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Conformed to the Image of His Son

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: Rom. 8:15-30.

I want to speak to you in a general and simple way on what seems to me to be so evident in this portion of Scripture, as related particularly to the time in which we live. I think you will agree that the people of God in this time, as in many past times of severe pressure and trial and suffering, need delivering thoughts, which lift up and out and re-assure the heart and make steady the going; and I do not know of anything in the Word of God more calculated to perform that function than this familiar passage. It brings us right back to the foundation of all things with some mighty affirmations, some tremendous statements - into the eternal and establishing thoughts of God concerning His own people in all times. It is in those thoughts of God, as we recognize them, that we find our strength in times of special stress.

God's Purpose, Focused in His People, Explains World Events

The first and basic thought here is this. God has a fixed, determined purpose. He has His thoughts from eternity clearly and perfectly defined. The world is not in a jumble; things are not, from God's standpoint, in chaos. They may be from man's point of view, but from God's they are not. One clear, sure thought and purpose is actively at work in all these things which are going on as they affect and touch the life of the people of God, and we must remember that, at the heart of the universe, are the elect; the very core of everything is the people of God, the "called according to his purpose." That is why they are never exempt from the things which go on in the world; God never puts them into positions isolated from world happenings, never sets them aside in some place where they are untouched and unaffected. There is a sense in which the people of God register the happenings in the cosmos more than others do, and suffer more. The Lord's people are the heart of things and

God's fullest thought is centred in them; and around that people, embodying that thought of God, the whole creation is gathered, according to this Scripture, and is said to be groaning in travail in direct relation to this thought of God which is to emerge ultimately in the manifestation of the sons of God.

Now, I do want to put this as simply as possible. God's thoughts are very high but they are not beyond any who have the Holy Spirit. Right from the beginning, before the world was created, God had a definite thought. It was not an idea that He was going to try out, not something that had come into His mind and He was going to experiment with it to see if He could bring it to pass. When God thinks a thought it is as good as an act. "I know the thoughts that I think toward you... to give you an expected end" (Jer. 29:11); and who will for a moment allow room for God's thoughts to be ultimately defeated? No, God's thoughts are God's acts. So that He had a thought which was as good as an accomplishment from the beginning, and right through the ages He has been at work with that thought in relation to His own people; and in such times as this in which we are living, times of great trial for the people of God, that thought of God takes on a new meaning and His people ought to turn back to it in order that they may be saved.

Need for Spiritual Evaluation Above Earthly Happening

I was talking to someone recently who is very much in the affairs of this world, and he said, 'Of course, this world is all upside down, everything is wrong, nothing is as it should be.' He was not talking religiously, but as a man of the world, without any knowledge whatever of God's thoughts. He went on to say, 'Of course, so far as our lifetime is concerned, we shall never see recovery, things will never be normal again' - and he spoke with a note which indicated that for him life and the world were all gone; everything for which we lived and hoped, our whole system of things, had gone, there was nothing left; we might just as well depart this life now. If we are going to live at all in relation to this world and this world order, we are going to be in a terrible tangle. To put it quite precisely in the light of present conditions, our essential need is for deliverance from looking for a change of circumstances and the return of conditions in which we can settle down and perhaps enjoy again all the old liberties.

If we are from day to day hoping that there will be a complete change and that something will happen which will completely alter things for the better: if we are living in things as they are or as we would like them to be, the ups or the downs of these present world happenings: we are destined and doomed to despair and to live under a terrible strain. We have to get out of this somehow, we have to be above it.

Of course, we shall be touched with the suffering and the sorrow and the conditions; we shall feel things in the realm of our souls; but in the innermost part of our being, in our spirit, we have to be free from this. We shall never be able to bear our testimony, fulfil our ministry, or be that for which God has chosen us unless we are in a position of spiritual detachment and ascendancy above what is happening. We need deliverance, and we must have it. When we take up our morning paper and read of the course of this world's affairs, we can become terribly involved in it, and the shadow be over us for the rest of the day. That will not do, and if things do go from bad to worse in the realm of earthly things, we have to find a place where still we are outside of it. The same holds good in the matter of elation because of good news, and the apparent improvement of conditions. Disillusionment may cast us down, sooner or later. We must be above this world.

What is it, then, that will secure us there? What will deliver us? It will be the basic and all-governing thought of God. If only you can be assured that God is definitely giving Himself to something, and

can see what that something is, and can have, by the Holy Spirit, the witness in your own being that He is doing that in your case, you are delivered. Otherwise you are in chaos and you will soon be in despair. That is where the world is. It is indeed "having no hope and without God in the world."

God's Thought - A People Conformed to the Image of His Son

What is this basic thought? The words are so familiar, but I believe everything in history from the beginning to the end in relation to the people of God turns upon this one familiar fragment -

"Whom he foreknew, he also foreordained to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom 8:29).

