

A People Prepared for the Lord

by T. Austin-Sparks

Reading: 1 Kings 19:15-18; Rom. 11:2,4; Luke 1:17; Acts 19:1-6.

What I would like to say is gathered up into this little clause in Luke 1:17 —

"... to make ready for the Lord a prepared people".

That is put in different ways, but that is a fairly accurate and literal translation.

The vocation of this Elijah-John the Baptist instrument is said to be the making ready for the Lord of a prepared people. Even John the Baptist did not exhaust the declaration about his coming in the spirit and power of Elijah, that there still remains something of that to be accomplished. I am not going to discuss or argue about that. I take it for granted as a settled thing, and that the end-time will see something after that nature, the work of Elijah-John the Baptist as in a vessel.

What I want to come to very quickly is this particular factor or phase of that ministry or that vocation — a prepared people, a people prepared for the Lord. In the main, there are two things which I want to suggest as being characteristic of that prepared people.

It is very difficult for us to understand how anyone without prejudice, with an open heart and a sincere and honest spirit can fail to recognise in the Word of God throughout that, at an end-time, the people of God are not all marked by the same measure of preparedness for the Lord. The Lord Himself has made that perfectly clear in His own teaching and in His own parables, and throughout the Word, in the Old Testament and in the New, that there is a people in the midst of the people of God who represent a measure of preparedness for the Lord. They have a fitness, suitability, beyond what is general; their testimony is something more definite, positive and utter. It is very difficult to understand how anybody can fail to recognise that.

Further, it is difficult to understand how people can fail to see that such a company, such a prepared people, stand in a particular and peculiar relationship to God's thought and purpose, to meet a need which He has in a representative and vocational sense, to serve Him in a peculiar way, for that is also made amply clear to anyone who will be honest with the Word of God. To put that quite concisely, while they may not be an elect of the elect, there may be no such thing recognised, the fact remains that God must have a people prepared for Himself, and that the whole company of those who are His are not prepared, as seen in the Word of God at any end-time in the past or in the end-time yet to be. But the Lord has His heart and mind concentrated upon such a people and they are to Him a peculiar treasure, a special vessel, not because He intended them to be that as apart from the rest, but because the rest are not prepared to pay the price. The rest are not wholly following the Lord; they are following at a distance.

Now, the ministry as represented by Elijah and John the Baptist and then by the two combined in the same Spirit, has to do particularly with this company in the midst of the whole body of the Lord's people to be prepared for Him, prepared for His coming. If we are willing and open and honest before the Lord, we shall see that that is so more clearly as we see the particular features of such a company or of such a preparedness — the state which He is seeking.

Two Features of a Prepared People

We will proceed, then, to see those features. For the present, just two. But it is an interesting thing that the seven thousand to which the Lord referred were not brought to

light, until the time when Elijah came into view. These two things came into view at the same time. The Lord is saying to Elijah, "*Return to the wilderness of Damascus and anoint Elisha to be prophet in thy room.*" I have heard it stated that this was the Lord setting aside Elijah as a repudiated prophet because of his breakdown and failure; that the Lord is saying, 'You are not going to be prophet any longer.' I do not accept that for a moment, because Elijah went on for some considerable time after this had happened. But the point is that Elisha came into view then, and almost in the same statement the Lord said, 'Yet I reserve unto myself seven thousand that have not bowed the knee to Baal!' 'Have not' — they are in existence. They were brought to light in the moment that Elisha was brought to light; the two things came into view at the same time, and that gives us the key to this whole matter of the nature of this people. Here we speak in the type, but we pass over and see the spiritual side of this actually in a moment.

What does Elisha represent? We ought to know quite well the particular significance of Elisha. "*Knowest thou that the Lord will take thy master from thy head today?*" Elijah was the head. Upon that head the anointing rested. "*Grant that I may receive a double portion of thy spirit.*" That anointing was to be transferred to Elisha. "*Anoint Elisha in thy room.*" And when Elisha saw Elijah go up in the chariot of fire, the sons of the prophets said, "*The spirit of Elijah does rest upon Elisha*", and they bowed themselves to the ground. The mantle of Elijah was taken up by Elisha. That is the first thing. Then you follow Elisha, and you find that the outstanding characteristic of Elisha's life and ministry was life, or resurrection life. All the way through, in all those miracles and everything that Elisha did, was in very various forms an expression of resurrection life. He was the power of life conquering death. Now you have got your two things. Elisha signifies the government of the Holy Spirit and the power of resurrection life. Of course, we know that those two things are one, but they are two phases or aspects of the one thing.

