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The Rise, the Noon, the Sundown of a Great Church

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Acts 19; 20. 2 Timothy. Revelation 2:1-5.

Like the glory of a radiant morn, full of promise and blessed portent: like the power, the wealth, the beneficence of noontide, like the passing of a glorious day, the gathering shadows, the fast-approaching night, the sense of decline, loss, and failure; is the story of 'Ephesus' as we have it in the New Testament. It is a story, historically, of abounding promise; of abundant wealth; and of ultimate tragedy.

The Radiant Morn

The story of that glorious beginning is told in Acts 19 and 20:17-38.

First, it is the story of a small beginning with a few disciples, who, having had imperfect instruction and limited light, made a full-hearted response to further enlightenment, and took their stand on the full meaning of the Cross as signified by baptism - death, burial, resurrection in Christ, and the consequent government of the Holy Spirit.

Then it is the inevitable and invariable story of the uprising of the powers of evil and of intense conflict: a real baptism into heavenly warfare and the sufferings of Christ. It was the reaction of "the world rulers of this darkness" against the invasion of their territory by Jesus Christ. Through this conflict the testimony was established and the church grew strong.

Thirdly, it is the story of an extended period of building up, instruction, during which time the spiritual values spontaneously became extra-local and "all Asia heard the word". The true nature of the Church universal became the nature of the church local; not by organized design, not by committee, machinery, and institutions, but by spontaneous and overflowing spiritual life.

Fourthly, it is the faithful reiteration of all that had been done and imparted at great cost, through much travail, and uncompromising loyalty to Christ and the truth. A final note of prophetic warning closed that epoch; warning that, if the enemy's fierce and vicious assaults from the outside failed to break that church, its testimony, and its far-reaching influence, he would turn to the inside and "from among your own selves shall men arise... to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:30).

All that makes up to a wonderful and heart-ravishing beginning. How vital and significant a beginning it is! Would that every local church had such a clear-cut and transparent beginning! It was of God, not of man. It was wholly of the Spirit, and not of the flesh. It was of Heaven and not only on earthly ground. Therefore it had all the features of a heavenly calling; there was a heavenly fulness which spontaneously overflowed to distant regions, and a heavenly power which - while things remained true - triumphed over the many-sided insidious assaults of men and evil powers.

While it remained on heavenly ground, Heaven supported it. That it did survive for so long and exercised such a great influence is attributable to the soundness of the beginning.

The Noon

Although we should, perhaps, let the latter part of what we have written overlap into this second phase, we feel that the full blaze of the noon-time of the significance of 'Ephesus' is to be seen in the Letter to which its name (probably with others) was attached. Paul was then in prison in Rome. In the sovereignty of God he had been cut off from actual travelling among the churches in person, and from all those activities which, although ever vital and important, must now give place to a new phase.

The Lord who ruled all things in the life of His servant, acting on the principle of *comparative* values, judged that the *greatest* purpose would be served by shutting His servant away in seclusion, at least for a time. So, to the prison in Rome he went, despite every evil effort to end his life on the way. How fully and perfectly the wisdom of God has been vindicated!

Since "the heavenly vision" broke upon him on the road to Damascus, over a period of approximately twenty-eight to thirty years, that vision had been steadily and unceasingly growing in meaning and significance. It had been added to by special visions and revelations of the Lord (2 Cor. 12:1), in meditation, thought, and experience; in many long journeys on foot, and by sea. Much as he had given in letters, there remained a vast residue stored up in his heart, which demanded quiet detachment and freedom from administrative responsibilities for its release. So, the Lord planned it. What a mighty debt the Church universal through all the subsequent centuries owes to that act of Divine wisdom and sovereignty!

We do not hesitate to say that the greatest document ever penned and given to men is what is called "The Letter to the Ephesians". (We know the contention that it was an encyclical, and that 'Ephesus' was filled into a vacant space left for various other places, and we have no quarrel with

that conclusion.) For Ephesus it certainly was intended and that fact carries with it certain implications.

Firstly. It is a well-attested fact, known to all preachers and teachers who fulfil their ministry in the Spirit, that the measure of liberty and the degree of utterance depend upon the capacity of the recipients. Jesus enunciated this fact when He said: "I have many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now" (John 16:12), and it is stated categorically in Hebrews 5:11. The limit is imposed by the immaturity, the arrested growth, or lack of spiritual life in the hearers. A servant of the Lord, *speaking in the Spirit*, will know when he can go no further, and to try to go on will result in loss of unction and help. It is as though the Spirit said, 'That is as far as I can go with these people, they cannot take any more.' On the other hand, what a thing it is when there is no such restraint, and it is possible to give all that you have because the people are just drawing it out and are unwearied!

This is evidently how it was with those to whom this Letter was written. The Apostle was able to pour out the pent-up stores of heavenly riches. His only handicap was language, Superlative is heaped upon superlative. He beggars language and sometimes ruins grammar in his effort to free himself of his burden. There is nothing so profound; nothing so glorious; and nothing so significant for the Church as is here contained - or released!

Those believers must have been in a healthy spiritual state to receive all that. Paul must have felt how free that state made him, to so open the 'heavenlies' - a word so characteristic of the Letter.

