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"This is the Message..."

by T. Austin-Sparks

Transcribed from a message given in January 1962. The spoken form has been retained verbatim.

Will you please turn to the first letter of John, the first letter of John. I am going to do something which, apart from its real inspiration and perhaps an element of surprise, could be rather tedious. I'm going to ask you to look with me at quite a number of fragments in this letter, beginning in the first chapter, at verse 5, "And this is the message which we have heard from Him and announced unto you".

Chapter 2, and verse 25: "And this is the promise which He promised us even the life eternal".

Chapter 3, verse 23: "And this is His commandment, that we should believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ".

Chapter 5, at verse 9: "If we received the witness of men, the witness of God is greater, for the witness of God is this, that He hath borne witness concerning His Son. He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself, he that believeth not God hath made Him a liar because he hath not believed in the witness that God hath borne concerning His Son. And this is the witness that God gave unto us, eternal life, and this life is in His Son".

Back to chapter 3, into chapter... I'm sorry, again at chapter 5 at verse 4, "For whatsoever is begotten of God overcometh the world, and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith..." verse 14 of chapter 5, "and this is the boldness which we have toward Him".

Chapter 4, and verse 3, "Every spirit which confesseth not Jesus, is not of God, and this is the spirit of the Antichrist".

Again to chapter 5 and verse 6, "This is He that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ".

And finally at verse 20, "And we know that the Son of God is come and hath given unto us an understanding, that we know Him that is true and we are in Him that is true, even in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life".

Let us put all those fragments together: this is the message... this is the promise... this is the commandment... this is the record... this is the love of God... this is the victory... this is the confidence... this is the spirit of Antichrist... this is He that came... this is the true God.

I do not know what that conveys to you. In a very brief letter, so far as compass is concerned, a letter which you can read through in little more, if any more, than 10 minutes, you have this ten-fold reiteration: "This is... this is...". Surely it very clearly indicates that the writer, the apostle John, was wanting and intending to really pin-point the great sectors of the Christian life and the Christian faith. This ten-fold repetition, "*this* is, and *this* is" with an identification of something, putting a circle round something, ten different things here and saying of every one, "Now, this is...". It's impressive. It's instructive. It's very challenging. It all comes out of the first words in the letter, "That which was from the beginning, that which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, that which we beheld and our hands handled concerning the word of Life". Everything springs out of that. That is the sum of all that the apostle is going to say: "That which we heard from Him, that which we heard from Him".

So John is here in this letter recapitulating what came with Christ and which he, with other apostles, had seen and heard and beheld and handled. He has very serious business on hand. Indeed, John in all his writings had a burden, a burden which amounted to a passion. You will have noted perhaps, if you did not, you can note that in every one of these ten "pin-pointings", as we have called them, there is in some way one governing issue. There is one governing issue to the whole ten of these, "this is...". And that governing issue, related to everyone, is Life. Life! Did you notice that? Take note of it, go and look at it again. "This is..." and the issue bound up with this is Life. And "*this* is..." and the issue bound up with *this* is Life, and so right the way through to the final summary, "This is the true God, and eternal Life". And it's saying that, repeating that, so strongly emphasizing that.

John brings us to *the* issue of the whole battle of Christianity. For you perhaps need not to be told, true spiritual Christianity is a terrific battle. When you come into this kind of relationship with the Lord Jesus which is in Life, which is living, you come into, you are precipitated into, a tremendous conflict. You'll discover that sooner or later. And it was in that very context that John wrote, he wrote his gospel, he wrote these three letters, and he wrote the book of the Revelation. And he wrote them all, all, very much about the same time. And no one who knows anything about these writings of John has any doubt whatever that they are set in the realm of a tremendous spiritual battle.

Can you recall his gospel? Can you recall that that gospel almost from beginning to end, and all that we have there about the Lord Jesus in teaching and in work, is compassed by an atmosphere of intense antagonism. How many times did the Jews, the Jewish rulers counsel together to kill Him because of things which He said; until at last they did it. But all the way through that gospel, you look

again, you will find that He is moving in this atmosphere of intense spiritual antagonism. And John wrote the gospel with that clearly in view. We will come back to that in a minute.