Now note. You come to the New Testament. John the Baptist comes in the spirit and power of Elijah. "*He shall be filled with the Holy Spirit from his birth*", said Gabriel: "*The spirit and power of Elijah*". He took that spirit up, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, he carried things on to Him who was the life; the power of resurrection.

We pass into Acts 19, and it is very interesting. "Into what were ye baptized?" said Paul to those disciples. "Into John's baptism". John's baptism! What was in John's preaching, what was John's attitude, what was his ministry? To transfer everything to Christ — "... *that they should believe on him that should come after*". And when the transfer was made, what happened? They were baptized into the Lord Jesus; the Holy Spirit came upon them. What was it that Paul recognised there at Ephesus among those disciples that made him ask that question, "*Did ye receive the Holy Spirit when ye believed?*" Well, he evidently discerned a lack of life, a lack of power. The marks of the Holy Spirit's presence were absent, and when John fulfilled his ministry, so to speak, that is, got them over into the Lord Jesus, there was at once the power of the Spirit, the anointing, and the power of resurrection life; the difficulties were overcome, those tragic absences were made good. You find *at once* that there are manifestations of the Spirit in life.

The Government of the Holy Spirit

We said that the seven thousand came into view when Elisha came into view. The remnant, the people prepared for the Lord, came into view with Elisha, which means in simple language that the marks of a people prepared for the Lord are absolute government by the Holy Spirit, and the power of resurrection life. That means a good deal more than you and I have yet recognised. I suppose all Christians, if they are worthy of the name, would confess to the reality of the Holy Spirit, the need of the Holy Spirit, and would go a long way in their recognition of the Holy Spirit's Lordship and government, and probably every day, every morning, before they go out, they acknowledge the Holy Spirit and seek the Holy Spirit's guidance and enablement for the day. That is true of the great mass of Christians, of the general company, we may say of

all, speaking generally, who are the Lord's people, but it means something infinitely more than that.

Evangelical Christianity, recognising the Holy Spirit and writing libraries of books on the Holy Spirit, the ministry and work and power of the Holy Spirit, is still not subject to the Holy Spirit in an utter way. It makes its plans, it organises its work, it sets up its system of Christian activities, and of course commits it to the Holy Spirit and asks the Holy Spirit to bless it and to come upon it and use it, but that is not the government of the Holy Spirit. You cannot in the first instance make any plans if you are Holy Spirit governed. You cannot organise Christian work in the first instance if you are Holy Spirit governed. You cannot lay out a programme for anything in the first instance in relation to the Lord if you are Holy Spirit governed. The first thing is the surrender of everything to Him and getting it by revelation of the Holy Spirit, and not by using your own natural wisdom or judgment or enthusiasm, your good desire for the Lord, and so arranging things for the Lord and asking Him to preside at your arrangement. I do not know if this applies to us, but I am working up to another point where we are concerned.

The real government of the Holy Spirit is a deep thing. It is a very deep thing and a very utter thing, and we must realise that the Holy Spirit always works along the line of revelation, and not along the line of reason at all. When the Holy Spirit does things, you get a lot of blessed and wonderful surprises, and even the most evangelical men are afraid to trust the Holy Spirit. Get a convention and a lot of speakers; you are going to have your convention and you are going to have your messages. How many are there of such who will utterly trust the Holy Spirit in this matter and not arrange subjects to be spoken of? Leave it for the Holy Spirit, leave the men with the Holy Spirit and find where the Holy Spirit is speaking and give a clear way to that. What happens? Why, the Holy Spirit will see that the same thing is being said. You will have a wonderful revelation of the one mind of the Spirit in all. That is how it was at the beginning, and it is a very blessed thing to see that and you have to say, 'This is nothing but the Lord! We have not compared notes, arranged subjects, got up a programme, but the Lord is leading us all in exactly the same way!' The Lord is of one mind. I only mention that to indicate what I mean by the Holy Spirit having utter place and government, and this represents something which is not by any means general among the Lord's people. It represents a position and a life in the Spirit which belongs to a few among the Lord's people, and we may say with confidence and emphasis that a people prepared for the Lord is a people wholly and utterly governed by the Holy Spirit. This is something more than acknowledgment of the Spirit and the need of the Spirit, but where it is truly a matter of the Holy Spirit and nothing else. Man is set aside, all man's business abilities are set aside and the Holy Spirit does His own work in His own way by His own means and is being allowed to do it. That is a position of which a great many Christians are afraid. They have never learned that real deep work of the cross which puts a man right outside and leaves the full place for the Spirit. Man must come into this somehow; he must put his hand upon it, he must somehow order it, arrange it, govern it and be in it, and so far as that is true, the Holy Spirit is limited.

