

The Horns of the Altar

by C.H. Spurgeon

C.H. Spurgeon teaches that true salvation comes not from outward religious rituals or professions but from laying hold in faith on the spiritual altar of Jesus Christ.

Scripture: 1 Kings 2:30, Hebrews 9:11-12, John 3:3, 1 Timothy 2:5, 1 Corinthians 11:27-29, Romans 10:17

Topics: "Salvation", "Faith", "Christian Ordinances"

Description

In this powerful sermon, C.H. Spurgeon explores the biblical story of Joab fleeing to the horns of the altar and draws a profound spiritual lesson about the futility of trusting in outward religious rituals for salvation. He passionately exhorts listeners to place their faith solely in Jesus Christ, the true spiritual altar, emphasizing that only through Him can sinners find eternal refuge. Spurgeon warns against the dangers of relying on sacraments, church membership, or orthodox doctrine without a heart transformed by faith. This message challenges believers and seekers alike to examine the foundation of their hope and to cling firmly to Christ alone.

Transcript

On March 23rd, 1884,

"And he said, Nay; but I will die here."—1 Kings 2:30

WE MUST tell you the story. Solomon was to be the king after David, but his elder brother, Adonijah, was preferred by Joab, the captain of the host, and by Abiathar, the priest; and, therefore, they got together, and tried to steal a march upon dying David, and set up Adonijah. They utterly failed in this; and when Solomon came to the throne Adonijah was afraid for his life, and fled to the horns of the altar at the tabernacle for shelter. Solomon permitted him to find sanctuary there, and forgave him his offence, and said that if he proved himself a worthy man he should live without further molestation. But very soon he began plotting again, and sought to undermine Solomon now that their venerable father was dead. It became therefore necessary, especially according to oriental ideas, for Solomon to strike a heavy blow; and he determined to begin with Joab—the bottom of all the mischief, who, though he had not followed after Absalom in David's time, was now following after Adonijah. No sooner had the king determined upon this, than Joab, conscience-stricken, began to look to himself and fly. Read the twenty-eighth verse. "Then tidings came to Joab: for Joab had turned after Adonijah, though he turned not after Absalom. And Joab fled unto the tabernacle of the Lord, and caught hold on the horns of the altar." I suppose that he thought that, as Adonijah had done this successfully before, Joab might repeat it, and have some hope for his life.

Of course. he had no right to enter into the holy place, and lay hold on the horns of the altar; but being driven to desperation, he knew not what else to do. He was a man of hoary head, who had thirty or more years before committed two atrocious murders, and now they came home to him. He did not know where to fly except he fled to the horns of an altar, which he had very seldom approached before. As far as we can judge, he had shown little respect to religion during his lifetime. He was a rough man of war, and cared little enough about God, or the tabernacle, or the priests, or the altar; but when he was in danger, he fled to that which he had avoided, and sought to make a refuge of that which he had neglected. He was not the only man that had done the same. Perhaps there are some here who before long will be trying to escape from impending woe by like means.

Now, I want you to notice that when Joab fled to the tabernacle of the Lord, and took hold of the horns of the altar, it was of no use to him. "And it was told king Solomon that Joab was fled unto the tabernacle of the Lord; and, behold, he is by the altar. Then Solomon sent Benaiah the son of Jehoiada, saying, Go, fall upon him. And Benaiah came to the tabernacle of the Lord and said unto him, Thus saith the king, Come forth. And he said, Nay; but I will die here. And Benaiah brought the king word again, saying, Thus saith Joab, and thus he answered me. And the king said unto him, Do as he hath said, and fall upon him, and bury him; that thou mayest take away the innocent blood, which Joab shed, from me, and from the house of my father. And the Lord shall return his blood upon his own head, who fell upon two men, more righteous and better than he, and slew them with the sword, my father David not knowing thereof, to wit, Abner the son of Ner, captain of the host of Israel, and Amasa, the son of Jether, captain of the host of Judah. Their blood shall therefore return upon the head of Joab. So Benaiah the son of Jehoida went up, and fell upon him, and slew him: and he was buried in his own house in the wilderness."

I have two lessons I am anxious to teach at this time. The first is derived from the fact that Joab found no benefit of sanctuary even though he laid hold of the horns of the altar of God's house, from which I gather this lesson—that outward ordinances will avail nothing. Before the living God, who is greater and wiser than Solomon, it will be of no avail to any man to lay hold upon the horns of the altar. But, secondly, there is an altar—a spiritual altar—whereof if a man do but lay hold upon the horns, and say, "Nay; but I will die here," he shall never die; but he shall be safe against the sword of justice for ever; for the Lord has appointed an altar in the person of his own dear Son, Jesus Christ, where there shall be shelter for the very vilest of sinners if they do but come and lay hold thereon.

