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The Meaning of the Fire

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have chosen you in the furnace of affliction. For My own sake, for My own sake, will I do it; for how should My name be profaned? and My glory will I not give to another" (Isa. 48:10-11).

You know that Israel was chosen not just to be something, but to serve a divine end. The being was essential to the doing, and the divine end was the bringing of the Lord into the world, into evidence, into manifestation, into effect. It is a very great purpose; that God should choose that, by human instrumentality, He should come unto His own, and that He should be manifested in His own realm, that He should be in evidence. God chose that the outcome should simply be that He was known, understood, felt, that the one ultimate declaration should be: It is the Lord, that is the Lord. Those are very simple words, but they go to the root of everything.

That great purpose of God, which has now been manifested as bound up with the saints of this dispensation, made necessary refining fires and much affliction, and, although it may be no new thing to be said to you, it can come with a renewed emphasis that the supremely important thing for you and for me and for the Lord's people to be fully and deeply aware of is that the Lord has no other object where we are concerned than that of bringing Himself in ever-increasing measure into evidence, into manifestation, for time and for eternity. The all-governing thing with God is His self-manifestation, and that can only be along the lines and by means of spiritual life. There is no other way of manifesting God, God becoming really known, only along spiritual lines. There is not one of

us who knows the Lord Jesus and has that knowledge in any other way. We do not have a physical knowledge of Jesus. We have come into our knowledge of Him in a spiritual way, and every fuller bit of knowledge of Him is spiritual, essentially spiritual, and God cannot be known in any other way. The Lord cannot be manifested in any other way. There is that mystic, strange, inexplicable something which is extra, which is the Lord. I mean, it is not teaching. There may be a great mass of teaching, and perfectly right and true teaching, a great fulness of truth, and yet there may just be lacking that something, that extra something, that mystic something that leaves it as truth, a bulk of truth, and does not get you anywhere. When you have got it all, it has not got you anywhere. It is not something objective at all, objective in the way of truth imparted, teaching given, doctrine held. It is not a matter of work done for the Lord, in the Name of the Lord, things that we are doing — even the matter of leading others to accept Him, as an engagement, as a form of activity, of work. It is not the constituting or the constructing of something for the Lord in the same way as we would go to work to build up some other institution in the world and call it by this or that name; it is not that. These may be means, but if there is not that extra, as I call it, that mystical something, if it is just an objective thing, it has failed in its divine value. That something, that extra, is the Lord. The Lord has been imparted, and all teaching and truth which does not impart the Lord — not just knowledge, truth and doctrine, material, however right in its place — if it does not carry with it the Lord and impart the Lord and result in people who are alive, who are sensitive, who are open, who are prepared, being able to say, Yes, the Word was good, but the Lord met me in the Word — if it is not that extra, it has failed. If any of the work that is being done, all the activities, all the business, with the best of motives and a great zeal and devotion, whole-heartedness, if the upshot of it is not that the Lord has come in, it is the Lord, something extra to the Word, you have come into touch with the Lord; it has failed.

What the Lord really does want and is after and must have is intrinsic spiritual value, and He may press that into a small compass outwardly, but it becomes tremendously intense in a spiritual way. Do not misunderstand me. I am not talking about our tenseness, but the thing itself becomes of atomic power, crowded into a small compass. That is the explanation of the terrific pressure which those who are chosen to keep spiritual values pre-eminently in view experience. Fire! When man sinned, God instituted deliberately the law of travail. Why? Not as mere judgment and punishment. No! God said in principle, 'There is no blessing that can rest upon the flesh; blessing only rests upon what is spiritual, and if I were to let man now, in his disobedience, get away with it and have blessing upon his work, he would never be concerned about spiritual things, spiritual things would go by the board.' That lot of suffering and travail is carried right through into the life and service of the Lord's people and the church. Why so much opposition? Why so much adversity? Why so much suffering, when you are right out for God? When you have nothing but the Lord's interests in view, still there is this terrible time of spiritual trial, adversity, suffering and testing, even in the Lord's work. There is no place made at all for ourselves, for the flesh. When I speak of the flesh now, I am not speaking necessarily of evil; but the natural.

