

The All-governing Vision in the Life of the Child of God

by T. Austin-Sparks

Reading: Psalm 132:1-9; Acts 2:29-35; Acts 15:13-18.

I do feel, beloved friends, the need and the desire that we should from time to time have brought before us afresh that which really governs our lives from the Lord's standpoint and into which we are called by His grace. We do understand, I think, that the multitude of things which have a place in the life of the child of God are related and must ever be kept related to one all-governing thing, and that we must be careful not to be too greatly taken up with these phases and details as things in themselves but ever seek to see them and hold them as related parts of a whole. So, as quickly as possible, I want just to take you over the ground of the revelation which God has given concerning His purpose in Christ Jesus.

God's Desire for a Dwelling-Place

We begin with the comprehensive conclusion to which the Scriptures as a whole bring us as to what God had as His primary idea in bringing this world into an ordered condition and bringing man on to it. Of course, we know that His Son was in view before all things and that He was to be the heir of all things. That takes precedence over every other consideration but, when we have recognized that, then the Scriptures gradually unfold the mind of God and build up a tremendously impressive revelation of what God intended. And when you have gone through the Scriptures and reached the end, this one thing becomes quite clear, that God's primary idea was to have a dwelling-place for Himself not only in heaven — in the whole universe — but here also.

A dwelling-place! One of the final declarations which is made as in a spirit of a great achievement, of a great triumph, as though the end which had been in view and the end which had ever been contested was now reached is those words at the end of the Revelation —

"The tabernacle of God is with men, and He shall dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God" (Rev. 21:3).

The tabernacle of God *is* with men! If you take that as a key to the Scriptures, you will see that that is the original, the primary, the all-governing thought of God, and it is the occasion of all the labour and all the sacrifice and all the suffering and all the conflict, that God should at last have that tabernacle on the basis desired and designed by Him. That, then, lies behind all in the thought of God.

The Place of God's Presence

What is that dwelling-place of God? Well, again within the compass of the main thought, the main idea, we have firstly, God present, not far off, not remote, not distant, not separate, but God immediately present; a desire of God's own heart to dwell with men — almost too great an idea to be grasped, but there it is realized in His Son, Emmanuel, God with us. But the very coming of Christ as Emmanuel, God with us, is a mighty achievement and triumph, a wonderful thing which sets heaven singing and all angel hosts worshipping. Emmanuel, God with us! The answer to the deepest consciousness planted in the nature of man at last — God with us! What do we want more than that? — God with us. That has been in itself a part of the conflict, ever and always man's faith has been tried on that. Israel in the wilderness is said to have failed upon that point — *"Is the Lord with us?"* (Ex. 17:7). The conflict arises over that. God dwelling, tabernacling with us — how much there is around that thought alone.

John 1:14 is that — *"The Word became flesh, and tabernacled among us"*, but that word was God. God dwelt. *"He will dwell with them"* (Rev. 21:3). The dwelling of God.

The Place of God's Glory

But again the Scriptures throughout in this connection make it perfectly clear that the dwelling-place was to be the place of the glory of God. How often do we read of the glory filling the house. That was a primary thought in the transforming of the chaos of this world into an ordered beautiful whole. The glory of God! For that man was created. The tabernacle, when all things were according to the pattern, was filled with the glory. The temple, when all was constituted as God prescribed, was filled with the glory. The church at Pentecost, when brought right under the glorified Headship of Christ was filled with glory, and away on in the revelation at last we see again the glory filling. Well, it is like that, a divine thought, a dwelling-place in which the glory of God soon shall be revealed.

I have often tried for myself to define and explain the meaning of the glory of God and I have so far not succeeded. All that I can say is that when you get rid of all that makes for evil, shame, misery and despair, all that sort of thing, you have a state of glory, and I suppose that that is what the glory amounts to — at last there is nothing whatever that is not glorious. The glory fills because God has everything according to His own mind. His dwelling-place is then, to be glorious, the place of His glory.

Then this dwelling-place is the place not only where He dwells and is expressed in terms of glory, but where He is worshipped, and that again is what the enemy is against. He is against the presence, he is against the glory, and he is against the worship.

