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Rooted and Grounded

by T. Austin-Sparks

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The Lord's Object with the Overcomer

"And the remnant that is escaped of the house of Judah shall again take root downward, and bear fruit upward." (Is. 37:31).

Reading: Isaiah 36:1-22.

"And even now the axe lieth at the root of the trees: every tree therefore that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire." Matt. 3:10.

"Then came the disciples, and said unto him, Knowest thou that the Pharisees were offended, when they heard this saying? But he answered and said, Every plant, which my heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted up. Let them alone: they are blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch." Matt. 15:12-14.

"...and when the sun was risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away." Matt. 13:6.

You will have noticed that in all these passages there is reference to roots, and roots are very important things. A very great deal depends upon roots; for a tree almost everything depends upon

the roots. And in the same way, beloved, our roots and our rooting are very important things in the matter of our eternal destiny.

I want to say a little in a general way at the outset before we come to something more specific in this connection. You will notice that the passages which we read (and others could be added to them on the same subject) are divided. Some refer to the sound rooting which will take the strain, which will prove adequate. The others refer to rootings which are not adequate and which will not abide. We might just say a word or two about that second class to begin with.

Through the Word of the Lord there are various kinds and classes of those whose roots and whose rooting is not adequate. Some have been mentioned. The one in Matthew 3:10: "And even now is the axe laid unto the root of the trees"; a word in the ministry of John the Baptist, representing a time of crises when a long period of probation and opportunity had been given by the Lord, and there had been every provision made by Him to secure a sound and abiding rooting on the part of Israel, but now the testing time had come when roots were going to be subjected to a severe trial and testing. The result of that testing, as we know, was that once again Israel was rooted up. Not so many years after this they were rooted up from their land and were carried away in the great hurricane of Divine judgment through the Roman Legions and scattered to various parts of the earth, and they have never since been planted again. The axe was laid to the roots of the tree.

Then two others came in in that class. In Matthew 13 the sower had sowed his seed and some had fallen in rocky places. It had sprung up; when the sun was up it withered, died, having no root. And that, we are given to understand, illustrates those people who hear the Word of the Lord superficially; hear it and in a way receive it, on the face of things respond to it, but in whom it is found eventually there is not the root of the matter. Their kind of receiving, their kind of responding, their kind of association with the Word of the Lord cannot bear the heat, the blaze of the sun, it is something which lies on the outside, it is not that which reaches down into the very depths of their being.

The third, Matthew 15, was a word concerning the Pharisees. The disciples reported that the Pharisees took a certain attitude toward things. The Lord's Word was: "Every planting (literally) which my heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted up. Let them alone: they are blind leaders of the blind."

The Danger of Living on the Past

Now these three cases of roots which do not stand, bring different aspects before us. In the first case, in Matthew 3, you have an historical and traditional thing which has occupied the place of that which claims to represent the Lord and has had much in its history which was of the Lord, in blessing and in use and service; with which much of the Lord has been associated, and which has been associated with much of the Lord in His purpose and His ways; but which has come to a time when it is no more than a past history, a reputation without present life; something that belongs to a by-gone day; whose life, whose vitality and energy and spiritual progress is not up-to-date and abreast of its present claims.

A time of testing comes in the sovereign ordering of God for all such, and it is found by reason of its present root-dryness, lack of vitality, of energy, of up-to-dateness of life that it cannot go through the testing, it is rooted out. A simple word that, and yet a challenging word which shows us two things:

that God, in His sovereignty, does most definitely appoint a time in which He will test the state of everything and everyone which makes a claim to be related to Him. He will do that, and then no amount of past history, good history, Divine history, will stand that thing in stead for the day of His testing. Or to put it another way, God tests to find out just exactly how up-to-date spiritual life and spiritual experience is.

There are quite a lot of people who have had a very sound, thoroughly genuine conversion, but who live back on their conversion of ten, twenty, or forty years ago; and while it is true the history was quite sound, it is something of the past. Its vitality has not been continuous, it is not up-to-date, and such people will find that when the winds of God begin to blow they are lacking, they are wanting, and they will be carried away, not necessarily to be eternally lost, any more than Israel is, but to very great loss.