I. To begin, then, first, OUTWARD ORDINANCES AVAIL NOT. The laying hold upon the literal horns of an altar, which can be handled, availed not Joab. There are many—oh, how many still!—that are hoping to be saved, because they lay hold, as they think, upon the horns of the sacraments. Men of unhallowed life, nevertheless, come to the sacramental table, looking for a blessing. Do they not know that they pollute it? Do they not know that they are committing a high sin, and a great misdemeanour against God, by coming amongst his people, where they have no right to be? And yet they think that by committing this atrocity they are securing to themselves safety. How common it is to find in this city, when an irreligious man is dying, that someone will say, "Oh, he is all right; for a clergyman has been, and given him the sacrament." I often marvel how men calling themselves the servants of God can dare thus to profane the ordinance of the Lord. Did he ever intend the blessed memorial of the Lord's supper to be a kind of superstitious vialicum, a something upon which ungodly men may depend in their last hour, as if it could put away sin. I do not one half so much blame the poor ignorant and superstitious persons who seek after the sacrament in their dying hours, as I do the men who ought to know better, but who pander to what is as downright a superstition as anything that ever came from the church of Rome, or, for the matter of that, from the fetish

worship of the most deluded African tribe. Do they conceive that grace comes to men by bits of bread and drops of wine? These things are meant to put us in memory of the Lord Jesus Christ, and, as far as they do that, and quicken our thoughts of him, they are useful to us; but there is no wizardry or witchcraft linked with these two emblems, so they convey as form of grace. If you do rely upon such things, I can only say that this error is all of a piece: it is a superstition which begins with, "In my baptism, wherein I was made a member of Christ, a child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven"; which statement is altogether false; and then it continues the delusion by prostituting an ordinance meant for the living child of God, and giving it to the ungodly, the ignorant, and the superstitious, as though it could make them meet for entering heaven. I charge you, as before the Lord, cleanse yourselves of this superstition. There is no salvation apart from faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; and you might as well trust in your sins as in sacraments. In fact, the sacraments become sins to men who trust in them, for those men sin against the ordinances of the Lord by putting them where they never ought to be, and making an Antichrist of them, so as to push Christ out of his place with their baptisms and their masses. If you died with the sacramental bread in your mouths, ye will lost unless your faith is in the Lord Jesus Christ alone. Your hands, which are superstitiously laid upon the altar's horns, might as well be placed upon your weapons of rebellion. Outward emblems can do you no good whatsoever if you remain unspiritual. Without faith in Christ, even the ordinances of God become things to condemn you. If ye eat and drink unworthily ye eat and drink condemnation to yourselves, not discerning the Lord's body; and, if this be true, how dare any unconverted, unbelieving man put his trust in the outward ordinance of which he has no right to partake?

There are others who put their trust in religious observances of sundry kinds. Their visible altar-horn is something which they believe to be very proper and right, and which, indeed, may be so if wisely used, for the thing is good if used lawfully; but it will be their ruin if it be put out of its own place. For instance, there are, doubtless, some who think that they are all right because they frequent sermons. They delight to be found hearing the gospel. Now, in this you do well, for, "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God"; but, if you suppose that the mere hearing of a sermon with the outward ear can save you, you suppose what is untrue, and you build the house of your hope on sand. "Oh, sir, I have sat to hear the true gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ these many years." Yes, and these many years you have rejected it. The kingdom of God has come nigh unto you, but I fear it will work your damnation through your unbelief; for it will be a savour of death unto you. I fear that in the last great day it shall be seen that I have ministered unto some of you to your hurt. It will not be laid to my charge, but to yours, if I have been faithful in the declaration of the word. Oh, may God grant that no man or woman among you may ever put the slightest faith in the mere hearing of the word! Except ye receive it by faith ye deceive your own souls; if ye are hearers only, what good can come of it?

"Oh, but," says another, "I attend prayer meetings." I admit that it is not every hypocrite that will regularly come to prayer-meetings, but there are some that do; and, though you are so fond of prayer-meetings, yet, my dear friend, unless it can be said of you, "Behold he prayeth," you need not make sure of safety. Your being found in the place where prayer is wont to be made may be no true sign of grace. "Ay, but I do more than that, for I have prayers in my own house." Yes, and very proper, too. I would that all did the same; I am grieved that any should neglect the ordinance of family prayer. But yet, if you think that the reading of a form of prayer in your household, or even the use of extempore prayer, is a thing to be relied upon for salvation, you do greatly err. "He that believeth in him hath everlasting life", but he that believes not in the Lord Jesus Christ does but offer unbelieving prayer to God; and what is that but a vain sacrifice which he cannot accept? Oh, do not rely upon the habit of outward worship, or you will lean on a bulrush!