So anything that can be called the house of God from every angle is something against which the enemy stands. It is for God's pleasure, it is for God's rest. The Psalm which we read makes that quite clear. The Lord is to arise into His tabernacle, the place of His rest. The Lord wants a place for His rest, a place for the ever-expanding knowledge of Himself. That is the meaning of the house of God, the ever-expanding knowledge of Himself. The Word makes that clear. The Lord desires to reveal Himself, to be known, and we are told that if there is one thing above everything else in which we are to rejoice, it is that we know Him. Is that not the word? *"Let him that glories glory in this, that he has understanding, and knows me, that I am the Lord"* (Jer. 9:24). If we could only understand the Lord, what joy it would be. Well, the Lord is seeking to teach us to understand Him and the house of God is the place of the ever-expanding knowledge of the Lord.

And then it is the place where His servants serve Him.

God's Dwelling-Place: A People in Union with His Son

Well then, that, in brief, is the primary idea of God. But then there is the eventual reality, that which comes out eventually in this connection, that this house of God, this dwelling-place of God, is not after all, a thing or a place. It is a people. Types there are, things and places, but the thought of God is not finally bound up with a thing or a place called the house of God, it is a people and the Son of God is their Head — *"whose house are we"* (Heb. 3:6). Yes, but *"Christ as a son, over God's house, whose house are we"*. So that this dwelling-place of God is a union with and relatedness to His Son, the Lord Jesus. That is what Hebrews 2 makes so clear. *"I and the children ..."* (Heb. 2:13). *"He is not ashamed to call them brethren"* (Heb. 2:11). My brethren! And in that connection, these words occur, *"Christ as a Son over God's house, whose house are we"*. Then the dwelling-place of God is a people in union with and under the Headship of His Son, the Lord Jesus.

Further, the house, the dwelling-place, derives its character from its Head, from the Lord

Jesus. It is to be formed after Christ and conformed to the image of God's Son.

The Twofold Building of God's Dwelling-Place

There is the building of this house and this building is twofold. It is numerical, the gathering, as we have read in Acts 15 the great purpose and character of this dispensation — the taking out of a people for His Name. Now that statement itself takes you over a great deal of Old Testament ground. You know that the one thought in the Old Testament at the beginning was to find a place for His Name and the Lord said, "*I will put my name there*"; "*In every place where I record my name I will come unto thee*" (Ex. 20:24). God's dwelling was the place of the Name. Now, "*a people out of the nations for his name*". "*The residue ... upon whom my name is called*" (Acts 15:17). That is what God is doing now, and that is what we are called to do in fellowship with Him, by evangelism to gather for this house the people for His Name. Let us remember that you and I cannot be builders of the house unless we have a real place for that side of the building, the numerical building, the gathering, the bringing of the living stones, or, plainly, the leading, by the Holy Spirit's enablement, of men and women to Christ, bringing Christ to them and bringing them to Christ. It is a part of the building, the work which God has had in His heart from before times eternal. This is the superstructure.

But then there is the other, the second aspect, the spiritual increase of the house, the inward enlargement, the building up. We are concerned in that and everything that really does answer to the description, "the house of God", must be marked by those two things. We are not truly the house of God, we do not truly represent the house of God unless there is the numerical aspect of our ministry in the gathering, the adding to, the bringing in, the salvation of men and women. We are not truly representative of the house of God unless there is real building up. These two things have been very largely divorced, put apart. Some give all their attention to one and some to the other. Perhaps there is a great deal of leeway to be made up to get the balance restored, for there has been an over-emphasis, I think, upon one side of this, and there is. The Lord would have His house balanced in this matter, and we see it so marvellously in the New Testament times that the balance was maintained. The apostles, the first builders of the church, had both these sides so wonderfully developed in their ministry — the salvation of the unsaved and the building up of the saved. It seems as though in them the two things went in a very even balance and they were true builders.

God's Dwelling-Place: Universal and Local

Then we go on to remind ourselves that this dwelling-place of God is universal and local; the universal predominates. It is a most important thing to remember that the House of God is pre-eminently universal.

There are some very practical things associated with that fact. To begin with, there is the greatness of Christ Himself and the greatness of Christ can never be truly expressed in something that is only local. We have to have the universal spirit, the universal mentality about the house of God in order to really express the greatness of Christ. We must start from that, because anything that is local will compass its own death if it is not preserved by the universal vision and conception of the house of God, and the whole tendency, the fatal tendency through the years has been to narrow down to something merely local as an end in itself, circling round itself, turning in upon itself, taken up with itself and its own little life and affairs, all the things which are incidental, and if anything local has only that as its horizon it will not be long before it loses its vitality, energy and fruitfulness. Do remember that, friends. It is the life, the power of prayer times in any location that the universal vision is there. There is something more than the thing that is there, something much bigger. The greatness of Christ is bound up with the universal conception of God's dwelling-place. You think that out and remember it always.