"Conformed to the image of his Son" - that is the basic, all-governing thought of God where His people are concerned. That is what He has been at work upon from the beginning with His people. That is at the very heart and root of our present experiences, our trials, our suffering. God is at work upon you and me with this one thing in view - conformity to the image of His Son. That means many things, which we do not now stay to consider, but we take fresh note of it as the underlying, undergirding fact. Going right back before time, "foreknown, foreordained," on to "the ages of the ages," the realization; "conformed to the image of his Son." The previous verse (v. 28) expresses this - God is working all things for good with those who are called according to His purpose.

What good? What is the good of the suffering and trial that we go through? It is this - that God is (may I use the word?) reproducing His Son in us; and His Son is His hope, and His ultimate glory is to be revealed manifestly in the saints in terms of sonship. It is the hope for the whole creation - "subjected to vanity... in hope." We are travailing in hope. The hope is in God's Son, and the hope is the manifestation of that Son in the saints. "Christ in you the hope of glory."

Conformity to Christ Wrought through Common Trials

Now to bring that down again to very simple terms. Go back to the place where, for the time being, the Lord has put you, where He has called you to live your life and do your work in all the trial and difficulty and suffering of it, and do not strain to get out of it. Do not lose the present value of it by always living mentally or hopefully in a time when you will be out of it, but go back there and recognize that if you are the Lord's, if you love God and are called according to purpose (as you are if you are in Christ), God is seeking to do something with you and in you by means of the conditions of your present situation. You will only defeat God's end if you try to get out, and will fail to recognize and accept what He is seeking to do. I can think of few things more regrettable and grievous than that we should look back upon any part of our life and have to say, 'I might have realized some great purpose of God in that period of my life if only I had taken another attitude toward it than the one I did take; I was chafing, impatient, all the time looking for a way of escape; I was rebellious, living in another mental world of my own creating, in which I would do and be this and that; and I missed all that God intended at that time.' I say, there can be few things more grievous than that.

So we must go back to the sphere and conditions in which the Lord has placed us, with this attitude - God has a thought which relates to me as one of His Own; and that thought is, that through the conditions and sufferings of my life He should develop in me the features of His Son. On the one hand, the features of the old creation may be seen to be more and more terrible and horrible, as I recognize them in myself; but over against that God is doing something which is other than myself, not me at all. He is bringing into being Another, altogether other, and that is His Son. Slowly, all too slowly; nevertheless something is happening. That sonship is not very much manifested yet, but it is going to be manifested. What God has been doing will come out into the light eventually -

conformity to the image of His Son; "that he might be the firstborn among many brethren."

So we look out upon the people of God on the earth amongst whom we are included, and we have to adjust our ideas as to why we are here. There may be things to do, but God is far more concerned with the being than with the doing, and we have to learn all over again what service is. I am not going to pursue that at the moment, but I would say this - service to God is essentially spiritual, or, in other words, it is the measure in which Christ Himself is brought into God's universe for God's satisfaction; and we know that we can never bring Christ into anyone's life by preaching. Have you learned that yet? How much of Christ has resulted from all the conferences you have attended? I am under no delusion that what I am saying to you can reproduce Christ in you. We may talk to the end of our days, but all our preaching is not going to produce Him. We can only help one another in this matter to understand what God is seeking to do.

Only God's Spirit can Conform us to Christ

And so we come back to this second thing in relation to purpose. There is the thought, the purpose, which God has in view, upon which He is at work, but the Holy Spirit is brought in here so definitely and fully as the indispensable agent.

"The Spirit... maketh intercession... according to God."

The words - 'the will of' God - are printed in italics in the Bible; they are not in the original. The Spirit Who knows God, God's thoughts, God's mind, is working according to God and working in us. We have received the Spirit of sonship, adoption, by which we cry, Father! We are *children* of God to be manifested as the *sons* of God, but all this is because the Holy Spirit is operating, making intercession with, groanings which cannot be uttered. *"The Spirit helpeth our infirmity."* He comes alongside. He alone can reproduce Christ, conform us to His image. And yet we have thought that service was preaching, teaching, doing this or that or a hundred and one things! Oh, that is only the vehicle of the Spirit. Let us be undeceived about this matter. You are not going to be one whit better spiritually for attending meetings unless the Holy Spirit does something. All that is said may be very true, but your knowing it all will not reach the end of God. We are wrecked upon the Holy Spirit in this matter. Therein is the need for real exercise over everything that we hear.

The fact is this, that we may advance a long way in spiritual knowledge (I mean in information, the knowledge of the truth) beyond our own real measure, and then have the shock, under terrible conditions, of discovering that all that we have accumulated through the years does not help us. We are right up against things and have to say, 'I have not got the realities I thought I had, they are not helping me; I am being brought right back to foundations in my real, personal, living knowledge of the Lord Himself.' The peril then, of course, is to jettison all the teaching we have had and to say that it is a valueless thing. It is not valueless; but we must recognize that there is all the difference between knowing the thoughts of God in our minds, and the Holy Spirit's using that knowledge to accomplish God's ends. Thus we have to come back with every fragment and have very real dealings with the Lord. Our attitude every time must be, 'Lord, do save me from ever coming to the time when what I have heard proves only to have been a thing heard; make it a basis of Holy Spirit activity to reach the Divine end.'

