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The Trees of the Lord's Planting

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: Ezek. 47:6-12; Psa. 1:3; Luke 6:44; Rev. 22:1-3; Rom. 8:6-7.

Going back to Ezekiel 47 as our foundation passage, it hardly needs to be said that in the Scriptures trees are people; they are symbols of men. There are very many passages, of course, which make that perfectly clear and sure. Psalm 1:3 is conclusive. In the bringing of the wood for the boards of the tabernacle it is again self-evident that trees are men who form a habitation for God in a collective way. The Lord spoke about trees (as we have read) as men, known by their fruit.

Now in Ezekiel 47 it is fairly clear that this is a prophecy which had its fulfilment in the first instance at Pentecost; that is, what is in this chapter is what came in on the day of Pentecost and with Pentecost, and characterises this dispensation. It will have another and fuller fulfilment when the time marked by Rev. 22 is reached. The river again proceeds out from the Throne of God and of the Lamb, the river of water of Life. But for the moment it is this present application and fulfilment of the prophecy which engages us, this dispensation is characterised by this. A river began to flow on the day of Pentecost out from the sanctuary by the way of the altar, and on its course living witnesses were rooted to continue as a line of testimony right down the whole course of that river of Life - on either side of the river, on each bank, a tree and another corresponding, two and two, so to speak - it is this full testimony. "He sent them two and two" (Luke 10:1). "If two of you shall agree..." (Matt. 18:19) and so on. It is the Lord's means of testimony down the whole course of the Holy Spirit's movement through the dispensation - living witnesses.

A Living Organism

First of all, we must remind ourselves and be very clear on one simple and well-known fact that is well-known as a truth: that a tree is a living organism. It is not a machine, it is not an institution, it is not an office or an official thing, it is not an organised movement, it is not a fixed system. It is a living organism whose life is in itself and which is itself livingly reproductive by reason of its very life-energy. It is a living organism. That is the Lord's conception of His testimony through this dispensation - living people planted into His very Life and standing as His witnesses right down the dispensation - witnesses to Him as their Life, to Christ the Life. The life of this organism is His Life; the water is the water of Life; the fruit is the fruit of Life; the leaves of healing are the leaves of Life, and there is no other effective ministry in this dispensation. It is not taking up things as teachings and doctrines and giving them out. It is not taking up work as a form of activity. It is expressing a Life, manifesting a Life, giving effect to the Life, or the Life giving effect to itself; having a means for its expression. That is the Lord's idea for the whole of this dispensation, and we can see how effective and how fruitful, how mighty and how sufficient that is by looking at the first days of the process of that Life from the sanctuary. It was only when Life was supplanted by men's institutions that things changed, and wherever and whenever that has been the case, men have sooner or later become conscious of a lack, of a need which cannot be met in any other way than by this Life of the Spirit, the Spirit of God.

Now, we may know that very well, it may be nothing new to us, but we here are concerned with the matter of our life's meaning and significance on the earth for God; what is to be the result of our being here in a positive way for God. We may be thinking about service, about ministry, about work, about our usefulness to the Lord. Do not let us fail to recognise this and to get it well rooted in us and to have it always in our consciousness, that all ministry, all testimony, all witness, all service according to God's mind in this dispensation is this: that God has His trees planted by the river of water, that they are there rooted in His Life, and that their business is, as a living organism, to express the nature, the power, the value, the potentialities of His divine Life, so that the Christian life and Christian service resolves itself into one thing, all questions about serving the Lord are resolved into this one thing: the measure of His Life coming into us and going out through us. That means that the whole of this life here on this earth is a question of how much of death is overcome by the triumph of His Life, and that, of course, resolves itself into what we have so often called 'the battle for Life'. It is not only the battle to live, to have the spiritual life preserved. It is the battle for the testimony of Life.

There is a tremendous potency about this Life of God, this divine Life. It has in it all the potentialities of bringing about an entirely new creation and new universe, for the end will just be that - the tremendous transformation brought about by a new life; there is no other power that can do it. So our Christian experience is resolved into this continual conflict with the power of death in the energy of this Life, and thereby as the Life overcomes and triumphs, as through pressure and conflict the Life emerges triumphant, the testimony is thus maintained, the Lord thus has what He needs. Well, then, trees are organisms of this kind, for this purpose.

The Nature of the Life

But then, what does this Life mean? What is the nature of this Life? Well, we read the fragment from Romans 8:6 - "To be spiritually minded is life", or, "the mind of the Spirit is life". That means that it is our spirituality; this Life is our spiritual life, and it means the measure of our spirituality. Spirituality

is the secret of witness, of effective witness, and that means, of course, how much things of the Spirit have a place in us. As the Life of the river found its way through the roots of the trees up through trunk to branches, from branches to leaves and fruit, and then out to the nations - that is only saying that all that that means depends upon how much the things of the Spirit have a place in us; to be spiritually minded. That originates with a planting into His Life, planted by the river, planted into the very stream of Life, the very river of Life: planted into Christ. There is no other way of being united with Christ but by being planted. Paul used that word, as you know, in Romans 6 so much, "If we have been planted together in the likeness of His death, we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection". Planted in Christ. Nothing else is adequate. It is to be rooted into Christ so that all our spiritual vitality and energy is drawn from Christ. That is the origin of it.