The Danger of an Assumed Relationship to God

And then the Lord also tests most definitely, every kind of profession, every kind of response, every kind of attitude or relationship, to discover whether that is a thing which is on the surface, on the face, superficial; or whether it is a thing which has gone right down deeply into the life, burying its roots in the very sub-soil of experience. Here, again, a simple word, but it may be that there is someone here who is attaching themselves to something, attaching themselves to a place, to a company of people; attaching themselves in an outward way to that which represents the Lord, in hymns and addresses and prayers and services and such like; associating themselves, and, in a way, making some kind of answer or response to the things of the Lord.

Have you seen a self-grown forest in a mountain district after a gale? We have a good deal of that sort of thing in Scotland where the seeds have been carried by the wind and have sown themselves in the very thin soil of a mountain slope, a rocky district. They have grown very tall, lanky thin trees, firs or pines; their roots have spread out and covered a great area, and then – a gale – and as you go along after a gale there are those lanky, thin, gaunt trees lying with their roots right up in the air. You wonder how in all the earth they have managed to cling to the shallow soil. There they are everywhere, rooted up because self-grown, and that is Matthew 13. Something which has made its own kind of response, given its own response, answer, with reservations perhaps, not going too far, not going to be "extreme," not going to be "singular," not going to be "fanatical," just going to be "perfectly balanced" and "sane" and make their *own* response to the Lord.

All right, God has appointed the hour for a gale. Yes, there will be a blazing sun, it will be discovered whether God did that planting, whether that was a work of God in the heart or whether it was just something of human attachment or association. It may just be that here there may be one or more attaching themselves from the outside to that which is of the Lord, but they are not right in, buried, rooted, grounded, not in the thing in the Lord. Are you attaching yourself to something religious, or are you buried with your roots in Christ? Rooted in Him?

The Danger of Position without Possession

The third word in Matthew 15 relating to the Pharisees of course has to do with those who assumed the role of teachers, spiritual leaders. The Pharisees were those who took upon themselves to guide others in matters of religion. The Lord said of them: "Every planting (literally) which my heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted up." In other words it was just this: Everyone who dares to

take the responsibility of giving guidance to others, who has not been commissioned of the Lord, with the Lord's message, will be rooted up. They are self-planted teachers and leaders.

Now, while within the compass of this gathering that may have a very limited application, it is something for us to remember in these days. The absolute necessity that those who lead us in spiritual things should themselves be men who have a mandate from God, men with a message, men with a revelation, men in whom the root of the matter is and not just teachers. I am saying all this in the light of the end-time because I believe we are entering more and more into that phase of things when everything is going to be subjected to testing in the sovereignty of God. Everything of tradition, everything of profession, of vocation; all are going to be tested by the winds of God.

Oh, such winds! Yes, winds of deception. God may not send deception but God will not prevent it. False teachers, false doctrine; severe trial and testing; deep, deep searching experiences, we are all coming into it and it is going to be discovered under the sovereign direction of God just how deep our roots are. Beloved, testing will do one of two things, it will either carry us away or drive us deeper. There is going to be in the end nothing that will not stand the test. The Lord make us those who have our roots downward and our fruit upward.

Now just a little more specific word especially in connection with Isaiah 37. Isaiah has much to say about the remnant, and there is a remnant of Israel, and as we know quite well, there is a remnant of Christianity. The remnant of Christianity is found in the first three chapters of Revelation. It is represented by the oft-repeated words "To him that overcometh"; that is the remnant. You see quite clearly that it is but a remnant in those churches in Asia. The main thing has gone wrong, a remnant of overcomers is seen there and that remnant of Christianity is very much in view in the Word of the Lord.

