

The Ten Days Prior to Pentecost

by T. Austin-Sparks

Reading: Acts 1:1-9.

I have been trying to get into that period between the ascension of the Lord and the descent of the Holy Spirit, between the ascension and Pentecost, to enter into something of what was taking place in these apostles. For here we have a definitely defined period which undoubtedly had its place and its character in the whole course of the movements of God, these ten days from the fortieth to the fiftieth day, the day of Pentecost. Of course, there is a very great deal of teaching in the realm of type and symbol as to the fifty days and the firstfruits of the harvest, but I am not going to touch upon that at present. It is these ten days in particular which I feel hold something of very great value for us.

We know, of course, that forty days is the number of probation under testing all the way through the Old Testament and New Testament — a period of trial. When Moses was in the mount forty days and forty nights, Israel were being sorely tried by his absence and they broke down under the trial. We know that the Lord Jesus was being put to it, in extreme severity, during the forty days and forty nights in the wilderness. We know of various other periods of that length; it was probation and testing under divinely appointed conditions. But the ten days following upon the forty had their particular and peculiar meaning.

Ten the Number of Responsibility

Ten is the number of responsibility where those concerned have to take the weight of things themselves, in a sense. So these ten days after the ascension were a time in which in a sense things passed to the apostles. Up to that time, in the three and a half years of the Lord's earthly pre-crucifixion life, things were very largely almost entirely with Him. There was very little responsibility where they were concerned. In the forty days after His resurrection, again it was so much with Him, the initiative was with Him. He was appearing, He was going. Everything seemed to be entirely resting with Him. There was very little responsibility where they were concerned. But now, on His ascension and during these ten days, the responsibility passed to them. That is, they are called upon to face the situation, they are called upon to do something about it. They are left, and in a sense — not in the absolute sense that the Lord has forsaken them and that they have no longer any Lord — but in a sense now it is up to them, the matter rests with them. The point is, what are they going to do about it? They could do one of two things. They could go back. He has gone, all that phase of things has passed. They are left, and they could just go back if they chose. Or they could go on. It is a strange situation; they have never had to face anything like this before. It is a position with which they had never before been confronted, altogether new. Are they going on? That is the challenge of the ten days — what would *they* do about it?

Now it is at that point that we can ask some questions. They may, so far as these men were concerned, be imaginary questions, but so far as the Lord's people are concerned, they are not imaginary, they are questions which arise out of actual experience and spiritual history.

Our Attitude in the Face of the Inexplicable

First of all, these men might have been overwhelmed by the mystery of everything. The whole thing might have been to them a tremendous mystery. That does not need to be broken up and explained. You have only got to think a little of all that had gone before and then of all that eventuated in the Cross, and then of all this strange unearthly kind of

thing during the forty days, and now this going up. It could constitute a tremendous mystery to entirely defeat all their powers of comprehension and understanding and definition, and in the presence of the mystery, the strangeness, the unearthliness, the exception, unheard of experiences, they could have said, this is all beyond us, we cannot cope with this! They could have been paralysed by the mystery of it all and done nothing; or, as I have said, they could have said, Let us get back to our simple, practical, everyday life of boats and nets and so on. Whether that ever did happen in their case or not, I cannot prove, but I am perfectly certain that there will be one, or more than one, in this room who understands that, for these are realms into which the Lord launches us, depths beyond us into which He precipitates us, the things which are incapable of being explained and defined by human wit and ingenuity and wisdom, the experiences which are not natural. Yes, the mystery of a life off this earth with the Lord can bring us to a standstill, to bewilderment, where there could be a reaction of: Let us get back to simple, practical realms of things where everything is straightforward, this is all too much beyond us! Do you know anything about that? What are you going to do about it? That is the question of the ten days in the presence of complete defeat of all natural powers to cope with these heavenly things, proved defeat, defeat which has really brought to a standstill, for that is where they were. It presents a very real challenge as to what we are going to do about it. Are we going on, or are we going to say, 'It is too much, too big, too inexplicable: let us come down to simplicities and practicalities'?

