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The Stones of Testing

by T. Austin-Sparks

*Transcribed from a message given in March 1959.
Words which were not clearly discernible are enclosed in [square] brackets.*

Our meditation for a few minutes will be in the book of Joshua, chapter 4:

"And it came to pass, when all the nation were clean passed over the Jordan, that Jehovah spake unto Joshua, saying, Take you twelve men out of the people, out of every tribe a man, and command ye them, saying, Take you hence out of the midst of the Jordan, out of the place where the priests' feet stood firm, twelve stones, and carry them over with you, and lay them down in the lodging-place, where ye shall lodge this night. Then Joshua called the twelve men, whom he had prepared of the children of Israel, out of every tribe a man: and Joshua said unto them, Pass over before the ark of Jehovah your God into the midst of the Jordan, and take you up every man of you a stone upon his shoulder, according unto the number of the tribes of the children of Israel; that it may be a sign among you, that, when your children ask in time to come, saying, What mean ye by these stones? then ye shall say unto them, Because the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord; when it passed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off: and these stones shall be for a memorial unto the children of Israel for ever. And the children of Israel did so as Joshua commanded, and took up twelve stones out of the midst of the Jordan, as the Lord spake unto Joshua, according to the number of the tribes of the children of Israel; and they carried them over with them unto the place where they lodged, and laid them down there. And Joshua set up twelve stones in the midst of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests which bare the ark of the covenant stood: and they are there unto this day. For the priests which bare the ark stood in the midst of the Jordan, until everything was finished that the Lord commanded." [Joshua 4:1-10]

Chapter 5: "And it came to pass, when all the kings of the Amorites, that were beyond the Jordan westward, and all the kings of the Canaanites, that were by the sea, heard how the Lord had dried up the waters of the Jordan from before the children of Israel, until we were passed over, that their heart melted, neither was there spirit in them any more, because of the children of Israel."

As you know, historically and symbolically this represents the crisis of the fullness of God's purpose concerning His people - that for which He had moved and worked and been patient through many years, that which now was immediately before them. And at this crisis or this turning-point, in that relationship, as at every crisis relating to something more of the Lord, the people were, and we are, brought back to our foundation: to the foundation. These stones, twelve on the land and twelve in the Jordan, were the foundation stones of everything concerning the purpose of God.

We know the typology, that these waters of the Jordan - which at this time were spread over not only the riverbed but the land round about in a mighty inundation, for it says "that season Jordan overfloweth all its banks" - these waters typify the floods of death. The floods of death; death at the full.

The ark, we know, is the symbol figure of Jesus and Jesus taking up His position, the great priestly ministry, right in the heart of death's flood and flood time. And as He did so, death gave way. As we are told in the Word, "He could not be holden of it" that is, it had *no* power over Him. It had to yield to His presence, He conquered it, it stood up, the mighty flood was held in its course and broken in its way; it had no power. Death had no power over *Him*. And here, this record is intended to teach us that in the place where death reigned universally, a testimony is planted, and planted forever, for whenever we come on that little phrase "And there it is until this day" it is meant to imply permanence; it goes on, it is something unchanged. Right in the place of death's fullness and overwhelming there is a testimony that its power has been broken, that its long course has been interrupted, that it has not held on its way forever. There's something which *forever* says death has been arrested and its power broken.

Well that is, of course, the Gospel in its objective form but the message here for us this morning is this: that what is there, right in the very scene of that triumph, of that overcoming, of that mighty thing; has got to have a counterpart on the land where it can be seen, right here, where everybody can note it and the children can say "What is the meaning of this, what do you mean by this?" Something clearly manifest in the very *life* of the people, that it is not only a looking back to something that was, but it's looking to something that here is and we can say what was, is! What was there is here, it's something to be seen.

The very foundation of everything in the purpose of God and in the *full* purpose of God for His people has got to be a literal *actuality*, right here, every day where it can be taken note of. That means more exact words, for there have got to be people who will take it up on their shoulders and say "I make myself responsible for that testimony. I carry on *my* shoulders that testimony, I am one in whom, through whom, it *can* be seen. Jesus has conquered death! There is a death-conquering Life present with us!"

And inasmuch as twelve men were chosen and twelve stones were placed here and twelve there, while we know that in the symbolism of numbers twelve means government (we'll not stay with that aspect) twelve is always representation of the Lord's people. And the Lord does choose amongst His people those who know something deeper of the death and [might] of the resurrection, who've

gone in and come out with a testimony on their shoulders - a representative company. It's His will for all of His people of course, but there are those who've got to stand *for* the people of God in this matter, carrying the burden *of* this testimony *for* the people of God, that all in looking may see what God wants concerning them and see it in these.

My brothers and sisters, the great Joshua, (it's the same name you know, Jesus - Joshua, the Lord, the Saviour) this greater Joshua, our Lord Jesus, would select men and women who He can take into the testimony in a very real way and bring them out - on their shoulders, so to speak, carrying its responsibility.

We do not think in terms of an elect of the elect, of a select people in that technical sense, but we do know it is true, we see it through the Bible again and again, right to the end of the Bible in the book of the Revelation, that there are those who come into a closer association with the Lord in the meaning of His death and resurrection *on behalf of others!* On behalf of others that others may see what the Lord wants, ah, that they may see that this thing is real; these have gone into the depths, these have known something of the place of the flood, these have been where the Lord has been in measure, and have learned *His* victory, have learned *His* power, who have come out with something on their shoulders of a testimony to the power of His resurrection; His death-conquering Life.

He would select a representative company and if the Lord deals with any in that deeper way, that so much deeper way, understand, understand that He is building something that is not just doctrine - teaching about the death and the resurrection - but making it very real in certain lives, perhaps in certain places, that it may be seen; taken note of, that coming generations now rising around may be affected and say "What is the meaning of this?" and be instructed by that which has come out of Jordan's deep bed, that which carries in it the significance of His mighty, mighty, victory.

And it is not only for themselves, it is not only for other believers; that's why we went on and into chapter five and saw that the chapter was divided at that point - it should not have been - all the enemies of the Lord lost heart when they saw this testimony in action! The conquest of the land, the possessing of the inheritance, the overthrow of the evil forces which were against them, came about because this thing was *real* in the life of the Lord's people. They fought, but they fought without a heart. Listen to what Rahab said about it, "When we heard what the Lord did our hearts fainted, there was no strength left in us any more". And when the enemy fights, and he will fight, but he hasn't got much heart for this fight for then he sees that this testimony is not theory, not teaching, not doctrine, but it's on the very shoulders of men and women - they carry it, it's something that is *real* in them. Well, we may be going into the deep places, but this is the Lord's object: that there shall be a concrete testimony to the power of His resurrection and His victory over death.

You notice that the waters came back again, they overflowed as before, they spread themselves over the earth again, and yet not as before; there were twelve stones right down there at the bottom which said "Your sway is not universal while we're here!". They were a denial. And friends, death spreads over the earth, even since Calvary, even since the resurrection, it's spread over; but has the Lord got His stones of testimony which say "Yes, but death is not universal and while this testimony remains as it *will*, the heart of death is taken out of it, the power of death is *not* universal, we testify to the fact that that power *has* been broken and that eventually it will be utterly destroyed!" The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.

Do you get the message of the Lord? I'm sure the message to you, to me, to us - what I'm going to do - no, that's not just a message, that's a challenge: shall we take up with both hands the stones of testimony and say "As for me, by the grace of God, I *will* be something that others can see in this matter, *He has conquered death* and in me the power of His resurrection *shall* be seen."

The Lord help us.