This letter, or these three letters, which are only three aspects of one thing, the first letter is for the Lord's people in general, and the second is for a church, and the third is for a spiritual leader in the church, but they are only three aspects of one thing. And if you read carefully, you cannot fail to detect that what John is writing is because of the existence of a positive opposition, antagonism, and hostility to the spiritual life. And if you have not recognised that in these two sections, you have not missed it in the book of the Revelation. For if there is one thing about *that* book, it is that it's a book of warfare, isn't it?

We know how the first three chapters gather around, "to him that overcometh... to him that overcometh" seven times repeated. And from then onward it's warfare. That is true. May I just here put in by way of parentheses this: it would be good always if you would remember that although there is some meaning and value in the position which these books occupy as bound together, that arrangement can be misleading, or at least can mean that you lose something, or miss something. It would be quite a good thing, and I am not suggesting that you go and unbind your New Testament and rebind it in another way, but it would be a good thing if you could get hold of these books separately and bind together gospel, letters and Revelation as one continuous narrative, each part having its own particular purpose.

But you must remember that John's gospel was *not* written away back there, just at the end of the life of the Lord Jesus - to give an account of His earthly life. That's historically where it is put. It was written right at the end of the first Christian century, after the destruction of Jerusalem. And so were these letters and so, probably, was the Revelation. They all come right at the end of that first Christian era or century, when all the other apostles had gone to the Lord and John the old, old man was writing at that very critical point, a turning point in the history of Christianity.

Now, that is the parenthesis. Always remember that, because you *must have* the gospel by John in order to understand the letters of John. It has been said that he wrote his gospel and then wrote this first letter or the three letters as a kind of covering letter to the gospel. Be that as it may, there are other very helpful things in that connection. You see, the gospel was written with one object. It was written with this sole object of making known what was *in* Jesus Christ. In other words, what had come into the world with Him and in Him; what *He had brought in*, in His own person. That was the object of the gospel.

The object of the three letters is to show *what is in believers* because of Jesus Christ. What is in Him is now to be in believers, and what is *in* believers; that is here in the letter and as you have probably noticed, especially in this first letter, but not in that alone. We need not go on to the Revelation because that doesn't concern us at this moment as to its special object. But you will see the gospel and letters are part and counterpart. The Person of the Lord Jesus and what has come in with Him, what is in Him, the Lord's people and what is in them, or is supposed to be in them because *He* is in them.

Now, that's by the way, but John is saying that (and he is saying it in the Spirit, as John always did, in the Spirit) that Jesus brought many things with Him in His Person into this world as from God. But everything that Jesus brought was more than a doctrine, more than a teaching, more than a truth. The meaning and the truth of everything that came in with Him is in this one word: Life. His teaching,

the value of His teaching, was to be found in the effect of His teaching: in producing Life. His teaching goes for nothing (unless it is condemnation) if the result is not Life.

All His works that He did were meant to result in Life. They were not just interesting, and wonderful, and marvelous, and miraculous works. The issue was intended to be Life. And all of the work of the Lord Jesus goes for nothing if it does not result in Life. It is not the teaching of Jesus, although that is important, it is not what Jesus did, although that is important, it is the *result* of all that He said, and did and was, that is the crucial thing. The proof of the Lord Jesus is in the *Life* which results from everything to do with Him. That is both a statement and a test of everything that we know and have to do with in relation to Him.

You notice John is very explicit about this. He sums it all up, both in gospel and in letter, you look in his gospel chapter 20, chapter 21 was a kind of an additional chapter, he really closed with chapter 20. In chapter 20 and verse 30 he sums up all that he has written: "Many other signs therefore, did Jesus in the presence of His disciples which are not written in this book but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing ye may have Life in His name". Now, you can shorten the statement if you like, and say, "these are written, all these, all these are written that you might have Life in His Name". That's the issue. That's the object. That's the only purpose of narrating all this about Jesus and His teaching and His work. The purpose is solely this: that you may have Life.

Then, as you notice in the first letter, at the end of chapter 5, he does a similar thing at verse 13: "These things I have written unto you that ye may know that ye have eternal life, even unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God". These things are written that you may *know* that you have eternal Life. In the gospel it is "believing ye may have". In the letters it is that "you may *know* that you have". You may know that you have.