Now, a remnant feature is roots downward. A feature of a remnant is that it takes root downward. And the Lord does it, the Lord causes it to be so. The Lord so acts in His sovereignty and in His providence to see to it that a remnant is marked by roots which have got such a grip that nothing in hell or on earth can pluck it out. The Lord must, for His own glory, have something like that which can stand all the challenges of the circumstances of life.

The Lord must have something which cannot be carried away, which cannot be removed, cannot be shaken, and certainly something which cannot be rooted up. That is His remnant. That, He must have for His own glory, and, that being so, He will take every measure with His remnant to have them after that kind, with roots downward. Of course, unto fruit upward. We speak much about the upward side of things, life in the heavenlies, sitting in the heavenlies, and our warfare and work – the fruitfulness of our life in union with the Lord. That is only possible as our roots are downward. In order that that might be so, we have to get into a place of unshakeableness where the roots have got such a grip that nothing can overthrow. And I believe that explains a very great deal of what the Lord is doing with His own spiritual people in these days.

It is true that the true children of God are going through a time of intense trial and testing spiritually in these days; everywhere it is so. Why? Because the Lord must have something against which hell is impotent and by which He demonstrates to the universe that strength of His might which causes to stand and withstand and having done all to stand. If one were asked what the last issue for the Church in this age is, I would say that it stands, and that is saying a tremendous thing. Oh, you say, that is surely limiting things, are you not expecting much more than that? Progress, advance,

sweeping movements? The Church will have all its work cut out in the end to stand, but its standing will be its victory. Just to be able, through testing, trial, when everything is blowing round you like a blizzard; when everything is dark, mysterious, and even God seems far away and unreal, and faith is tested and you are being assailed on the right hand and on the left, and there is every reason outwardly for your moving, giving up, falling down, surrendering, lowering your standard, just to stand and not be moved in your faith is the greatest possible victory.

The Remnant a Testimony to the Lord's Power

Now I come to Isaiah 36 and 37. You notice that that passage about the remnant taking root is an issue. Chapter 36 we have heard read this evening, about Rabshakeh and Sennacherib with his boasting, flaunting, high-faluting utterances, challenging not just Hezekiah and the Jews, but their God. Vaunting himself against Jehovah, saying that there has been no god of any of the peoples of the earth who has been able to stand before his master, and certainly the God of the Jews will not be able to stand; and there they are outside the gates of Jerusalem with all this. Why did the Lord allow it? The Lord saw the first movement in far away Assyria, toward Jerusalem; why didn't He stop them, intervene for the sake of His own, and circumvent? Why did He not raise up circumstances that would hinder? Why did He allow them actually to encamp round and lay siege to Jerusalem, and then allow them to say these things?

It is all in the sovereignty of God. God has allowed this. God has permitted this thing to come right up to this present point. Hezekiah received the letter and rent his clothes, put on sackcloth, and went and spread the letter before the Lord. They were surely in straits. The Lord has allowed, we might even say drawn out, Sennacherib and the mighty hosts of the Assyrians, drawn them out literally, drawn them out materially, drawn them out mentally, drawn them out verbally, extended them, allowed them to inflate themselves to bursting point: they are exalted to the very heavens in their own eyes.

All right, the Lord has drawn them out. A remnant comes into view and the remnant shall take root. When the Assyrian and Sennacherib have gone just as far as it is possible for them to go, have become as inflated as it is possible for them to be, when they have swelled to the very heavens, the Lord for His remnant's sake sent one angel! Surely, the Lord wants a mighty host to deal with this situation - "And the angel of the Lord went forth."

Do you see, beloved, a New Testament factor in this? The adversary would impress the weak saints of the Lord with his importance, with his greatness. There is one thing the enemy is always trying to do as a strategic thing and that is to put fear in the heart of a child of God. Fear. There is nothing so weakening, so devastating as fear. If the enemy can get fear into our hearts he has got the city and he will make a great display and vaunt himself and try to impress upon us how mighty he is.