Well, if you follow through with these epistles, you will find that that is where their whole future life is going to be lived, and things are not going to become simpler in the natural sense, they are going to be forced into ever deeper waters. This very Peter is going to find himself in new depths where he has never fished before when he is confronted with the house of Cornelius and the sheet let down from heaven. The Church is going that way. It will never be able to cope with what God is doing. It will never be able to comprehend God or to explain God. God will always be inexplicable, past finding out. They may come to glory in that, as Paul did when he said, "*How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past tracing out!*" (Rom. 11:33). That was the glory of the Church later, but God's ways involve very severe testing at times. Here, right at the beginning, before they were allowed to move out and become active and have a lot of engrossing activity to smooth over the thing. For we can make activity a means of just glossing over or shelving problems. Before they were allowed to touch the work, they had to face this question, what are you going to do about it? That may or may not have been actually present to their minds, but it is undoubtedly inherent in the ten days of passing over to them in a very real sense the responsibility, and I take it that that was at least partly included in the Lord's saying, "Wait, until ...".

The Possibility of a too-Cautious Attitude

Then again, they might very well at that point when He left them have been seized by a great caution when they found themselves left to themselves and on their own. They might have become extremely cautious. Well, you know, we did take a step before, we left all and followed Him, but we made a terrible hash of it. And just remember what a mess we made of it all, how it finished up when He was crucified and He was with us then, He has gone now; might we not make an even worse mess without Him, being left on our own? And when you think of what they had to face, they had to meet, all that organized antagonism to Him and His Name and to all related to Him, and He was not with them now, He has gone, it was no small proposition that confronted them. And so they might have become very cautious in the light of past experience and in the light of the greatness of the situation which was before them, and the consciousness of their own limitations and weakness having been forced upon them, and the question arose again, What are you going to do about it? Are you going to be very cautious, very careful, not commit yourself or let yourself go? How far do you capitulate or have reserves and go carefully? That is undoubtedly something that might well have arisen for them. I think it would have in my case if I had been there with the same experience, the experience of

past failure, terrible failure, so far as we ourselves are concerned, failure for which we could never forgive ourselves, that terrible breakdown and that terrible hash made of the thing under what seemed to be the most favourable conditions with Him present. Now we have made one mess, we will be very careful not to make another, and we will not capitulate, we will not let go, we will just hold ourselves very much in and be very careful and become marked by a certain reserve. You may say that would be very commendable, quite a right thing. But, in the light of the situation into which they were moving, in the light of their calling, such caution, such reserve, would be unbelief, would be positive lack of faith. So we find that they got through their time of the ten days and they were not by any means characterised by caution in this sense, feeling their way in a kind of 'pussyfoot' manner, not putting their feet down lest they might make a mistake. They are men who have committed themselves, they are in it up to the eyes for good or bad, there is no doubt about it.

The Possibility of Paralysis Caused by Disappointment

Or yet again, they might have been men who were characterised by a certain sadness and a certain sadness might have taken the strength and positiveness out of their decision and their procedure. It would be a strange thing if these men had not got some mark, some furrow, some scar, some wound on them as the result of the tremendous buffeting and threshing they had had. All their hopes and expectations and castles in the air and all their profession and, in one case at least, protestation of courage and determination, everything that was positive in their lives came to that tragic collapse at the end. They had all forsaken Him and fled, denied Him, been offended because of Him, and all their hopes of the Kingdom still clung to them — "*Dost thou at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?*" Their hopes of the kingdom on the earth were shattered by His death. See them on the Emmaus road, walking and sad. All that must have had some effect upon them. They were either very superficial men, or very hard, tough men, if it had made no impression on them. But we have reason to believe that it did have an effect, and they might have been very sad, in a sense, disappointed, and this sadness could have entirely weakened them, if not paralysed them. They could have faced the future with a kind of despair in their hearts. 'Well, I do not know, we have had a lot of disappointment, there has been a lot of suffering, we have had a pretty difficult hard time, and we have been bitterly disappointed; I do not know whether we can put our heart into this, we really have not much heart for it.'

Is that true to experience? When you have been through a tough handling by the Lord, you have been disillusioned and had a lot of your ground taken away, been knocked about all over the place, the temptation is to have no heart for the future. They might have been like that, it was very possible, there was everything there to make them so. What are you going to do about it?