And it also, of course, sets forth the greatness of the house itself. This is not some little local house, dwelling-place of God. This is a vast thing, and how great it is. The greatness of this house of God has to be seen in terms of divine grace. Ephesians is a very great letter. The dimensions of Ephesians are immense, going back into ages before time, going on to the everlasting, comprehending all realms, the heavens, the earth and what is under the earth. It is a vast letter, but two things about that letter are so patent. One — it is the church that is in view; it is this dwelling-place of God, this habitation of God through the Spirit that is in view. And then the other thing about Ephesians is that it is all of grace. I beg of you to go through that short letter again, those six brief chapters, and mark 'grace' in it, and then you will see how great grace is and how great the church is because of the greatness of His grace. The universal must predominate.

And then we see the oneness of all through that grace. It is a thing that must ever be kept in mind — the universal oneness of all who comprise this dwelling-place of God, this house of God. Again, the tendency is to divide, split up, become fragmentary, to lose the sense of the oneness of all in Christ making one house. Oh no, there are not two, three, a dozen, a hundred or a thousand houses of God: there is only one house and it is a very great house, and we want to be saved from anything small in this matter.

But then the local does come in afterward and what is the local for, the local expression of the house of God? Well, there are practical things in this. Firstly, it is for the practical expression and realization of the universal house, for God's thought about His house, that the local shall be there where it is a practical expression of the greatness of Christ. Oh, that in our local company there should be more of the expression of the greatness of Christ in our relationships! Christ is so much bigger than we are, so much bigger than our natures, than our minds, than our judgments, than our ways, and there is one thing that we have to learn in any local company of the Lord's people. It is how to be big and not to be small. Do you understand what I mean by that? It is so easy to become petty, almost paltry, small, and all the time the Lord is saying among us, You have got to be bigger than that, you have got to enlarge your heart towards this one and toward that one! It is a constant demand for the expression of the greatness of Christ even among a few. Is that not true?

And the greatness of the house of God, the greatness of the grace of God — these things are to be expressed locally and that is the purpose of the local house of God. Here all the laws of His house and all the verities of Christ have got to be applied; they have to be *applied* laws and *applied* verities. The local church is the place of training.

And then there are all the values of God's presence, God's dwelling, God's rest, God's joy, God's glory. Those values are to be known and experienced and applied in a local company. We learn these things or we should be learning them. There is a good deal of suffering that is unnecessary because the values of corporate life are not being enlarged. There is much to be gained by realising that any company brought into being by the Spirit of God is there what that vast house of God is in itself, or intended to be; God present, God's glory, God's grace, God's help. The local is a very vital thing in relation to the purpose of God for expressing there in itself what the whole is, and that we should learn that. It is a great training ground for the end.

What end? What is it? — final glory, final vocation, for, after all, this is only preparation. You see at the end of the Word of God, in the Revelation, as we have said, the end achieved at last. The tabernacle of God is with men, He will be their God and dwell with them; they shall be His people. Well, what next? What after that? That is not the end, that is the beginning. All that you can say about God's dwelling-place, the house of God, the church, the temple, however you speak of it, then comes into full function because it is only then, fully realised. God is there, and what I see is this, that this dispensation is the dispensation which is providing God with that house, and in this dispensation He is gathering the material for it and preparing it, training it, forming it to be at the centre of

His universe through all coming ages. Just as the temple is central in Jerusalem on earth in type, so this people shall be central. Oh yes, God is going to save a good many more people than the church. God is doing wider things than the church, but this is the central thing. This is His sanctuary and it is to be for the showing forth of His glory to all peoples, the vessel of His presence among all peoples, the expression of His rest among all peoples, the channel of His pleasure and joy to all people. It is to this we are called. Keep the vision always in view, understand the meaning of the Lord, bringing His people together in this way. Ask the Lord ever and always to keep the greatness of things in your heart, to start with the greatness and then to enable you to see all the details in the light of the whole. He has a great thing in view, a great purpose, a great calling, a great vocation.