

The Altar, the House, the Name

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the centrality of the altar and the Blood of Christ in understanding God's testimony and the believer's life.

Topics: "Spiritual Renewal", "The Significance of the Blood"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the significance of three key elements in God's testimony: The Altar, The House, and The Name, which are foundational to understanding Scripture. He illustrates how every divine reaction and new beginning is marked by the altar, starting from Abel to the remnant returning from Babylon, highlighting the centrality of the Blood of Christ in this process. The sermon stresses the sacredness and incorruptibility of the Blood, which signifies life and is essential for spiritual vitality and ministry. Sparks warns against the dilution of the Blood's significance in modern Christianity and calls for a return to a faith that recognizes the power of the Cross. Ultimately, he urges believers to embody a testimony that reflects the victory of Calvary over all adversities.

Transcript

Let us now gather up in a positive presentation - even at the risk of some repetition - what we believe to be the essence and substance of that testimony for which the Lord has ever reacted, and would now react, in a day of declension. There are three words which represent this testimony, and these three words may be clearly seen to govern and interpret the whole of the Scriptures. There is no part of the Scriptures which does not relate in some way to one or more of the objects which these words denote. They are, in the Old Testament: THE ALTAR, THE HOUSE, THE NAME; or, in the New Testament: THE BLOOD, THE CHURCH, THE SOVEREIGNTY.

THE ALTAR AND THE BLOOD

Every reaction and new beginning that has come from God has been by an altar. The first of these was that of Abel, although there must have been an earlier shedding of blood, when the consciousness of being uncovered led to God's clothing or covering the expelled two with skins of animals. Then, when that world was wiped out in judgment by the flood, a new beginning was made with Noah's altar. When there was nothing of a distinctive character speaking for God in the days of Abram, the Lord laid His hand upon him, called him out as an elect instrument, and brought him to an elect land; and there, with the man and the place of His new beginning brought together, an altar was erected. There was a brief lapse when Abram went down to Egypt, but on his return the original ground was re-taken with a reconstructed altar.

Thus a distinctive seed was marked out; and some four hundred years later, that seed being constituted a corporate testimony against world-wide misrepresentation of God, an altar was the conspicuous factor, initially and continuously. It is significant that, although many thousands of lambs were slain on the night of the separation of that people from Egypt, the record always speaks in the singular, never in the plural. It was always "the lamb" or "a lamb". In God's sight there was only One Lamb, and although every threshold was an altar, there was only one Altar in Heaven's view. (The word in Exodus 12:22, translated "bason", is in the Hebrew "threshold".)

This truth of new beginnings with the altar can be clearly seen afterward in the case of the receiving of the Law and the pattern of the heavenly things by Moses. The great altar of the Tabernacle and Temple governed the life of Israel for many years, until the times of declension set in, and then each movement back toward God was marked by the altar coming again into its place. It was so in Elijah's stand, in 1 Kings 18; and it was so with the revival under Hezekiah, in 2 Chronicles 30. It was so again with Josiah - 2 Chronicles 35. But hardly had Josiah passed off the scene than his work fell in ruins. Judgment fell, Jerusalem was destroyed, the Temple burnt, and the people went into captivity. After seventy years a remnant returned, and we read in Ezra 3:3 that the first thing that the remnant did was to "set the altar in its place".

This is God's new work in reaction. We have not gathered in every instance, but only enough to indicate, and perhaps establish a recognition of the principle. We leave the matter of the altar there for the time being, while we consider the essential element in the altar, which is the BLOOD.

The testimony of the altar is the testimony of the Blood. As we approach this sacred thing, may we urge our readers to give it the most careful heed? Here we touch the heart of everything. There has been nothing so assailed as the testimony of the Blood: by ridicule, by a sneer, by intellectual superiority, from one direction; by an ignorant and false refinement which pretends to be shocked, from another; by a merely rationalistic and philosophical interpretation, which sees no more than a crude system of ritual and rite by which a universal religious instinct expresses itself - a form and idea which belongs to times of immaturity and unenlightenment - from yet a third; these and many other modes of assault from its opponents. Then from its would-be friends it suffers in numerous ways, ranging from the ritualistic and sacerdotal debasement, which has names and forms without life and power, to the other swing of the pendulum, marked by a superficial, cheap, frivolous, noisy, jazz-chorus singing about this most holy and sacred thing - "the precious Blood".

There is nothing in the universe more bitterly hated and more terribly feared by the adversary than the Blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. But if it is to be a mighty operative factor in life and service, faith must have as intelligent a basis concerning it as possible; and we are especially concerned with the vocation of the people of God here! Let us then see what the Blood stands for.