The Possibility of Recalcitrance

This might sound a bit hard, unpleasant — they might have been recalcitrant. We did go all out, we gave up everything, we let all go, and we sought to show that we meant business by leaving everything else, and well, look how it all turned out, and where are we now? We seem to be suspended between heaven and earth now; we are neither in the one nor the other. I do not know that we are going to risk it again, it has not come up to our expectations. As I heard a man once say who had been going through a pretty bad time and had become bitter: Well, if the Lord wants me, He knows my name and address, He will have to come and fetch me. We can become like that — bitter or recalcitrant, just being awkward. It is possible; people do get that way when they have passed through experiences like this. You may be of finer stuff than that, but there are those who get to a state like that. The question is, What are you going to do about it?

The One Inclusive Issue of the Ten Days

If any one of these things gets into control, there is going to be a missing of the very thing for which the call of Christ came. Now, you see, the ten days, while they might well have been characterised by any one or more of these things, contain one inclusive issue, and the thing which governed the ten days was the full purpose for which Christ had called them. It is right there in a few days, right in front of you. Strangely enough, this period when He has gone and nothing seems to be happening, we are left to it, it is left with us. Why was not the Holy Spirit sent immediately on His ascension? Let us get on with it! Well, ten is the number of responsibility, and it is passing to you. You see, there is a point and a phase, dear friends, when the Lord passes it to us. We are always wanting and waiting for the Lord to do it all. We are very much taken up with the idea of Pentecost. Oh, yes, when Pentecost takes place, when the Holy Spirit comes and takes charge, all responsibility will be taken out of our hands. It will be great, it will be the Lord doing it. But you see the Lord never made us to be just parts of a machine to be driven. No, there is a point at which He says, There is something for you to do, you will have to shake off your sloth, you will have to fight back your temptation, your besetment, you will have to face whatever it is that is paralysing you, holding you bound, neutralizing you; you will have to deal with that. The Lord has appointed His day of Pentecost in His calendar, but also, in some way which we cannot understand, He causes our state to synchronize with His dates, or His dates with our state. There are always two sides, God's side and ours. Here is *the* thing for which He has called us. It is all there waiting. That day can recede, so far as we are concerned, it can just move ahead of us, and we never catch up with it. We never catch up with the thing for which the Lord has called because we are waiting for something to happen which the Lord says you have to deal with yourself and make happen, you have to take responsibility for this. We shall never come to the full purpose of God for our lives unless we face this thing, whatever it is, be it one of the things I have mentioned or any other thing. Face it, and say, We are going to have this out once and for all, we are going to deal with this, and it is going to be final. It is an aggressiveness with the Lord. There is a reason for the disappointment with ourselves, whatever it is, the breakdown in the past. These men had a great deal in their heads, and the Lord has to do something with people, if they only have it in their heads, just grind them to powder until it becomes part of them. They have to face the question. Before we can overtake the day of the full purpose, the Lord says, Look here, there is this and that and something else that, so far as you are concerned, which is postponing that day, causing it to move ahead of you, and it must be dealt with.

If we wanted to prove it, we could quite easily do so by going back into the three years of their life with Him to see how He was dealing with them concerning these very things. There is a storm on the lake and the whole question is the question of their faith; that is all. No sooner is His finger, so to speak, put upon the weakness, the flaw, the cause of the trouble, than the ship is at the land. They have been toiling long hours to get there, but no sooner has His put His finger on the trouble and they saw it, the ship is at the land. As soon as the Lord is able to get us to see what the trouble is and we really do see it, that may be the end of the whole struggle, but it is most necessary before ever we come to that for which the Lord has called us. Do not let us be mistaken about that. He has called us to a great purpose, to a life work, but somehow or other we have to get away from ourselves. For all this is just what is coming up from the cesspool of this nature of ours. We have to face it squarely and deal with it once and for all.

I have mentioned various things that might have accounted for a very different issue in the case of these men, and are accounting for postponement in the life of many a child and servant of God.