Well, let us look at the occasion of this writing; the time and the occasion. We have pointed out that the date of John's writing was at the close of the apostolic era. In all that we have in the book of the Acts, it was history. All that we have in the epistles of Paul and the others, stands on record as an accomplished thing and the unveiling of Divine purpose; it's on hand. Now John comes right in and in effect he says, "You have all that. You have all that! You know all that. That has been deposited with you, now then, what about it?" It's a call back, a call up to all that the church has received. It's a challenge at this time, to the Lord's people, to the Church of Jesus Christ to come right into line with all that has been given because, because the Lord, having given, holds His people responsible for all that.

Now again, you see, he goes on with the book of the Revelation and when at the opening of that book he arraigns the churches before the risen Lord, he does so on the ground, purely, that the apostle Paul had given to those churches in Asia, who had been instrumental of bringing into being a full-orbed revelation of Jesus Christ and now the risen Lord is calling them to account for all that Paul was used to give them. And it's most impressive, dear friends, it's solemn, but it's encouraging. Do you know what one of the last things Paul said about that, his ministry, was? "All they which be in Asia be turned from me. They've repudiated me. They've turned me over. They have discredited me, they have closed down on my ministry." In Asia! Now, "John, to the seven churches in Asia..." but it isn't John, it's the risen Lord through John to the seven churches in Asia. And it is as though the risen Lord there in chapter one of the Revelation is saying, "Oh, but churches in Asia, you're not going to get away with it like that! You may repudiate My servant, you may turn from him, but it is with Me

you'll have to reckon. It was I who spoke through him, who wrote through him. It is with Me that you'll have to reckon." Now, that's encouraging for any servant of God isn't it, who has been faithful and has suffered discrediting and repudiating, that's encouraging. But it is very challenging and very solemn isn't it, that the Lord never lets anybody get away with anything that He has given without sooner or later calling upon them to answer to Him for that trust.

Well, here, that's the time of things, you see, it's a time thing. There comes a time when the Lord does that. But what about the occasion? Well, it's perfectly clear, perfectly clear from these letters and the Revelation, and it's implied by the gospel, that a state of spiritual decline had set in. A state of spiritual change: those former days of glory in the church were passing, but they had not passed. All that devotion, that faithfulness, their willingness to suffer, that purity, is passing. Declension had set in and the big change was coming over Christianity at the time that John was writing. And the change was not for the better, it was a change of loss of standard, loss of calibre, loss of purity, loss of first love.

Yes, a state of spiritual decline and sad change. It was a time when pagan ideas were invading the church and Christianity. And it might not interest you and it will only be taking up time if I was to stay to point out what those pagan ideas were. But there they were, they were coming in, strange, mysterious kinds of teachings from paganism, coming in and being made a part of Christian teaching. And this was destroying the absolute purity of the gospel, of the faith, and of the life of believers. That clearness and transparency of testimony and of life, which had marked the early days, was giving place to spiritual mixture. And whenever mixture comes in, there's always confusion. Confusion... and you can discern how much confusion there was by just reading this short letter. How much here indicates that the Lord's people were in a state of confusion born of this *mixture* which had come into Christianity.

Now, I am not talking, dear friends, only about something of a couple of thousand years ago nearly. That would, or might be interesting, but we're, we're living in our own day. And I have no hesitation in saying that we're living in conditions very similar to those in which John wrote this letter. What a mix-up Christianity in general is today, isn't it? What a confusion there is in Christianity (using that word generally) today. What a loss of tone, and of level, and of impact, and of purity, and of passion for the Lord Jesus. What a loss. Everybody is aware of it, everybody is deploring it.

There was this extra factor at that time, which no small part of this world is knowing something about today, and that is: persecution. John wrote the Revelation when he was in exile on the Isle of Patmos for the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus. It was a time of severe testing of the church by persecution, by opposition, and antagonism. We may not know so much about it in this western world, and yet, and yet that is not to our credit. Our brethren in the East are knowing all about this, they are in the fiery trial of persecution and suffering. And when I say it is not to our credit that we don't know it, I mean this: that while, just at present the *form* of it that is over there may not have reached us, if, dear friends, *we* were more vital in our spiritual life and testimony, we would meet more of that powerful opposition.

I think it is because we don't count for enough that we don't meet enough; speaking of the church generally. Some of us individuals do meet quite a lot, don't we? But as a whole, the church in the West is not a persecuted church because it doesn't count for enough. That's true.