The instinct of a tree is firstly to draw the very life, the very sap, the very energy, out of that into which it is rooted; and the instinct of a newborn child of God, a born-again one, is to draw on the Lord. That can be said in many ways, but that new hunger, that new thirst, that new sense of need, of dependence, that growing consciousness of how indispensable the Lord is, that which corresponds to the demand of our bodies for food, that demand of the inner man for the Lord, is the very instinct, the very nature, of a spiritual person. And the measure of our spirituality on the one hand, and the resultant measure of our effective testimony, can be judged by the strength of that instinct to draw upon the Lord; or, to put that more simply, can be determined by how much we are drawing upon the Lord, resorting to the Lord, making the Lord our very life. That is spiritual mindedness - it is a mindedness toward the Spirit, and that is spirituality.

That is, of course, exhibited in many ways. It is exhibited, for one thing, by that gravitation of our spontaneous life when we are free from anything that is set and formal, that our Christian life is not just a matter of meetings and the set occasions of Christian activity in meetings and things which are recognised for the time being to be spiritual activities. But when we are free, when we are alone or when we are together apart from any meetings at all, what is the spontaneous gravitation of our conversation? Do we talk on all sorts of things by the half-hour, the hour, or do we spontaneously gravitate toward the things of the Lord? A truly spiritual person gravitates instinctively and spontaneously towards spiritual things. What are the things that occupy us when there is no constraint of the occasion set upon us? Now, perhaps it is hardly fair to press that, but I am trying to illustrate what I mean by spirituality: the mind of the Spirit, a mindedness, an instinctive gravitation toward the things of the Spirit, is a mark of spirituality. Would we avoid, would we limit, would we fain be relieved, or do we feel it to be our very life to be wherever and in whatever there is that is spiritual, that is of the Lord? Not that it is expected of us, not that we are afraid that something might be said if we were absent - no, it is our life. That is what we are here for, to be in that position and that state, and out of that, all service to the Lord flows.

The instinctive thing about an organism is that it is always drawing, it receives, it must have. That is one side of it.

The Expression of the Life

But the instinctive movement of a tree is not only to draw, but to give, to yield, to express, and the instinctive nature of spiritual life and spirituality in us ought to be the seeking, whenever possible, to give fruit: "Whose fruit faileth not", it is new every month. It is a picture of something that is always fresh, never disappointing, never despairing. Paul said about love, "Love never faileth", and the original word means this - Love never despairs. When you come to look for that fruit, you do not

come as Christ came to the fig tree and found no fruit, you do not come and are disappointed that it is not there. It never fails and it is new every month. It is only a pictorial way of saying that the nature of a tree that is living by Christ is to give, not always to be receiving; to receive, but to give, and the test of our spirituality is whether we are giving. Is the Lord able to meet need through us, to bring healing, to bring refreshing and to bring nourishment? "Shall be for food", is the word here about this fruit. Well, is there food? Not what we work up by Bible Study, but by our life in God. It is spontaneous; it is not necessarily prepared, it is not necessarily something that we collect and it is not necessarily conscious. The tree just does it, and that is what the Lord meant by His parable of the vine and the branches and the much fruit. He is simply saying this: "If you have all in Me, you bring forth much fruit; you do it".

You remember that that figure and that tree was the turning-point in the life of Hudson Taylor. Up to a time, he was in the awful strain of things - the work of the Lord, the demands laid upon him by this work, all that came upon him through the Mission and the meetings. He felt that it was an intolerable strain and he almost broke under it and had to get away with the Lord. And then the Lord spoke to him through John 15, and he saw it by revelation. I expect no man knew John 15 as to the letter better than he at that time, but then he saw it by revelation, and saw this: "Why, after all, the whole need can be spontaneously met by my abiding in Christ!" That is so simple that it seems foolish, but it changed his life and changed his history. You have read his life and know the chapter on it, 'The Exchanged Life'. He said, "Christ is my soil, Christ is my sap, Christ is the fruit, Christ is the branch; why, Christ is everything, and all I have to do is to live in Christ, abide in Christ, and the rest will happen!" - and it did happen.

Well, coming back to Ezekiel, it is this fruit, full fruit for food, and leaves for healing; it depends on the measure of His Life in us, or, in other words, the measure of our spirituality, the measure of our spiritual life. It is spontaneous according to measure. It is certain if we are as we should be; "it faileth not".

The Law of Related Life

Then there is this further thing: its relationship is to the sanctuary and the cross. The river issues from the sanctuary; it comes down by the way of the altar, and the river which has its rise in the sanctuary by the way of the cross, is the river in which the living witnesses are planted, from which they draw their life. Well, you and I know enough to know the meaning of that.