The Result of Taking a Positive Attitude

So we pass to the positive side. What was the positive side of this when it emerged on the day of Pentecost? When they had taken responsibility, when this transition had

accomplished its purpose or was an accomplished thing and for ten days they got down on their knees and continued in prayer, showing that they were taking a positive responsibility over the whole thing; when they had really got through whatever may have been their difficulties, got through and got over, and the day of Pentecost came, the Spirit was poured out, what did it amount to?

A New Captivation by Christ

It just amounted, in the first place, to this: a new mighty captivation by Christ. You cannot have any one of the things which I have mentioned if you are captivated by the Lord. They will all go out. It is the key to everything. If we are occupied with ourselves, our problems, our mystery, our disappointment, our failure, well, we are not occupied with the Lord, that is all. We are certainly not captivated by the Lord. But you see with these men the one thing with them is that they have found a new Christ, a new Lord, and they cannot help themselves in this matter. It is just the Lord. It is not a new doctrine that they are preaching, a new teaching or a new interpretation. They are not a bit concerned about a new religion or a new teaching, a new interpretation. They are simply concerned about the Person Himself. The Lord does not want us to be enthusiastic over interpretations of truth, but about Himself. He is the great Emancipator. As they became captivated in a new way by Him, what a great, complete, release came to them from themselves. What a transcendence took place over themselves and what they were! They were all this. Eradication of it has not taken place. The old Peter is still there; he crops up a little bit here and there, and the others too, but there is a wonderful transcendence. Did he deny for fear of his dear life? See whether he is afraid for his life now. "*With great boldness gave the apostles witness.*" He is still capable of the same old fear, but he is transcending himself. They are all there. We can sink down into ourselves at any time and be just what we ever were unless the Lord has such a purchase on us that we are lifted out of ourselves. And we can take it as settled as ever anything can be settled, that we will be useless to the Lord until ourselves are transcended. We have to be out of ourselves, on top of ourselves, and the only way of getting on top of ourselves is to be objectively occupied with the Lord. Do see that in the book of the Acts. Whatever comes later of the work of the Lord in us, that is subsequent; but in the book of the Acts it is an objective occupation with the Lord. He is there at the right hand of God exalted. He is there. It is objective. It is a very perilous thing to have anything to do with subjective truth until the objective is very really established. We have to be taken outside of ourselves with the Lord. That is how they were: completely taken out of themselves, not by an interesting bit of work, a work which had no problems and nothing in it to drive them in upon themselves. It was all there if they yielded to that kind of thing. But with all the problems they were gripped by the Lord as risen, ascended and exalted, and so released from this hampering self. There is nothing more devastating than to be eternally occupied with ourselves. Dr. Chalmers preached a sermon once, and it is regarded as one of the most famous sermons ever preached, and the title of his sermon was "The Expulsive Power of a New Affection". "*The love of Christ constraineth*" (2 Cor. 5:14), was his text, and he went on to show that the new affection drives out all those things which harass and paralyse and darken the life. They drive out from the inside everything but Christ and left Christ in possession. It was the expulsive power. The love of Christ expels from the inside, and then it expels you into the world. It is expulsive in this sense that the love drives you out, as well as drives out of you, and that is what happened to him.

Well, there is a lot more that I see in all this, but I do feel that a new objective occupation with the Lord and a new captivation by Him is waiting. I should be saying, perhaps, a dangerous thing if I said Pentecost is waiting, the Holy Spirit is waiting, but in some sense that is true. The Lord is waiting during this ten day period. What are you going to do about it? Are you going to get to grips with the thing that is hindering, that is holding you up, paralyzing you? Or are you going to square down to this? What are you going to do about it? The Lord is saying, I am waiting for you; you are waiting for Me, but I am also waiting for you. You are living for some day which you think will come

when the situation will change, when I will lead you out to your full work, but are you quite sure that there is nothing you have to do about this to bring that day, to overtake that day? I do not know how that touches you, and I do not want to drive you in on yourself to try and find something, but the point is, Are we held up, are we in the thing for which the Lord has called us? If not, is it because of something which we know we have got to face? We are hoping the Lord will deal with it, and the Lord is perhaps saying, This is your matter; when you have dealt with that, I will come in. The Lord make His word of value to us!