Well now, this was the occasion of the writing, but when we've said all that, mentioned all these things, you've got to get behind and to the heart and say, "But why? What is the explanation? What is the meaning?" These are only aspects of a great battle. The battle has many forms, takes many different aspects. It means that there's something against, there's something against: against purity, against vitality, against the life of the people of God. There's something against them. What is it that is the object of it all? What is the heart? Now John doesn't leave us in any doubt when he underlines, underscores this one word all the way through: *Life!* Life! Life! You mark it in the gospel, in the letters: Life.

What is it all about then? Anything, by any means, any how - from subtle subterfuge and deceit and trickery to every other form - until it comes to open daily persecution. Any thing, any how, to destroy this Life. Anything to destroy this Life, because this Life is *the eternal issue* from eternity past, through all the ages into eternity to come; this is it. This is it!

God intended the man of His creation to possess His own Divine eternal Life; to share His Life with him. That is symbolised, of course, in the Tree of Life in the garden at the beginning. That is there, and it represents, it is a symbol of God's thought that man should, on certain conditions, on a certain basis of faith, of obedience, of fellowship with Him, of walking in the Light as He is in the Light, on that ground become the possessor of this that is called eternal Life. Now, if that should happen, if that should happen and that should happen in a universe where there is a hostile, inimical and antagonistic hierarchy to God, a hierarchy set against God and all His purposes and intentions, if that should happen, the whole situation for that hierarchy is hopeless. Is hopeless! The forces of antagonism are fully and finally ruled out if that should happen because this Life is indestructible. It is indestructible. It just cannot be destroyed. It just cannot be destroyed. John is telling us that it was *in* the Son of God. And we know from another scripture that it was not *possible* that He should be holden of death; just not possible. An impossible thing that the One in whom this Life dwelt should be holden of death; it is indestructible. It is irresistible; irresistible.

Mr. Spurgeon was once asked if he would become a member of a committee for the defence of the Bible. And he looked at the man who'd come to ask him, and he said, "Does a lion need defending? You let him off his chain. He'll look after himself alright!" The Word of God needs no defending, let it loose, and that's all you've got to do: it is irresistible.

I don't know whether you read recently in the paper of something happening somewhere, I think on the northeast side of this country, a whole stretch of concrete road, main road, had got to be torn up and relaid because mushrooms had forced their way through it and cracked it open. Mushrooms! Cracking open concrete highway! There you are: the power of life! Irresistible, if it gets a chance, if it's let loose, if it takes things into its own hands. This Life calls out everything in this universe to defend itself against this Life, to save itself from this Life! That's an explanation of a lot, dear friends, isn't it? It's a Life which provokes opposition because of its *inherent* potentiality. Irresistible!

Now then, this Life, John says here, was in His Son Jesus Christ. Look at Him, look at Him. Everywhere He went He met, in its many different forms, antagonism to the Life that was in Him. Because it was in Him, all the evil intelligences in this universe, the devil and demons came out, woke up: "This is a critical situation, this, this thing has invaded our realm!" And He met it in every form: demon possessed, and all the forms of satanic work in human bodies and human minds, but not one could stand against Him. Not one could stand against it. Not one could hold the ground against Him, till John heads up all his signs in his gospel, signs of this very thing: the mighty irresistible power of the

Life that was in Jesus, heads it all up in one cumulative instance - Lazarus. Lazarus who is allowed not only to die, deliberately allowed to die, but allowed to be in the grave; in a climate at the end of four days to be in a state of corruption. Allowed! Allowed, allowed; deliberately, in order to show that death, real death, not imaginary, not fictitious death, not sentimental death but real, terrible death cannot stand before Him who is the resurrection and the Life. He exemplifies the nature of this Life; it is indestructible, it is irresistible.

And I would like to take you through the many instances of Jesus bringing Life right into situations which were naturally quite hopeless. You must remember that John (and I think I said this the last time I was in this city) that John deliberately selected a whole line of impossible situations in order to show that with this One there is nothing impossible. It doesn't matter what it is, whether it's the water into wine, it's a hopeless situation in Cana of Galilee, it's a hopeless one, the end of everything. Or whether it is the woman of Samaria, it's a pretty hopeless situation that, with her, isn't it, morally? A hopeless situation. Or the nobleman's son reaching the verge of death, and being a nobleman who would have undoubtedly used all his wealth to find some help for that son, himself travels all the way from Capernaum to Cana to come into contact with Jesus and beg Him to go and do something. A hopeless situation in this world. And so we might go on.

