

Alas! I Can Do Nothing!

by C.H. Spurgeon

C.H. Spurgeon's sermon emphasizes the believer's helplessness and the assurance that Christ's death provides strength and salvation for the ungodly.

Scripture: John 15:5, Romans 5:6, Ephesians 2:8

Topics: "Faith in Christ", "Helplessness"

Description

C.H. Spurgeon addresses the struggles of the anxious heart that feels powerless to do good after accepting the doctrine of atonement. He emphasizes that many believers feel a deep sense of inability, lamenting, 'I can do nothing,' and struggle with their moral weakness and the burden of sin. Spurgeon reassures that Christ's sacrifice is sufficient for the ungodly, highlighting that salvation is not based on our strength but on faith in Jesus, who died for us while we were still without strength. He encourages believers to focus on the truth that 'in due time Christ died for the ungodly,' which can transform their weaknesses into blessings through faith. Ultimately, Spurgeon calls for a reliance on Christ's love and sacrifice as the source of strength and hope for those feeling spiritually lifeless.

Transcript

AFTER THE ANXIOUS HEART has accepted the doctrine of atonement, and learned the great truth that salvation is by faith in the Lord Jesus, it is often sore troubled with a sense of inability toward that which is good. Many are groaning, "I can do nothing." They are not making this into an excuse, but they feel it as a daily burden. They would if they could. They can each one honestly say, "To will is present with me, but how to perform that which I would I find not."

This feeling seems to make all the gospel null and void; for what is the use of food to a hungry man if he cannot get at it? Of what avail is the river of the water of life if one cannot drink? We recall the story of the doctor and the poor woman's child. The sage practitioner told the mother that her little one would soon be better under proper treatment, but it was absolutely needful that her boy should regularly drink the best wine, and that he should spend a season at one of the German spas. This, to a widow who could hardly get bread to eat! Now, it sometimes seems to the troubled heart that the simple gospel of "Believe and live," is not, after all, so very simple; for it asks the poor sinner to do what he cannot do. To the really awakened, but half instructed, there appears to be a missing link; yonder is the salvation of Jesus, but how is it to be reached? The soul is without strength, and knows not what to do. It lies within sight of the city of refuge, and cannot enter its gate.

Is this want of strength provided for in the plan of salvation? It is. The work of the Lord is perfect. It begins where we are, and asks nothing of us in order to its completion. When the good Samaritan saw the traveler lying wounded and half dead, he did not bid him rise and come to him, and mount the ass and ride off to the inn. No, "he came where he was," and ministered to him, and lifted him upon the beast and bore him to the inn. Thus doth the Lord Jesus deal with us in our low and wretched estate.

We have seen that God justifieth, that He justifieth the ungodly and that He justifies them through faith in the precious blood of Jesus; we have now to see the condition these ungodly ones are in when Jesus works out their salvation. Many awakened persons are not only troubled about their sin, but about their moral weakness. They have no strength with which to escape from the mire into which they have fallen, nor to keep out of it in after days. They not only lament over what they have done, but over what they cannot do. They feel themselves to be powerless, helpless, and spiritually lifeless. It may sound odd to say that they feel dead, and yet it is even so. They are, in their own esteem, to all good incapable. They cannot travel the road to Heaven, for their bones are broken. "None of the men of strength have found their hands;" in fact, they are "without strength." Happily, it is written, as the commendation of God's love to us:

When we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly (Romans 5:6).

Here we see conscious helplessness succored--succored by the interposition of the Lord Jesus. Our helplessness is extreme. It is not written, "When we were comparatively weak Christ died for us"; or, "When we had only a little strength"; but the description is absolute and unrestricted; "When we were yet without strength." We had no strength whatever which could aid in our salvation; our Lord's words were emphatically true, "Without me ye can do nothing." I may go further than the text, and remind you of the great love wherewith the Lord loved us, "even when we were dead in trespasses and sins." To be dead is even more than to be without strength.