For understanding of it, we come back again to the book of the Acts. It was as out from the sanctuary that the river ran in the book of the Acts. It took its rise in the newly-born Church, that spiritual and heavenly sanctuary - Christ by His Spirit the very fountain-head, the very spring of this Life, came into the sanctuary, into the Church, on the day of Pentecost. And it was out from Christ in corporate expression that the river flowed, and it is Christ crucified and what that means to the Church, that the Church, the sanctuary, is founded upon: the cross of the Lord Jesus in all its meaning. So the very life is the Life of Christ crucified, risen, in the Church. And the measure of spirituality is very largely the measure of our corporate life.

The measure of effective witness, therefore, and fruitfulness is, by divine law, a collective thing, a corporate thing. We know so well, for it has been told us a hundred times, that we can only go so far, reach a certain measure individually and separately, as units. This is a corporate testimony, this is the testimony of the Church, not as so many isolated individuals, and therefore the law of fulness is

the law of related life. That has been demonstrated in the New Testament so fully, so thoroughly, and we ought to know it, and we shall know it, and perhaps we do know it, that if we become detached and isolated, if we detach ourselves, or if in any spirit of independence we fail to live the life of unity, fellowship, oneness and spiritual relatedness with the Lord's people, our own life suffers and our own testimony suffers. We know that; many of us do know it very truly. It is a fact. For fulness in every way, a related life is necessary. It is sanctuary life and it is crucified and risen life. It is the Life which in Christ has conquered death and is a reigning life, and that life is centred in the Church, in the corporate Body of Christ.

Well now, all these things themselves perhaps are quite clear as a presentation of truth and of revelation, but it has many practical applications. It brings in the whole range of what is according to the Lord. Spiritual mindedness is the mind of the Spirit; what is according to the Lord. The Lord says this by His Spirit: "The mind of the flesh is death; but the mind of the Spirit is life and peace." That is, according to the degree in which we are minded towards the things of the Spirit, we have Life. In the measure in which we are minded in any direction, or on any matter that is not according to the Spirit, that Life is suspended and death operates. Romans 8 says that and then the apostle puts in a parenthesis in his teaching, and that parenthesis has to do with Israel. You know chapters 9, 10 and 11 about Israel and Israel's present position in this dispensation, and Israel's future prospect. That is a parenthesis, something put in brackets, as though it were not in the direct line of the spiritual teaching.

Then with Chapter 12 he takes up the spiritual teaching again so that the direct connection, the sequence, is this - "The mind of the flesh is death; but the mind of the Spirit is life and peace... I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service. And be not fashioned according to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God." That is spiritual mindedness - not conformed to this world. Inasmuch as we are conformed to this world, taking on this world's fashions, being governed by this world's standards, that is the mind of the flesh and that means death, and the Lord cannot go with us, cannot support us, and our fruitfulness will be limited. And inasmuch as we are free from the dominance of this world's standards and judgments and not conformed to it, the Lord has us in the way of His own mind and can go on. It is very practical in its application. Spiritual mindedness is Life. It gives the Lord a way in us.

Now, we need the Lord, we are dependent upon the Lord. Not one of us is sufficient to meet even the natural demands of this world with any hope of a testimony to the glory of God. We may be very inefficient naturally; we may be unable naturally to rise very high as clever ones, as having ability. Well, we need the Lord very much if there is going to be anything for His glory. We may be tremendously efficient, very clever, very able, we may achieve a good deal here, but we are no more advantaged by human efficiency and ability and capability in effecting a spiritual testimony to the glory of God than we would be if we had none of that ability. For the glorifying of God which is the service of God, we need the Lord and His help. Whether able or not able, we need the Lord. The Lord cannot come to our help unless we are spiritually minded, unless we are really set upon the things of the Spirit, unless His life has a free way in us, unless the channel is clear and we are rooted in Him.

Forgive me for being so emphatic, but I do feel it is very necessary for us to be clear on this matter, that the trees for His testimony and His glory down through this dispensation have to be rooted in

His Life and have got to have a clear way for that Life, being set upon the Lord, having a testimony at our point in the course of the ages. Right down the dispensation He always has had His witnesses; right down the course of this river of the Spirit's going He has had them, and in our day He has them and He needs them. But I think we are right, no one would dispute it, in saying that there is a sad need today of witnesses to the greater fulness of that Life, the greater power of that Life, the mighty triumph of that Life. There is a sad lack of this freshness and fulness and effectiveness in witness. That may be the point of His word to us now: "He shall be like a tree planted by the streams of water, that bringeth forth its fruit in its season"; "whose leaf shall not wither, neither shall the fruit thereof fail: it shall bring forth new fruit every month". That is the Lord's thought for us and we are in the dispensation of that river and in the dispensation of that testimony.

May the Lord find us such as correspond to this description, that, on the one hand, we are great receivers in a spiritual way - drawing upon the Lord, reaching out like roots to get all that is available, all that can be had of the Lord, great receivers of His life, great in our outreach for the Lord - and then, spontaneous and instinctive, great in giving, imparting, and meeting other need.