A people prepared for the Lord will be a people under the anointing in this full sense in which only the Holy Spirit has His way and His place, and does the ordering and arranging. It is a very difficult life for the flesh and that is why the divide comes, and until the flesh has gone through a deep and terrible breaking by the cross, there can be no real full life under the anointing. Well, that is a price; it costs, but oh! the Lord gets something from that! Who is there among us who would for one moment say the Lord does not get something special out of a life or a company of the Lord's people who are immediately and wholly under the government of the Holy Spirit? We can put this in various ways.

Many are praying for the fulness of the Spirit, the power of the Spirit, the guidance of the Spirit, those marks of the Holy Spirit superintending. They are crying to the Lord for that.

But what does it mean to come through to that? It means a terrible breaking by the cross in the natural realm; it is impossible otherwise. There is no Spirit-governed life in the full sense which has not gone through the depths of the cross to break the natural strength, natural wisdom, and all the resources of nature as it is brought into the very work of God. No, we have to go out, just as, when the glory filled the sanctuary, the priests could not remain — they had to go out. In the same way we have to go out. The servants of the Lord have to go out if the Holy Spirit is going to fill all things and wholly occupy the place. We have got to get out. We know what that means — our being displaced even in the work of the Lord. There is no room for us and the Holy Spirit, or the Holy Spirit and us, no room for the two.

You say, 'Well, where do we come in instrumentally?' The position is just this, that, when such a state does obtain that the Holy Spirit is really having His full place, He may be using us, but our position and consciousness will be more of that of spectators than instruments. We shall be saying, 'It is marvellous, it is wonderful!' We may be instrumental, but we shall in our inner consciousness be more in the spectator position than in the instrument position. We have to say, 'It is the Lord!' Oh, the terrible tragedy when men begin to be used of the Holy Spirit and themselves become conscious of being used in the service of the Lord. Our days are numbered when we show signs of being conscious that we know we are being used. Oh no, there is not room for both us and the Holy Spirit. A people prepared for the Lord is a people who give the Lord the Spirit not some room but *all* the room. That means much more than it sounds, because I am quite sure the things I have said would be accepted and admitted by the majority of Christians, but there is a great difference between recognising that the Holy Spirit must be Lord and must have full place, and getting there!

Resurrection Life

Then the second mark of this people prepared for the Lord is the power of His resurrection — resurrection life. All Christians would accept that, but here again there is a big gap between the truth and the reality. This is again something which carries with it the utter draining of our own resources, so that He and He alone becomes our life for spirit, mind and body. The power of His life has got to be witnessed to in us by our very being and in that company by its very history. There is something here which lies very deeply in the Word of God. There is a simple statement — "*The righteous shall hold on his way*" (Job 17:9). That is a simple statement, but what are we going to say to people who do not hold on their way who are the Lord's? Are we going to say that all who have fallen out in the way, broken down in the way, turned aside, were never the Lord's? I see this, that to get right through to the end when all the powers of evil have focused their attention upon you if by any means they can destroy you or put you out, means something more than a nominal Christian life or even an enthusiastic life with the Lord. It means nothing less than the very power of His resurrection. In this matter where the highest interests of the Lord are centred, and therefore the most definite concern of the powers of darkness are centred, the getting through will represent nothing less than the mighty power of His resurrection.

To put that in another way. Everybody who is in that will at last have to say, 'Well, it is a miracle that we are through! Our history has been one of concentrated and unyielding antagonism of the enemy to destroy us; we are through, it is a miracle!' But what is the miracle? It is the miracle of His risen, indestructible, incorruptible life. Will you tell me that all Christians are living on that basis today and that they all know the power of His resurrection, and are all a testimony to that resurrection life? You do not know very much about Christians if you say that is so. I say that such are few comparatively, but they represent this people who must be or God is defeated, God is cheated, God is disappointed. There must be a people like this. God has had them in every age and He will have them at the end. It will not be all His people. It will be a prepared people. Elijah passed on seven thousand to Elisha, reserved unto the Lord, a people coming under that

anointing on resurrection ground to live wholly in the power of the Spirit and in the power of Christ's resurrection. John the Baptist passed the people on, so to speak, to the risen Christ — Jesus came up out of the Jordan. Paul passed John's disciples onto the risen Christ — baptised, raised together — resurrection. A people prepared for the Lord, a people like this marked, among other things, by these two great features: nothing is man-ordered, arranged, planned, programmed, governed, but everything is directly under the Spirit's government and knowing in a growing way the power of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus as an inward reality.