The one thing that the poor strengthless sinner has to fix his mind upon, and firmly retain, as his one ground of hope, is the divine assurance that "in due time Christ died for the ungodly." Believe this, and all inability will disappear. As it is fabled of Midas that he turned everything into gold by his touch, so it is true of faith that it turns everything it touches into good. Our very needs and weaknesses become blessings when faith deals with them.

Let us dwell upon certain forms of this want of strength. To begin with, one man will say, "Sir, I do not seem to have strength to collect my thoughts, and keep them fixed upon those solemn topics which concern my salvation; a short prayer is almost too much for me. It is so partly, perhaps, through natural weakness, partly because I have injured myself through dissipation, and partly also because I worry myself with wordly cares, so that I am not capable of those high thoughts which are necessary ere a soul can be saved." This is a very common form of sinful weakness. Note this! You are without strength on this point; and there are many like you. They could not carry out a train of consecutive thought to save their lives. Many poor men and women are illiterate and untrained, and these would find deep thought to be very heavy work. Others are so light and trifling by nature, that they could no more follow out a long process of argument and reasoning, than they could fly. They could never attain to the knowledge of any profound mystery if they expended their whole life in the effort. You need not, therefore, despair: that which is necessary to salvation is not continuous thought, but a simple reliance upon Jesus. Hold you on to this one fact--"In due time Christ died for the ungodly." This truth will not require from you any deep research or profound reasoning, or convincing argument. There it stands: "In due time Christ died for the ungodly." Fix your mind on that, and rest there.

Let this one great, gracious, glorious fact lie in your spirit till it perfumes all your thoughts, and makes you rejoice even though you are without strength, seeing the Lord Jesus has become your strength and your song, yea, He has become your salvation. According to the Scriptures it is a revealed fact, that in due time Christ died for the ungodly when they were yet without strength. You have heard these words hundreds of times, maybe, and yet you have never before perceived their meaning. There is a cheering savor about them, is there not? Jesus did not die for our righteousness, but He died for our sins. He did not come to save us because we were worth the saving, but because we were utterly worthless, ruined, and undone. He came not to earth out of any reason that was in us, but solely and only out of reasons which He fetched from the depths of His own divine love. In due time He died for those whom He describes, not as godly, but as ungodly, applying to them as hopeless an adjective as He could well have selected. If you have but little mind, yet fasten it to this truth, which is fitted to the smallest capacity, and is able to cheer the heaviest heart. Let this text lie under your tongue like a sweet morsel, till it dissolves into your heart and flavors all your thoughts; and then it will little matter though those thoughts should be as scattered as autumn leaves. Persons who have never shone in science, nor displayed the least originality of mind, have nevertheless been fully able to accept the doctrine of the cross, and have been saved thereby. Why should not you?

I hear another man cry, "Oh, sir my want of strength lies mainly in this, that I cannot repent sufficiently!" A curious idea men have of what repentance is! Many fancy that so many tears are to be shed, and so many groans are to be heaved, and so much despair is to be endured. Whence comes this unreasonable notion? Unbelief and despair are sins, and therefore I do not see how they can be constituent elements of acceptable repentance; yet there are many who regard them as necessary parts of true Christian experience. They are in great error. Still, I know what they mean, for in the days of my darkness I used to feel in the same way. I desired to repent, but I thought that I could not do it, and yet all the while I was repenting. Odd as it may sound, I felt that I could not feel. I used to get into a corner and weep, because I could not weep; and I fell into bitter sorrow because I could not sorrow for sin. What a jumble it all is when in our unbelieving state we begin to judge our own condition! It is like a blind man looking at his own eyes. My heart was melted within me for fear, because I thought that my heart was as hard as an adamant stone. My heart was broken to think that it would not break. Now I can see that I was exhibiting the very thing which I thought I did not possess; but then I knew not where I was.

Oh that I could help others into the light which I now enjoy! Fain would I say a word which might shorten the time of their bewilderment. I would say a few plain words, and pray "the Comforter" to apply them to the heart.