John deliberately selects these things to show that this *Life in Christ* has no match and no master; it is the Master. It is the Master. In a situation of growing spiritual death, and darkness, and decline, and loss, John writes all this and says in effect, "Oh, you believers, you need to recover in this day your knowledge, your experience of this *Life* that is in Christ! This matchless Life! This mighty Life! It is the Life that is going to solve the problems, answer the questions, meet the needs, overcome the adverse forces, and triumph at last. It's this Life in Christ! That's what you need to know, and apart from that, apart from that, things will go from bad to worse, and from worse to awful - they'll just decline."

And John stands right in that gap, in that gap and says, "The answer is a recovery of *Jesus Christ as the eternal Life in the power of this endless Life*, a recovery in your spiritual history, in your spiritual experience".

Now, dear friends, I have taken practically an hour to introduce the matter, and I must I fear, close there for the present. As I said this afternoon, here is something to cover the whole weekend and if the Lord wills, we will continue with this after the Lord's table tomorrow morning for a little while, as long as He leads us. But we come with a great fact tonight, a great fact, that over against what anybody with any spiritual knowledge, spiritual experience, of spiritual discernment will agree, is a time of lost spiritual power on the part of the church and the people of God today. The need of much more power - don't you agree - to meet the present situation, the inroads of adverse pressures, that about which we have yet to speak more specifically, to meet it, to counter it. This is, this is what is needed, as John shows in his gospel, his letters, and the Revelation: *bringing back* of the Lord Jesus into His full place in terms of eternal Life; bringing Him back. John with his gospel seeks to bring in the Son of God in a new way to a failing church, in his letter that's his interest: the *re-introduction* of the Son of God in the power of eternal Life.

May the Lord say something to our hearts about this, because really, we really are so much farther on than John was in the dispensation, and surely none of us here will dispute the statement that we are getting very near the end. In the little time since we were together here, since I was with you in your flock, what, what advances have been made! What a headlong rush has taken place! How much

nearer that day mentioned by Peter in prophetic inspiration when the heavens being on fire shall dissolve in fervent heat and all these things be burnt up. My, we understand it today, in a few short months or years, we've come to know that this is not fiction, this is terrible reality. It only needs some madman with the restraint taken off of him to push a button today and civilization will be well-nigh wiped out. If the Lord were to allow it, it's possible, it's possible.

We are very near the end and I can only trust that all the prayer that has gone before our time together here, only seeking the Lord, means that the word that is coming to you is a timely word, a time for a word, for the hour. And for the present situation, that few as we are, and weak as we are humanly, we at least individually, and as a company of the Lord's people, may come into a new knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ in the power of this mighty, indestructible and irresistible Life. That we may really come where John meant to bring the Lord's people by writing when he said, "I have written these things that *you may know* that you have eternal [Life], *that you may know!*" It's possible to believe that you have it, and not know it. It is possible to have the doctrine of it and not know it. It's possible even to put your feet down on the truth of it and *not be living in the knowledge of it*.

These were Christians, and doctrinally and theoretically they had eternal Life, because they had believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, but they were not living day by day in the *knowledge* of that Life. That's possible you know, isn't it? John, when he wrote the Revelation made perfectly clear to one church this: you can be doing all the Christian work without all the Christian Love; the dynamic of all your activities has gone, and you're carrying on the activities. It's just possible to be full of Christian works without the Life and the Love being there. A lot of people are working tremendously hard in Christianity, but... but... there's lacking something, isn't there? A vital something is lacking and that's just that that John was saying.

No, it isn't the teaching, it isn't the doctrine, it isn't the theory, it is not even the works that you're doing. It's the mighty power of this Life registering, that you know in your own experience every day *His Life* is a resurrection Life in you, in me, every day; *that's* the testimony. This is the testimony, this is the message!

Now, of course, we'd want a very long conference to take every one of those pin-pointings and say, "This is the message... what is it? This is the record, what is it? This is the commandment..." and so on, but as I have said, whether we deal with them separately or not, when you put them all together they focus upon one thing. All of these things have to do with Life. Life is the issue. Well, I'll stop there for the present, may the Lord write this very strongly upon our hearts.