"But I regularly read a chapter," says one. I am extremely glad you do, and God bless that chapter to you! I would that all were in the habit of reading right thought the Bible regularly, and endeavouring to understand it; but, if you trust in your Bible-readings as a ground of salvation, you are resting upon a mere soap-bubble which will burst under your weight. Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, producing in the soul a change of heart, a new birth unto God, this is what is wanted; and, apart from that, all the Bible reading you ever practice can do you no good whatsoever. "Ye must be born again. Ye must be born again"; and if they be not this inward change, then vain is all outward observance. You may wash a corpse, you may clothe that corpse in the purest white shroud that was ever woven, but when all is done it does not live; and what are all the outward devotions of a carnal man but dead things which bring no life with them to men dead in sin?

Some are foolish enough to put their confidence in ministers. It would seem to me to be the maddest thing in all the world for anybody to have confidence in me as to helping him in his salvation; and I trust that nobody is such a fool. I cannot even save myself; what can I do for others? Do not come to me with "Give us of your oil," for I have not enough for myself, except as I keep on begging a supply. When I look at the priests in whom some trust, especially such as I have seen abroad, they may be very fine fellows, but I would not trust some of them with a half-crown, let alone my soul. The very look of most priests makes me wonder how they manage to secure power over people's minds. They may know a great deal, but they do not look as if they were overdone with wit. I would as soon trust my soul in the hands of a gipsy with a red cloak as I would with the best-ordained priest or bishop that ever lived. There is one Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, and he who sets up another is an enemy of souls. There is but one who can be trusted with our soul affairs, even the Lord Jesus Christ; and woe to us if we put our confidence in men! Ordained or unordained, shaven or unshorn, they cannot help us. Yet I know that people do trust in ministers most foolishly. I remember years ago being at three o'clock in the morning in a house now pulled down, which stood not far from the London Bridge railway-station. A gentleman of considerable means had spent the Sunday at Brighton, had come home, and had been taken with cholera on a sudden, and nothing would do him, when he was in the pangs of death, but he must send for me. I went, not knowing what was required of me. But when I got there what could I do? There was a little consciousness left to the man, and I spoke to him of Jesus. I asked if he had a Bible. The people of the house searched high and low, but there was no such thing to be found. The mind was soon too beclouded for further comprehension, and as I came away I asked, "Has he ever gone to a place of worship?" No, never—never cared for such a thing; but as soon as he was ill, then, "Oh, send for Mr. Spurgeon!" He must come, and nobody else: and there I stood, and what could I do? There died in the City of London, not long ago, a tradesman of much wealth; and when he came to die, though I had never seen the man in my life before, he importunately asked for me. I could not go. My brother went to see him, and, after setting before him the way of salvation, he enquired, "What made you wish to see my brother?" "Well," he said, "you know whenever I have a doctor I always like to get the best; and when I employ a lawyer I like a man who is high in the profession. Money is no object. I want the best possible help." Ah me! I shuddered at being so regarded. The best help he could get! That best is nothing—less than nothing, and vanity. What can we do for you, dear hearts, if you will not have our Saviour? We can stand and weep over you, and break our hearts to think that you reject him; but what can we do? Oh, if we could let you into heaven, if we could renew your hearts, how joyfully would we perform the miracle; but we claim no such power, no such influence! Go you to Christ, and lay hold upon the true altar-horn; but do not be so foolish as to put confidence in us or in any other ministers.

"Ah, well," says one, "I am free of that. I am a professor of religion, and have been a member of a church now these twenty years." You may be a member of a church fifty years, but you will be damned at last unless you are a member of Christ. It matters not though you are a church-officer, a deacon, an elder, a pastor, a bishop, or even Archbishop of Canterbury, or an apostle, you will perish as surely as Judas, who betrayed his Master with a kiss, unless your heart is right with God. I pray you, put no confidence in your profession. Unless you have Christ in your heart, a profession is but a painted pageantry for a soul to go to hell in. As a corpse is drawn to the grave by horses adorned with nodding plumes, so may you find in an outward profession a pompous way of being lost. God save us from that!

