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The Curse of the Earth Touch

by T. Austin-Sparks

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In searching for a sentence that will serve as a window through which what we have in view can be seen the one that seems most potent is

The Curse of the Earth Touch.

To understand what is meant by those last three words is to have an explanation of an immense amount of history, spiritual and temporal.

We must begin by re-emphasizing the fact that *this earth lies under a curse*. This is emphatically stated both in Genesis 3:18,19, and Romans 8:20-23.

Although Christ effected redemption by His Cross, that is but potential as to the creation and only spiritual in the case of those who are "In Christ". Both the "creation itself" and "our body" await "the manifestation of the sons of God", the consummation of the redemptive work. Believers alone are delivered from the "curse". Meantime, the creation groans under it.

This earth is to be destroyed and purged by fire 2 Peter 3:7,10-13. These words of so many centuries ago are so much more easily understood now by all men than they were when written. The rapidity of progress toward this consummation in less than our lifetime surely cries "the day of the Lord is at hand". So, the curse is present; it is rapidly gathering momentum, and very few - if any - parts of the earth are escaping from its closing in for the final phase and climax.

The nature and features of the curse, as the Bible everywhere reveals, are frustration, thwarting, bafflement, discontent, abortion, confusion, travail, breakdown, and an ever-defeated struggle against despair and death.

There are three realms in which these elements are clearly discernible.

Firstly, these elements are plain to be seen in the world. Call it what you will; explain it as you may try to do; the fact remains that chaos deepens and extends so that the accumulated brains and highest training in national and international councils are out of their depth in the solution of the problems confronting them. This is so obvious that we need not use time and space to argue and prove it. We are no more pessimistic than the Bible is with regard to the later phases of this world's history, and never was there a time when its description of things at the end could be agreed with more than now - "Men fainting for fear, and for expectation of the things which are coming on the inhabited earth; for the powers of the heavens shall be shaken" (Luke 21:26). We do not need this first aspect of the situation to be put into writing. We are reading it every day in our newspapers and in the happenings in all the nations.

The second realm is that of Christendom in general. Here again we are confronted with a situation which is extending all the 'World Councils' to their limits. It would be far from profitable to gather up the things being said and done in the realm of 'Christianity' which clearly indicate that 'Christianity' is in the casualty ward in a critical condition, needing every expedient, appliance, measure, mechanism, and recourse to justify its existence. Some 'Christian' leaders go as far as to speak of this as 'the post-Christian age'. This is all very horrible and terrible, but the common language of 'our unhappy divisions', 'our man-made divisions', etc., etc., and all the feverish efforts to patch up by compromise; the sacrifice of that which cost so much, and so forth, only evidence the fact that things are not all well in Christendom; far from it!

But, for us, the saddest and most grievous aspect of this situation is to be found in that realm which can be called 'Evangelical'. It is not too strong a thing to say that we have come to a time when the atmosphere is saturated with a spirit of suspicion, fear, skepticism, discrediting, distrust, misgiving, loss of confidence, etc. There is literally nothing which escapes the lash of criticism, the paralysing touch of reservation or question. It is positively amazing how quickly and easily good people will accept what Paul called (*as to himself*) "evil report", and in accepting it without investigating and "proving all things", repeat it and warn others of those concerned. A famous preacher once said to the writer about a certain Christian leader that 'the grapes of Eshcol would turn to raisins in his hands.' This spirit of suspicion and criticism withers the fairest blossoms and dries up the most beautiful fruit of the Spirit's producing. Many a ministry of Christ has been ruined by it, and the hand of the Lord withholds bread and wealth because of it, so that a characteristic of evangelicalism in our time is superficiality. There is "a famine of hearing the Word", and this is a judgment upon the spirit which treats the Word so cheaply as not to regard it as something worthy of the most jealous concern.

But we have to press on to our conclusion, and in doing so we have to observe and ask further questions.

Why is it that so many things which have greatly served the purpose of God have eventually fallen apart; broken up; and have little more than a great past to live upon? Why is it that the Lord Himself has not circumvented this and preserved intact these instruments and vessels that He has used?

Why is it that division upon division follows almost endlessly the course of many things which have been very jealous for an utter position as to Bible truth? These and many such questions have but one answer. That answer is THE EARTH TOUCH.

Somewhere, somehow, that blighting contact has been made. There has been a gesture toward this earth. *Man* has put his hand on heavenly things and tried to bring them on to this earth. It might be a 'New Testament Church' of a composite nature: certain things taught, enacted, and done in conformity to the record in the New Testament; a certain order, technique, and construction; these things have been drawn together for a creed, a form of procedure, and made the 'basis', the form and standard, the 'constitution' of a body, an institution, a society: man's mind and man's hand defining, controlling, holding. The verdict of history is that God will just not commit Himself to any such thing.

When the Church first actually came into being, it was "born from above", composed of such as had had a tremendous - we might almost say, a terrific - crisis, a devastating crisis in relation to the Cross of Christ. When the churches came into being, in every case, it was a local repetition of this inward upheaval and revolution. The churches were never made by man or men, be they the greatest Apostles. The Apostles did not take a 'Blue Print' of New Testament churches wherever they went. The outcome of their work was a crisis, a climax to an old creation and the fiat of the new. What followed of order and knowledge was organic, not organized; spontaneous, not imposed; life, not legality; and - above all - heavenly, not earthly. It was only when man pulled this down on to the earth that things went wrong.