THE MEANING OF THE BLOOD

There are two aspects of this whole matter of the Blood. One (concerning which we have already said something) is that a death has taken place, and in that death one whole kind of humanity has, in the mind of God, been set aside. This relates to "Him who knew no sin... made... sin on our behalf" ("in our stead") (2 Cor. 5:21).

The other, about which we shall now speak more particularly, is that which sets forth the inherently incorruptible life of God's Son made flesh. If all that is said about the Blood relates only to death, then its

sacredness cannot be understood, but becomes a supreme problem. We have dealt with this aspect in the book entitled "The Centrality and Universality of the Cross", but we will point out the essential elements here:

Firstly, let us note the sacredness of life as in the blood. We are now familiar with the scriptural teaching that "the life... is in the blood" (Lev. 17:1), and "the blood is the life" (Deut. 12:23). There is a tremendous emphasis in Scripture upon the sacredness of blood. Indeed the word 'soul' is often used interchangeably with both 'blood' and 'life' and all the characteristics and values of the soul are associated in the same way with the 'blood' and the 'life'. But the blood as the life is related in a peculiar way to God, as representing His specific prerogatives. Thus the whole matter is gathered up in a reservation and a provision as laid down in Leviticus and in John's Gospel.

In Leviticus the Lord repeatedly stresses that blood is not to be drunk. This role would be broken under a penalty of death (Lev. 7:26,27, 17:10-12). The law concerning blood and its sacredness was carried so far that if a man went hunting and killed a quarry, he was to pour out the blood on the ground and cover it over with dust (Lev. 17:13). He was not to leave the blood exposed, but honour it, show it the same reverence, as he would the body of a fallen man.

Now does it not strike you with a great force of significance that, when we have repeatedly read: "Ye shall eat no manner of blood... Whosoever eateth any blood... shall be cut off", then we turn and read in John 6:5: 'Except ye drink the blood of the Son of Man, ye have no life'? Surely the very first thing which this implies is that the whole question of life has been shut up by God to the Person and Cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is the life of the Person, and gives to the Person a uniqueness and distinctiveness which no other in history has ever had. Then it gives to the Cross of the Lord Jesus a unique and supreme meaning and value, in that it was there that He shed His Blood and poured forth His life; releasing that life to be received by all who believed on the Person and accepted the meaning of His Cross.

The spiritually blind Jewish religious leaders of John 6 would naturally be very scandalized at His words about drinking blood, and would revert to the tradition of the letter of Leviticus. This would be because on the one hand they did not realise the meaning of that reservation, and on the other hand they did not recognise who Jesus was. To recognise the Lord Jesus is to be lifted above law into life.

The thought of the sacredness of the Blood as the life is that of the Divine relationship of it: that is, that it is bound up with the Lord and no man can touch it. All of a piece with this is bound up with the Lord and no man can touch it. All of a piece with this is -

THE HOLINESS OF THE BLOOD

We are familiar with the injunctions concerning the spotlessness of the offerings of old - "without spot, or blemish". There was a sense in which the priests were expert fault-finders! Their business was to find fault if they could. The discovery of a blemish in a proffered sacrifice meant its immediate rejection. Their eyes were as the eyes of God in this matter. A beast was passed only after the most scrupulous investigation, when the formula 'It is perfect' was pronounced over it.

Such, likewise, then, was the blood, and this is the testimony of the holiness of the life of the Lord Jesus, and consequently of the nature of that Divine deposit within the born-again child of God. We are not perfect or spotless, but the life from Him in us is, and by its vital activity through faith and obedience we are to be conformed to His image, and are assured that one day we shall be like Him. Blessed be God, we

have the earnest of perfection. This precious Blood does cleanse.

This leads us at this point to say a brief word on

THE SHEDDING AND SPRINKLING OF THE BLOOD.

If we are not mistaken, the shedding relates to the whole question of sin, guilt, death, judgment; and by the shedding there is remission, and the whole ground of salvation is secured.

The sprinkling is that by which we are brought into living vocational fellowship with God. The Tabernacle and Priesthood of old represented, not only Israel's salvation, but Israel's priestly ministry in the nations. They were meant to be "a kingdom of priests", and God's ministering instrument among and to all nations.

Hence there was a special significance given to the sprinkling of the blood. Although the Tabernacle was perfect as a structure; although the "pattern" was carried out to the last detail; although the priesthood was complete in number and adornment: nothing and no one could function until every part - altar, laver, table, curtains, candlestick, golden altar, mercy-seat, vessels, instruments, ear, thumb, toe, etc. - had been sprinkled with the blood. It was regarded as a higher function to catch the blood for sprinkling even than to slay the sacrifice and thus shed the blood.