A company of Christians will get what they are ready for. The Lord has vast stores and He is only straitened in us. One of the saddest things said about Israel was: "He gave them their request, but sent leanness into their soul" (Ps. 106:15). An attitude and condition of heart will determine 'leanness' or plenty.

Secondly. It was not only the *measure* of what could be given, it was also the nature. Not in volume alone is value to be found. Volume could result in surfeit and oppression. Neither is it in the words or statements as such. The people to whom this letter was sent had not just developed an ability to take large assignments of wonderful ideas.

There was that in the ministry which corresponded to the phrase of the Psalmist - "Deep calleth unto deep". They had discernment born of hunger and necessity, and they detected that this was very *life*. Because of a condition it *was* life to them.

There are things in this Letter which have divided people ever and always into three classes. There are those who have no spiritual life at all and their reaction is just to give it all up as quite beyond understanding and mysterious. Then there are the 'intellectuals' and the theologians, who have resolved the content into differing 'schools' of doctrine and interpretation. It is all so cold and dead: or it leads nowhere when the heart is breaking for some heavenly light; it is Dead-Sea fruit; dust and ashes; a headache and a weariness.

But, there are those who really have "a spirit of wisdom and revelation" and 'the anointing' abiding within; who know an open Heaven because the Cross has broken the natural barriers. To them it is the *nature*, the essence, the heavenly light; the Divine potency, and the heart-ravishing blessing of what is *revealed*, rather than the *ideas* and concepts. The believers at Ephesus were evidently like

that. At least, there were a sufficient number of such there.

There was another factor already hinted at, which should be underlined. Those believers had suffered, and were suffering. Their *condition* made it absolutely essential that they had more than a nominal and ordinary resource. Yes, it was a *necessity*. They were hungry. They were up against the forces of evil. They *consciously* needed succour in the battle. The traditional religion had failed them. Spiritual food was hard to come by.

The vast deposit which God gave to people in such conditions and under such circumstances will only come to vitality again when, for some cause or reason, it again becomes a matter of life or death; of *living* light or we perish!

Sundown

What a pity that we cannot leave the story there. But, sad to say, the *record* ends with 'the radiant morn hath passed away, and spent too soon her golden store'.

We combine two Scriptures:-

"This thou knowest that all they which be in Asia turned away from me" (2 Timothy 1:15);
"To the church in Ephesus... I have this against thee, that thou didst leave thy first love. Remember therefore whence thou art fallen, and repent and do the first works; or else I... will move thy candlestick out of its place" (Revelation 2:1). "Left thy first love". "From whence thou art fallen". "Thy candlestick out of its place".

If, as is generally believed, Paul wrote the Letter during his first imprisonment, and was released for about four years, and then wrote to Timothy during the second and last imprisonment, it must have been during those four years that the tragedy in Ephesus began. The whole tone has changed, the whole level declined. "All they which be in *Asia* be turned from me". Timothy had responsibility in Ephesus. We have only to read the Second Letter to him to see what had happened and was happening in Asia. It is a tragic story.

There are some things to draw from it.

Firstly. How quickly can a whole situation change, and how great the 'fall' can be when - *on the inside* - policy takes the place of principle; personal assertiveness thrusts spiritual government aside (there are a number of personal names mentioned with discredit in this Letter); when spirituality in order, 'office', and procedure is made to give place to organization, earthly orders, and a technical system. Either Paul's reproach and ostracism, his discrediting and threatening execution was too much for these people *now*, and so they turned from him; or his standard was *now* too high and exacting for them and they had developed a spiritual inferiority complex; perhaps it was some of both; but by 'fallen' the Lord meant dropped on to a lower level.

And the characteristics? lost first - original and virgin - love; and forsaken "first works", the former expressions of early and primal vision.

It is something to be thought over that, in addressing Ephesus, the Lord said: "I know thy *works* and thy *toil* and thy patience", and then should charge them to do the "first works". He did not charge

them with having no works or toil, but with departing from their *first* works.

Secondly. It is possible to 'turn from' the Lord's vessel and repudiate what He had given, but it is not thereby possible to get away from the Lord.

Paul is gone - about A.D. 64. John most probably wrote the book of the Revelation twenty years - or so - later. In that time the decline had become so great that the Lord seriously raised the question of the justification of the continuance of the Lampstand - the vessel of the Testimony. Of course, it is possible that the elements of this declension were present in Paul's lifetime and that apart from Alexander the Coppersmith they were suppressed. The Lord may have removed Paul because He knew this, for He does not believe in suppression. What is present will, sooner or later, be given an opportunity to manifest itself in order to be judged. Be that as it may, what is of God cannot be set aside by man without an encounter with God in His chosen time.

It will be a certain encouragement to all faithful servants of the Lord to know that time is God's ally, and that 'their labour is not in vain in the Lord' whether they see it in their lifetime or not.

We come then to the final word. It is not Ephesus or any other place or thing *as such* that the Lord sets Himself to keep intact. The world is covered with places and institutions which once were scenes of His glory, power and use, but today are shells or shadows of that former glory. God is not so concerned with the means as He is with the spiritual values which eternity will reveal. It is *people* who are His concern, and people of spiritual measure undiminished by time. It is - ultimately - the measure of the gold of Christ as symbolized by the Candlestick.