It is never for us to under-estimate the power of the enemy, but we have always got to keep the balance of comparison between our God and the enemy. The Lord's weakness is more than a match for all the power of Satan. And it comes to this, the remnant puts its faith in the Lord over against all the fury of the oppressor, all the vaunting of the oppressor, and then the Lord proves He only allowed the oppressor to come out in that extreme way to show that the remnant cannot be destroyed, for the remnant takes root in the presence of Sennacherib, in the presence of the Assyrians. "And the remnant... shall again take root." You see that is the ultimate issue. This was looking on to a coming day, it is true, but it is remarkable that these two things come together, that

the Assyrians come into view with all their power and they are only allowed eventually to destroy that which is not counting for God, but God gets, in spite of everything, a remnant with roots.

Rooted in the Cross and Immovable

Now note, you who know the conflict, you who know the fury of the oppressor, the bitterness of the animus of the devil, remember that the Lord allows him to go a long way in order that there might be this double issue. Firstly, an entering into the knowledge of the exceeding greatness of God's power – but how exceeding great must be God's power if against the mighty host of Assyria one angel alone is all that is necessary! To discover the exceeding greatness of God's power on the one hand, and on the other hand, through the work of the enemy himself, to drive the roots down. The Lord uses the adversary in his own hatred and bitterness to get our roots in, and to make us impervious to the Devil. He uses the adversary against himself in our trials. Roots downward, fruit upward. I am sure that is what the Lord is doing.

We are passing through deep experiences, the enemy is doing it and the Lord is not preventing him, but we are coming to a fuller knowledge of the power of our God and a deeper rooting beyond all previous shakeableness. And the Lord is seeking to have a people who cannot be shaken, against whom hell with all its demonstration of arrogance and pride, is impotent. "And the remnant... shall again take root downward." That is what the Lord needs.

May I remind you that the nature of this planting is just that with which we are so familiar. "Planted together in the likeness of his death." That is the word of the Apostle, "For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection." The enemy is the instrument so often, of planting us more deeply into the death of Christ. His assaults, his attacks, his accusations, everything – yes. The Lord is not the source of evil but the Lord allows it.

So often our hearts cry out: "Why did the Lord ever allow that in our lives?" That thing which has meant such a deep, dark passage. Why did the Lord allow it? He could have prevented it. Well, we were planted by it into the death of the Lord Jesus. We were brought more than ever to an end of ourselves. Yes, and therefore, to know the Lord in a larger measure than we have ever known Him, and to be brought to a place where it will not be so easy for the Devil to shake us next time.

That is the sovereign way of God in deeper death experiences. "Planted together in the likeness of his death." Have you been planted there initially? Have you been planted in Christ crucified? Or are you one of those attachments to something? Are you planted? And when a deeper planting comes, remember it is the roots being driven downwards, and the issue is going to be most surely endurance, stability, ability to stand; but, oh, there is going to be greater fruitfulness.

We are in the Lord's hands, not in the Devil's hands. We are in the Lord's hands, and being in His hands we are in the hands of a Potter Who knows what He is after. We were saying this afternoon that first of all, the vessel is in the potter, and then eventually the potter is in the vessel. What we mean is this. That before ever the potter starts, the vessel is in his mind, in his heart very clearly. The pattern is not something objective, the vessel is already a complete thing in him; and then he gets to work upon it and when he is finished, he is in the vessel he has wrought. What was in *Him* has come out in it.

We say of people's work: "I can see who made that, it is just like them." "That is just like So-and-so to make a thing like that." Yes, He is in His work, He is in the vessel that He makes, and that is just what He is doing. Sometimes that clay has to be pressed down to a shapeless mass, broken. It is not showing all that He intended it to show, there are defects and flaws, and so He crushes it down to shapelessness. A mass without shape. But it is to start again to get something more perfect than has been before, in which He Himself is.

May He give us grace to endure whatever the trial may be, along whatever line of metaphor, the wind, the blaze, supreme heat, or pressure of His hand, all of which is to get us into a place where we cannot be moved, where hell cannot shake us, where His power is made manifest as triumphant over all the power of the enemy.