Remember that the man who truly repents is never satisfied with his own repentance. We can no more repent perfectly than we can live perfectly. However pure our tears, there will always be some dirt in them: there will be something to be repented of even in our best repentance. But listen! To repent is to change your mind about sin, and Christ, and all the great things of God. There is sorrow implied in this; but the main point is the turning of the heart from sin to Christ. If there be this turning, you have the essence of true repentance, even though no alarm and no despair should ever have cast their shadow upon your mind.

If you cannot repent as you would, it will greatly aid you to do so if you will firmly believe that "in due time Christ died for the ungodly." Think of this again and again. How can you continue to be hard-hearted when you know that out of supreme love "Christ died for the ungodly"? Let me persuade you to reason with yourself thus: Ungodly as I am, though this heart of steel will not relent, though I smite in vain upon my

breast, yet He died for such as I am, since He died for the ungodly. Oh that I may believe this and feel the power of it upon my flinty heart!

Blot out every other reflection from your soul, and sit down by the hour together, and meditate deeply on this one resplendent display of unmerited, unexpected, unexampled love, "Christ died for the ungodly." Read over carefully the narrative of the Lord's death, as you find it in the four evangelists. If anything can melt your stubborn heart, it will be a sight of the sufferings of Jesus, and the consideration that he suffered all this for His enemies.

O Jesus! sweet the tears I shed,

While at Thy feet I kneel,

Gaze on Thy wounded, fainting head,

And all Thy sorrows feel.

My heart dissolves to see Thee bleed,

This heart so hard before;

I hear Thee for the guilty plead,

And grief o'erflows the more.

'Twas for the sinful Thou didst die,

And I a sinner stand:

Convinc'd by Thine expiring eye,

Slain by Thy piercd hand.

Surely the cross is that wonder-working rod which can bring water out of a rock. If you understand the full meaning of the divine sacrifice of Jesus, you must repent of ever having been opposed to One who is so full of love. It is written, "They shall look upon him whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn." Repentance will not make you see Christ; but to see Christ will give you repentance. You may not make a Christ out of your repentance, but you must look for repentance to Christ. The Holy Ghost, by turning us to Christ, turns us from sin. Look away, then, from the effect to the cause, from your own repenting to the Lord Jesus, who is exalted on high to give repentance.

I have heard another say, "I am tormented with horrible thoughts. Wherever I go, blasphemies steal in upon me. Frequently at my work a dreadful suggestion forces itself upon me, and even on my bed I am startled from my sleep by whispers of the evil one. I cannot get away from this horrible temptation." Friend, I know what you mean, for I have myself been hunted by this wolf. A man might as well hope to fight a swarm of flies with a sword as to master his own thoughts when they are set on by the devil. A poor tempted soul, assailed by satanic suggestions, is like a traveler I have read of, about whose head and ears and whole body there came a swarm of angry bees. He could not keep them off nor escape from them. They stung him everywhere and threatened to be the death of him. I do not wonder you feel that you

are without strength to stop these hideous and abominable thoughts which Satan pours into your soul; but yet I would remind you of the Scripture before us--"When we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly." Jesus knew where we were and where we should be; He saw that we could not overcome the prince of the power of the air; He knew that we should be greatly worried by him; but even then, when He saw us in that condition, Christ died for the ungodly. Cast the anchor of your faith upon this. The devil himself cannot tell you that you are not ungodly; believe, then, that Jesus died even for such as you are. Remember Martin Luther's way of cutting the devil's head off with his own sword. "Oh," said the devil to Martin Luther, "you are a sinner." "Yes," said he, "Christ died to save sinners." Thus he smote him with his own sword. Hide you in this refuge, and keep there: "In due time Christ died for the ungodly." If you stand to that truth, your blasphemous thoughts which you have not the strength to drive away will go away of themselves; for Satan will see that he is answering no purpose by plaguing you with them.