You can view this from the two standpoints. You view it from the standpoint of what the Lord requires as made clear throughout the Word. This is what the Lord is after. This is the position and the condition which the Lord has set as His goal in a people, a people who, because of the Holy Spirit being pre-eminent, declare that the power of man and nature has been set aside, and a people in whom, because the power of His risen life is manifest, declare that the power of death is set aside. The flesh, nature and death are ruled out by the Holy Spirit and the power of the resurrection. The Lord has revealed that this is the kind of people He is after.

Now view it from the other standpoint. Is not that exactly what the Lord does when He really does get hold of a people? Or let me put it this way, when really we accept all the implicates of the cross (when we recognise what the cross of the Lord Jesus really does mean beyond its substitutionary work, beyond what He did for us; all that realm of what the cross means as wrought in us) two things at once start to work in us and they become the course of our spiritual history. The one is the setting aside of the life of nature, even in the work of God, in the Lord's interests, so that we come sooner or later to the place where we cannot work for the Lord, we cannot speak for the Lord, we cannot organise anything for the Lord. We know there is a veto on it all; it is all staked by the cross of the Lord Jesus. To speak requires the Holy Spirit; to work, the Holy Spirit; to do anything for the Lord, the Holy Spirit, or nothing at all. That becomes our spiritual experience.

And then the knowing of resurrection, being forced, compelled, to know the power of His resurrection. We are not going to survive unless we do. Again and again, scores, perhaps hundreds or thousands of times in our spiritual history we come to a place where for us it is an end, unless the power of His resurrection comes in. That is our spiritual history and it is wholly in keeping with what God has revealed as His thought for a people prepared for Him as, to use the words to Elijah, 'reserved unto the Lord'. Reserved! I do not want to create a new phrase, a new title, '*the reserved people*', but here it is, something held as necessary to the Lord's deepest and fullest thought, a people who had no outward compromise with Baal, but not just that (although in our very being is a compromise with Baal). I do not want to turn inward with that statement, but as we go on with the Lord and we obtain more light, it becomes perfectly clear that when you and I as natural people get into the things of the Lord, there is at least the infinite and imminent peril of our becoming exalted above measure. The very work of God, the things of the Lord, have become the sphere in which more men have been ruined by their own pride, conceit and self-assertiveness than in any other realm, and there is that compromise in us with something that is evil. When you speak of kissing Baal, you at once think of something exceedingly wicked, sinful, terrible. Not one of us would bow the knee to Baal. But every time we ourselves come into evidence, that is Baalism. Baalism is the link with what is satanic, and in our unregenerate nature, there is a link with what is satanic. Satan comes in among Christians and Christian workers along the line of pride and pride comes from place and that is found in the realm of the things of the Lord. It is a happy hunting-ground for position and recognition. It is all there in principle.

The Lord spoke with Thyatira, you remember, about Baalism, about Jezebel, and called it fornication. You need not make that literal at all, either in Baalism or fornication. It may be quite a spiritual thing. What did Balaam do? What was his sin, his crime? He got

'kudos' (glory, renown, Gk.) out of divine things. That is all; that is the end of it. Personal gain out of the things of God. He loved the reward, something for himself out of the things of God. And is there any one of us who has known the Lord longest who would say, There is none of that in me? Those of us who know ourselves best know it is a most perilous thing to be used of the Lord. The sphere of great divine blessing is the sphere of most danger to us. Even Paul (and who will place himself alongside of Paul?), after being taken up into the third heaven and shown unspeakable things, is not so empty of the peril of self or self-exaltation, as to make it unnecessary for the Lord to drive a stake through to keep him from being exalted. It is always there in the most used, the most blessed, the one who knows most of heavenly things; it is still there.

And so the people prepared for the Lord is a people well crucified to the flesh and knowing the Spirit alone and His risen life. That is true to the Word and true to spiritual experience, and if there is to be a ministry at the end in that direction it will be by an instrument like John the Baptist in the power of Elijah. John the Baptist went to prison and was beheaded. His life had to go in order to bring in Christ in fulness, in order to pass things on to Him who was the life, who was the resurrection. These things are a parable; I think we can see the spiritual truth.

Well, what is the comfort? You say that it is depressing, very severe, difficult and advanced. Not at all. The comfort is that we are in it. How many of you can say, Well, whether I have recognised the teaching or doctrine, or not, I know something about the experience! If so, take heart. The Lord has His hand upon you in relation to that people reserved for Himself, a people prepared for the Lord.