, He is the God of Hope: by travail there is hope, by despair there is hope. It is His way. May He give us understanding.