Nothing lives in the service and ministry of God, save in virtue of sprinkled blood. Oh, that men would see this today! The most perfect structure, the most complete outfit, the most ornate edifice, the most extensive organization, the most fastidious order, and the most devout purpose will all fail to function in the eternal interests of God, apart from the virtue of the precious Blood of the Lord Jesus. The Holy Spirit - the Fire of God - is indispensable to spiritual life and energy, and He only comes where that Blood has been sprinkled. The Blood and the Spirit are one, and always go together - one as the preparation, the other as the attestation. Calvary precedes Pentecost. The Cross is the way to the glorifying. To be crucified with Christ is to have put away that "flesh" upon which the Holy Oil may not come. God is never going to quicken and vitalise what He has for ever put away; neither will He glorify and use in His service that which is of man.

Whatever the means and methods or necessities which come in their course, the one all-inclusive object of the Divine reactions is to have that in the earth which is wholly and undividedly of God. To this end it is essential that the Cross be wrought so deeply into the experience of the Lord's servants that they shall come to utter despair as to themselves and all else, and send up a full heart-cry for the fullness of the Holy Spirit. To such a crisis the Lord will work by all manner of means, slowly breaking down all other ground of confidence, and writing 'failure' on all other resource.

The testimony of the Blood, the Cross, then, is the testimony of that which is uniquely, wholly, sacredly of God in absolute holiness.

THE INCORRUPTIBILITY OF THE BLOOD

The next related factor in the Blood as the Life is its incorruptibility and indestructibility. These elements go together and are one. What is incorruptible is indestructible.

This is a life over which death has no power. Death has been met in the power of this life. Hades has been entered and plundered in the power of this life. Satan and his entire kingdom have had their might exhausted by the power of this life. He who was and is this Life, now lives for evermore, as the Testimony

to the universal triumph of His own Blood over every force that has stood in the way of God's end.

By this imperishable life He has perfected salvation. Nothing of old was ever perfect, because the mediators constantly changed by death; death breaking in all the time meant no completeness. But this High Priest perfects for ever, because He lives after the power of an endless, "indissoluble" life. Therefore He is able to save to the uttermost, i.e., the ultimate and final end (Heb. 7:16, 23-25).

By this imperishable life He has bound His own to Himself. They share this life by new birth, and they will never die. Death is not cessation of being; it is something spiritual. Life triumphant over death is spiritual, and means ascendancy over sin, self, Satan, death. In other words, it is power and victory.

By this indestructible life the Lord Jesus has inaugurated a ministry and a work which will persist to its ultimate consummation, in spite of every force of earth and hell which may be hurled against it. Mighty empires and powerful hierarchies have been brought to ruins in setting themselves against that which He said He would build. "The gates [i.e., counsels] of Hades" have NOT prevailed, intensely as they have striven.

It is a blessed thing to be in and a part of that work which shall abide for ever. For a man's work to go to pieces when he is withdrawn is no compliment to him. It only means that it was MAN'S work, not God's. Like kingdoms, men rise and wane. Are we seeking to make a name for OURSELVES? This is very short-sighted, at best. The testimony to which God is reacting relates to a work which stands and persists when every destructive force has spent itself. This testimony, and such a work, is in virtue of the Blood of the Lord Jesus.

There are all kinds of alarms today because of rapid and drastic changes. Historic creeds are being treated as mere scraps of paper, and that by leading ecclesiastical representatives. Hoary institutions and traditions are rapidly losing their hold and influence. Organized Christianity is markedly on the wane. The maintenance of the religious system is demanding all the resource, acumen, wit, ingenuity and even cunning of men. There never were so many 'attractions', schemes, popularising methods, etc., to keep up the 'church' (?). Even in fairly evangelical quarters the appeals for help are so numerous that it is becoming - as someone has said - a matter of not being able to afford to go to church.

All this and much more speaks of failure and defeat, but the Lord will have that in the earth which is His triumph. To "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3) is something more than to contend for orthodoxy of doctrine; to champion an evangelical creed; to be a 'fundamentalist'. It is to recognise and fervently seek to secure for God that upon which His own heart is set: namely, a people of the Altar, the Cross, the Blood. A people who have been crucified with Christ in spiritual reality and apprehension, and whose life is an abiding testimony to Calvary's victory over all Christ's foes, within and without, and from whom there flows to the ends of the earth the stream of Divine, holy, mighty, energizing and indestructible life.

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