These thoughts, if you hate them, are none of yours, but are injections of the Devil, for which he is responsible, and not you. If you strive against them, they are no more yours than are the cursings and falsehoods of rioters in the street. It is by means of these thoughts that the Devil would drive you to despair, or at least keep you from trusting Jesus. The poor diseased woman could not come to Jesus for the press, and you are in much the same condition, because of the rush and throng of these dreadful thoughts. Still, she put forth her finger, and touched the fringe of the Lord's garment, and she was healed. Do you the same.

Jesus died for those who are guilty of "all manner of sin and blasphemy," and therefore I am sure He will not refuse those who are unwillingly the captives of evil thoughts. Cast yourself upon Him, thoughts and all, and see if He be not mighty to

save. He can still those horrible whisperings of the fiend, or He can enable you to see them in their true light, so that you may not be worried by them. In His own way He can and will save you, and at length give you perfect peace. Only trust Him for this and everything else.

Sadly perplexing is that form of inability which lies in a supposed want of power to believe. We are not strangers to the cry:

Oh that I could believe,

Then all would easy be;

I would, but cannot; Lord, relieve,

My help must come from thee.

Many remain in the dark for years because they have no power, as they say, to do that which is the giving up of all power and reposing in the power of another, even the Lord Jesus. Indeed, it is a very curious thing, this whole matter of believing; for people do not get much help by trying to believe. Believing does not come by trying. If a person were to make a statement of something that happened this day, I should not tell him that I would try to believe him. If I believed in the truthfulness of the man who told the incident to me and said that he saw it, I should accept the statement at once. If I did not think him a true man, I should, of course, disbelieve him; but there would be no trying in the matter. Now, when God declares that there is salvation in Christ Jesus, I must either believe Him at once, or make Him a liar. Surely you will not hesitate as to which is the right path in this case, The witness of God must be true, and we are bound at

once to believe in Jesus.

But possibly you have been trying to believe too much. Now do not aim at great things. Be satisfied to have a faith that can hold in its hand this one truth, "While we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly." He laid down His life for men while as yet they were not believing in Him, nor were able to believe in Him. He died for men, not as believers, but as sinners. He came to make these sinners into believers and saints; but when He died for them He viewed them as utterly without strength. If you hold to the truth that Christ died for the ungodly, and believe it, your faith will save you, and you may go in peace. If you will trust your soul with Jesus, who died for the ungodly, even though you cannot believe all things, nor move mountains, nor do any other wonderful works, yet you are saved. It is not great faith, but true faith, that saves; and the salvation lies not in the faith, but in the Christ in whom faith trusts. Faith as a grain of mustard seed will bring salvation. It is not the measure of faith, but the sincerity of faith, which is the point to be considered. Surely a man can believe what he knows to be true; and as you know Jesus to be true, you, my friend, can believe in Him.

The cross which is the object of faith, is also, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the cause of it. Sit down and watch the dying Saviour till faith springs up spontaneously in your heart. There is no place like Calvary for creating confidence. The air of that sacred hill brings health to trembling faith. Many a watcher there has said:

While I view Thee, wounded, grieving,

Breathless on the cursed tree,

Lord, I feel my heart believing

That Thou suffer'dst thus for me.

"Alas!" cries another, "my want of strength lies in this direction, that I cannot quit my sin, and I know that I cannot go to Heaven and carry my sin with me." I am glad that you know that, for it is quite true. You must be divorced from your sin, or you cannot be married to Christ. Recollect the question which flashed into the mind of young Bunyan when at his sports on the green on Sunday: "Wilt thou have thy sins and go to hell, or wilt thou quit thy sins and go to heaven?" That brought him to a dead stand. That is a question which every man will have to answer: for there is no going on in sin and going to heaven. That cannot be. You must quit sin or quit hope. Do you reply, "Yes, I am willing enough. To will is present with me, but how to perform that which I would I find not. Sin masters me, and I have no strength." Come, then, if you have no strength, this text is still true, "When we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly." Can you still believe that? However other things may seem to contradict it, will you believe it? God has said it, and it is a fact; therefore, hold on to it like grim death, for your only hope lies there. Believe this and trust Jesus, and you shall soon find power with which to slay your sin; but apart from Him, the strong man armed will hold you for ever his bond slave. Personally, I could never have overcome my own sinfulness. I tried and failed. My evil propensities were too many for me, till, in the belief that Christ died for me, I cast my guilty soul on Him, and then I received a conquering principle by which I overcame my sinful self. The doctrine of the cross can be used to slay sin, even as the old warriors used their huge two-handed swords, and mowed down their foes at every stroke. There is nothing like faith in the sinner's Friend: it overcomes all evil. If Christ has died for me, ungodly as I am, without strength as I am, then I cannot live in sin any longer, but must arouse myself to love and serve Him who hath redeemed me. I cannot trifle with the evil which slew my best Friend. I must be holy for His sake. How can I live in sin when