If this is true, the logic of it is this, that the more spiritual value there is to be, or, to use the other words, the more that there is to be of the Lord intrinsically and essentially, the more impossible will it be for any of nature to come in, and so, unto the greatest spiritual measure we have to be brought to the place where what we can do naturally is tested. We can do nothing. We are right up against a wall. Other people can do things, men of the world can get things done; we can do nothing, we are helpless. Every kind of resource seems to have dried up, and now, well, it is the Lord. It is to be the Lord, or everything is finished. You have heard that said many times here. There is an intensity of pressure and trial being brought to bear upon many of the people of God — not all, but in this

particular intensity many people of God are knowing something that they have never known before, headed right up to breaking point. What does it mean? I am not going to talk about why some go that way and others do not — even of the Lord's people; why it is that in some realms they seem to get along fairly easily, carry all before them, and in others every half step is the result of a most terrible spiritual ordeal, pressure, and conflict, and a long hold-up before even half a step can be taken. That is not exaggerating. I am not going to try to discuss why it is like that, but it is like that, and it leaves no room for spiritual conceit, anything of superiority. You get all that knocked out of you immediately you touch that realm of being chosen for intrinsic value — not general, not superficial, wide area usefulness to God, but that which is going to bring divine spiritual values intrinsically for the people of God, for others, for the work of God.

Chosen for that means that steadily right on to the end, all that is of man, his capability, his efficiency, his ability, his everything, is going to be squeezed right out. He is coming to the place where no more is possible unless the Lord does it, and that is a deliberately chosen way and method of the Lord, if the Scriptures are true. God's standard of values and man's are so different. Man thinks in big terms, expansive, extensive, objective terms, all objective. God is always thinking in terms of inward, intensive, essential values. His standard of greatness is the measure of divine spirituality. It is just the measure of Himself. So "I have refined you, but not as silver; I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction. For My own sake, for My own sake, will I do it; ...My glory will I not give to another."

You know in Romans 8, perhaps the most familiar chapter in the Bible to you, it is always the contrast there between the Spirit and the flesh. You know that in that chapter you have got past the grave, you are now on resurrection ground, and it is all now the spiritual. First, the law of life has made you free, then it is all the Spirit, the spiritual mind, the spiritual man, everything spiritual, and God has not departed from that. Man, thinking in more material and objective terms, has not taken God away from His basis. His basis is still that, right from the cross; it is spiritual nature, spiritual measure. It is all what is really spiritual in the divine sense. It is the Lord.

And that explains so largely the Lord's dealings with us. Do believe it! The Lord is after having mother tincture in spiritual life. That is, the 'flavour', trace or tinge of the Lord Himself. That is essentially spiritual intrinsic value.

Here, speaking among ourselves, I do not see, as I have thought and thought and spent very much time in weighing up everything, I do not see any other explanation for the way in which we are dealt with by the Lord. I see no other explanation for our existence. I have never accepted that, if the Lord wanted to do what He is doing generally in this world, why He should have made something more here, something separate here? We were at one time doing that and getting on splendidly in the general realm of earnest Christian evangelical activity. That could have gone on. But the Lord did something and brought us apart as a people, not — let me say it strongly — not to make us in ourselves any more important. We have not got one inch of ground to stand upon to speak of superior importance or our superior value. But I do believe that He did something because He wanted His people, perhaps in all the world, or many of His people over this world, to come into something more of Himself by putting this corporate vessel into the furnace. You know immediately you come into touch with this, you get into trouble. The only thing that will keep you going on, that will maintain your relationship, is that you find more of the Lord. If you do not, go, friend, go! Do not be attached to a *thing*. It is *the Lord*. And if it is not, my prayer is ever: Wind it up, put it out, if it does not stand justified in its extra measure of the Lord.

But you are really going into the furnace if you are going to be of intrinsic spiritual value, if it is going to be the Lord. Oh, do not go out with teaching. 'This is our teaching, what we stand for.' No, none of that! Go out and live and be the Lord, in effect, in manifestation. That is the only justification. What the Lord is after is men and women individually and collectively who do not hold some higher truth, propound some fuller or deeper doctrines or have a more exact New Testament technique, but who are the impact and registration of Himself in a spiritual way, that it can be said, "In touching them, I have met the Lord". That is the way of a fiery furnace. God does not want instruments. An instrument, a tool, is something you take up and has to respond mechanically to you. God wants living beings impregnated with Himself; to touch them is to touch the Lord Himself. Well, that explains the way of the Lord with us in our own experience, what He is after. It is a fresh challenge to us. May it have this effect, that it saves us from looking at others, what they are doing and what is being done, and coveting and envying; saying, Well, you see... and then gravitating in heart in that direction. Remember that it may be — I am not going to say dogmatically that it is, but it may be an election. "I have chosen...". Maybe He has put His hand on you for something more. You could serve Him; you could be of use in other realms. It may be He has put His hand on you for something more, and because of that you go through it as other people do not. Fire for you means something far more than for many others. Think that it may be an election to serve the Lord in some deeper way than the average, than the general, and the fire will see to the matter of conceit and pride. There will be no room left for them.