Now, if you can grasp this, it is going to be a great deliverance. Why are the people of God suffering? - that they may be conformed to the image of His Son. Of course, we may not need a world upheaval to do that, but God is going to use all conditions to that end, and, tragically enough, there are multitudes of the Lord's people who do need a world shaking. They are so bound up with the

externalities of Christianity, with its whole structure and system, that nothing but that which will overthrow, disintegrate, destroy, and raise tremendous questions about the whole business, will bring them to the place where the Spirit of God can begin really to do the work which He has come to do in them.

Need for Inwrought Knowledge of the Lord

I do not want to speak too much about work and service at this time, but we are all conscious how very testing are the limitations that growingly bear down upon us as those who would serve the Lord. They raise many questions and problems in our minds, so far as concerns the fulfilment of what we have thought to be our ministry. The situation is a very trying one. We have to look deeper, still more inward, as to God's thought.

This is a fact borne out in the case of every servant of God in history who has really come under the hand of God - that the real values of their lives for all time have been those which correspond to the wine of the grape, the thing trodden out in the winepress, the agony of the heart; and you know that it is true in your case that if ever you have had anything at all which you knew to be worth while and which has really helped someone else, it has been born out of some travail in your own experience. You have gone into the winepress, through an agony, to produce it and that is the nature of real service to God.

How do we *know*? - not have information, but *know*? We only know anything in that deepest sense by going into a situation where we are stripped of everything in order to prove that one thing, and to find in knowing it our deliverance, our salvation. That is the way in which we learn, and there is no gap whatever between that kind of knowledge and our very being. That knowledge is not objective to ourselves, it is ourselves, and when we give that we give ourselves. We cannot stand back from that and say, 'I believed that once but I do not believe it any longer; I had those ideas, but I do not hold them now.' Oh, God could never be satisfied with anything like that. There may be sifting and adjustment as to our ideas, but the Lord is after 'true knowledge.' We stand or fall by our knowledge, because true knowledge is life, is being, and it is what God Himself is in us.

Perfected through Sufferings

I wonder if you grasp the point. What is God doing with His people? He is using all these things which are happening, primarily to bring about in His people that conformity to the image of His Son which is to mean Christ in manifestation in an elect people - a people foreordained because foreknown for this very thing. This thought of God is a delivering thought. How do you pray for the Lord's people in times of trouble? Of course, we are all tempted to pray for their deliverance, to cry to the Lord that they may escape. It may be right at times to pray thus, but suppose the Lord does not deliver? He does not always deliver at once. He allows the situation to continue, to become long drawn out. The enemy will encamp upon that fact and give it his own twist and interpretation - 'God is not doing anything; He has left His people, is standing back, is not concerned.' There is no answering voice, no slightest indication that He is taking any account at all. It is like that very often, and that is a real playground for the enemy. God apparently makes no response. How shall we be delivered from going to pieces, from being overwhelmed in such a time and under such conditions? Only by grasping this thought of God; and then we have to begin to pray along other lines. If God does not act to deliver His people, there is a deeper and a higher thought and purpose than their deliverance, and He is at work upon that; and deeply in them He is going to reproduce the patience, the endurance, the longsuffering of Jesus Christ.

If you go right over the whole ground of God's Son perfected through sufferings and can read your Gospels anew and understand Him as He differs so utterly from the standards of men, you can see what God is doing with us His people. Meekness and gentleness - these are foreign things to our natures; under stress, under adversity, under the cruel hand of tyrannical men, to say, 'Father, forgive!' He could say "I am meek and lowly in heart." Oh, you see - the image of His Son. Such testing conditions are a terrible challenge to our natural dispositions. Our whole nature revolts against meekness and lowliness and wants to rise up and be even with the other one, or be the master. Our nature does not accept and delight in opposition, antagonism, frustration, persecution, and all such things.

But think - and this is the marvel of Christ in Pilate's hall and before the High Priest - think again. Spat upon, mocked, struck, in every way degraded - and He is almighty and infinite God incarnate Who, with the parting of His lips, the silent lifting of His hand, could have smitten that crowd out of existence! The centurion was right; when he saw what had happened he was filled with fear and said, Truly this was the Son of God. We have heard of people suddenly discovering their awful mistake and dying of heart failure on the spot. Think of the shock that has to come yet to those who treated Him as He was treated - when they see Him. You can understand something of what took place in Saul of Tarsus (who knew all about what had happened in Jerusalem) when he saw Him - "I am Jesus" - saw Him in a brightness above that of the noonday sun.

But my point is this, He accepted and endured all that, going through to the bitter end, letting them hammer nails through His hands and feet and fix Him to the Cross, with all the deriding - "He saved others; himself he cannot save... Let (God) deliver him now, if he desireth him: for he said, I am the Son of God." And He did not stir a finger or utter a word, when twelve legions of angels were standing ready for His aid.

(If one angel could smite the host of Sennacherib, what would twelve legions do?) That is meekness and lowliness of heart, and that is what God is trying to effect in us. That is the thought of God; that is going to be glory in God's universe; that will make a world worth living in, and a universe of that nature will be bearable. God thus works in us; and so the portion we read finds early in it these words -

"I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."