God has many times made a new move with something heavenly, but invariably there has been a tremendous impact of Heaven upon those first brought into it. There was such a fundamental severance between earth and Heaven in them, in which 'all things were new'; an inward break that - for them - set two worlds apart and irreconcilable. If tragedy came later it can be seen to have been on two counts.

1. Those first-ones violated the very principle of their own history by seeking to crystallize that history into a form and framework for others. They presented or imposed a set form instead of keeping in full view the meaning of "Christ crucified" and *travailing for the crisis* in others.

2. Then others have come in, but on either false or inadequate ground. They have felt the life, seen the good (objectively), and have wanted the values. But all has been without the cost and the crisis: no brokenness, no shattering crisis, no open Heaven, no travail; just the blessing, and - perhaps - place. Their former mentalities, traditions, ambitions, were untouched; their natural judgments intact. The earth touch has thus been made and the character of things has changed. A story of confusion, contradiction, and loss of measure, impact, and heavenly glory has slowly, almost imperceptibly begun, and only at some later crisis has it broken upon that people that a change has come about which spells decline.

Oh, this earth touch! How deadly it is! When will the Lord's people understand the essential meaning of their union with Christ *in Heaven!*

Our premise is that this earth and all in it lies under a curse and judgment, but that those "born from above" are fundamentally separated by the Cross of Christ from this earth, in a spiritual way. But most of the troubles in Christianity are due to some *spiritual* contact with, and involvement in that realm of death where the Divine ban operates. We are going to illustrate this with very vivid instances in the Bible. Most of our illustrations will be the cases of servants or people of God, which

will give just the point that we are trying to make. It is when *the Lord's people* touch this earth (in a spiritual way) that trouble ensues.

We begin with Abraham. As to his fundamental separation there is no question. That he was a committed man of God allows of no doubt. But at a point when faith was sorely tried in view of seeming impossibilities - actual impossibilities *naturally* - he resorted to a natural way through, and tried to resolve the situation by natural means. He came down from his heavenly position of "with God all things are possible" and touched earth when he resorted to Hagar as the solution.

We need not enlarge upon the entail of shame, regret, and tragedy, not only in his own life and that of Hagar, but right up to date in Ishmael. That earth-touch has indeed stood as a mighty warning to all such. It is the earth-touch of an *alternative* to faith when the natural can offer us nothing.

From there we move on to Jacob. Rebecca had been precisely told that of the two sons about to be born "the elder shall serve the younger". In her obvious favouritism for Jacob it is unlikely that she had said nothing of this to him. But together they connived at securing the birthright by cunning, deceptive, and lying ways. It was undoubtedly an earth-touch. Coming down to a low and carnal way of trying to effect the purpose of God. The result - twenty years of dishonour; deceiving and being deceived; extending the doubtful way of success (?); policy, not principle. Success has no law - the end justifies the means, and all such specious arguments. But Jabbok and Peniel are God's verdict and appraisal, and even one chosen in the sovereignty of God will not get away with an earth-touch.

Joseph stands very high in the verdict of history and the noble of Bible biographies. But, undoubtedly, one definite aspect of the long years of the prison - being forgotten, and "the iron entering his soul" - was the discipline of that earth-touch of pride, conceit, and vanity which led him to tell his dreams to his brethren. Dreams which came true, yes, but when personal self-importance obtrudes itself even into the Divine intentions the whole thing can go down into death and suspense.

We leap the years and arrive at Moses. Here again we are in the presence of Divine sovereign intention and purpose, both as to the object and the instrument: the object - to fulfil the promise to Abraham, to bring his seed as a great nation out of bondage to possess the covenanted land; the instrument - a babe miraculously preserved and a man richly trained. But in manhood - the earth-touch; putting his own hands on the purpose and work of God, and by his own zeal, strength, and prestige essaying to effect that which was to be for ever one of the greatest testimonies in history to the power and glory of God *alone*. The result - forty desolating years at the back side of the desert; a scholar, trained leader, prince of Egypt eating his heart out while tending a few sheep. His feet had touched the *earth* in more than a physical way, and there was more than a physical meaning in the Lord's words at long last "Take off thy shoes from off thy feet". There is no earth-touch with God.

It is another long leap to Joshua and Ai. What a lot of Divine history and sovereignty, to say nothing of patience and faithfulness, lie behind the eventual arrival of the people in the Land. Surely all the assurances and encouragements given to Joshua will not permit of a single wrong threatening the whole issue with disaster! But so it was! "Achan... took of the accursed thing", and the surge forward was brought to an untimely stop with no small consternation to Joshua and Israel. The earth-touch of personal ambition, covetousness, and lust for personal gain.

We conclude the survey by reminding ourselves of the disastrous results of David's counting of Israel. It is possible to make even the great blessings of God the ground and occasion of self-gratification; to point to that which is just of His grace, His mercy, and His faithfulness, and draw

some satisfaction and congratulation to our own souls. It cost David the loss of many thousands of his people, shame and remorse to himself, and a stain upon his story. Yes, God in sovereign grace never cast him off but still brought the site of the Temple out of the chastisement of David's flesh.

What a story this earth-touch is! We have by no means covered all the ground. We could add many more instances from Old Testament and New Testament, but this is enough to underline the essential heavenly life, position, and government of the people - and servants - of the Lord, and to make us reach out to see if there be any leaven in our house. The Lord help us ever to keep disentangled from the realm and things of death. How we need to

"Dwell in the secret place of the Most High", and so "Abide under the shadow of the Almighty".

Surely this gives point and meaning to our Lord's words: "Abide in me".

So help us God.