He has died to save me from it?

See what a splendid help this is to you that are without strength, to know and believe that in due time Christ died for such ungodly ones as you are. Have you caught the idea yet? It is, somehow, so difficult for our darkened, prejudiced, and unbelieving minds to see the essence of the gospel. At times I have thought, when I have done preaching, that I have laid down the gospel so clearly, that the nose on one's face could not be more plain; and yet I perceive that even intelligent hearers have failed to understand what was meant by "Look unto me and be ye saved." Converts usually say that they did not know the gospel till such and such a day; and yet they had heard it for years. The gospel is unknown, not from want of explanation, but from absence of personal revelation. This the Holy Ghost is ready to give, and will give to those who ask Him. Yet when given, the sum total of the truth revealed all lies within these words: "Christ died for the ungodly."

I hear another bewailing himself thus: "Oh, sir, my weakness lies in this, that I do not seem to keep long in one mind! I hear the word on a Sunday, and I am impressed; but in the week I meet with an evil companion, and my good feelings are all gone. My fellow workmen do not believe in anything, and they say such terrible things, and I do not know how to answer them, and so I find myself knocked over." I know this Plastic Pliable very well, and I tremble for him; but at the same time, if he is really sincere, his weakness can be met by divine grace.

The Holy Spirit can cast out the evil spirit of the fear of man. He can make the coward brave. Remember, my poor vacillating friend, you must not remain in this state. It will never do to be mean and beggarly to yourself. Stand upright, and look at yourself, and see if you were ever meant to be like a toad under a harrow, afraid for your life either to move or to stand still. Do have a mind of your own. This is not a spiritual matter only, but one which concerns ordinary manliness.

I would do many things to please my friends; but to go to hell to please them is more than I would venture. It may be very well to do this and that for good fellowship; but it will never do to lose the friendship of God in order to keep on good terms with men. "I know that," says the man, "but still, though I know it, I cannot pluck up courage. I cannot show my colors. I cannot stand fast." Well, to you also I have the same text to bring: "When we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly."

If Peter were here, he would say, "The Lord Jesus died for me even when I was such a poor weak creature that the maid who kept the fire drove me to lie, and to swear that I knew not the Lord." Yes, Jesus died for those who forsook him and fled. Take a firm grip on this truth--"Christ died for the ungodly while they were yet without strength." This is your way out of your cowardice. Get this wrought into your soul, "Christ died for me," and you will soon be ready to die for Him.

Believe it, that He suffered in your place and stead, and offered for you a full, true, and satisfactory expiation. If you believe that fact, you will be forced to feel, "I cannot be ashamed of Him who died for me." A full conviction that this is true will nerve you with a dauntless courage. Look at the saints in the martyr age. In the early days of Christianity, when this great thought of Christ's exceeding love was sparkling in all its freshness in the church, men were not only ready to die, but they grew ambitious to suffer, and even presented themselves by hundreds at the judgment seats of the rulers, confessing the Christ.

I do not say that they were wise to court a cruel death; but it proves my point, that a sense of the love of Jesus lifts the mind above all fear of what man can do to us. Why should it not produce the same effect in you? Oh that it might now inspire you with a brave resolve to come out upon the Lord's side, and be His

follower to the end!

May the Holy Spirit help us to come thus far by faith in the Lord Jesus, and it will be well!

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