"No," says one, " but I do not trust in mere profession. I have great reliance upon orthodoxy. I will have sound doctrine." That is right, friend, I would have all men value the truth. "My confidence is in my sound doctrine." That is not mine, friend, and I hope that it will not be yours long, for many lost souls have firmly believed orthodox doctrine. In fact, I question whether any one is more orthodox than the devil, for the devils believe and tremble. Satan is no skeptic; he has too much knowledge for that. Devils believe and tremble, and yet they are devils still. Put no confidence in the mere fact that you hold to an orthodox faith, for a dead orthodoxy soon corrupts. You must have faith in Christ, or else this altar-horn of a correct creed, on which you lay your hand, will bring you no salvation.

I will not enlarge upon this topic. Whatever you depend upon apart from the blood and righteousness of Christ, away with it! Away with it! If you are even depending upon your own repentance, and your faith, away with them! If you are looking to your own prayers or alms, I can only cry again,—Away with them! Nothing but the blood of Jesus; nothing but the atoning sacrifice; but, if you come and lay your hand upon that, blessed shall you be.

II. That assurance is the second part of our discourse, on which I will speak briefly. COMING TO THE SPIRITUAL ALTAR, AND LAYING OUR HAND UPON IT, WILL SAVE US.

Now, notice first, the act itself. Joab came within the tabernacle. So, poor soul, come and hide yourself in Christ. Joab took hold of the horns, the projecting corners of the altar, and he would not let go. Come, trembling sinners, and take hold on Christ Jesus.

"My faith doth lay her hand

On that dear head of thine;

While like a penitent I stand,

And there confess my sin."

Lean with your hand of faith upon your Lord, and say, "This Christ is mine. I accept it as the gift of God to me, unworthy though I be."

When that is done, a fierce demand may be made upon you. The enemy will probably cry, "Come forth! Come forth!" The self-righteous will say, "What right has a sinner as you to trust Christ? Come forth!" Mind you say to them, "Nay, but I will die here." Your sins and your guilty conscience will cry to you, "Come forth! Come forth! You must not lay hold of Christ. See what you have been, and what you are, and what you are likely to be." Answer to these voices, "Nay, but I will die here. I will never give up my hold of Christ." Satan will come, and he will howl out, "Come forth! What right have you with the Lord Jesus Christ? You cannot think that he came to save such a lost one as you are." Do not listen to him. As often

as he howls at you, only say to yourself, "Nay, but I will die here." I pray God that every sinner here may be brought to this desperate resolve, "If I perish, I will perish trusting in the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ. If I must die, I will die here." For certain, we shall die anywhere else. If we trust in any but Jesus, we must perish. "Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid." "Without shedding of blood there is no remission of sin." "He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not,"—whatever else he trusts to,— "is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only-begotten Son of God." Make, then, this desperate resolve—

If I must die, here will I die,

Here at the cross I bide;

To whom or whither should I fly?

Where else can I confide?

Say to all those who call you away, "Nay, but I will die here"; for nobody ever did perish trusting in Jesus. There has not been through all these centuries a single instance of a soul being cast away that came all guilty and hell-deserving, and took Christ to be its salvation. If you perish, you will then be the first that perished with his hand laid upon Christ. His love and power can never fail a sinner's confidence. Wherefore, may God the Holy Spirit lead you to resolve, "If I must die, I will die here." Listen to me, soul, whoever thou mayest be out of the crowd, man or women, whatever thy life may have been, even though it should have been that of a harlot or a thief, a drunkard or a profligate, if thou wilt now believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, thou shalt be saved; for, if not, then God himself will have missed his greatest design. What did he give Jesus for but to save sinners? What did he lay sin upon Jesus for, but that he might take it off the sinner, and let him go free, and be pardoned? If, then, Christ fails, God's grandest expedient has broken down. That method by which the Lord resolved to show what his almighty grace can do has proved to be a failure if a believing sinner is not saved. Dost thou think that such a thing can ever be? It is blasphemy to think that Jehovah can be defeated. He that believes in Christ shall be saved; nay, he is saved.

If thou art not saved believing in Christ, then Christ himself is dishonoured. Oh, let them once know, down in the dark abode of fallen spirits, that a man has trusted in Christ and yet has not been saved, I tell you that they will make such exultation over Christ as Philistia made over Samson when his eyes were put out. They would feel that they had defeated the Prince of Glory. They would trample on his blood, and ridicule his claim to be the Saviour of men. If any soul can truly say hereafter, "I went to Christ, and he refused me," then Christ does not speak the truth when he says, "Him that cometh to me I will in nowise cast out." Then he has changed his nature, foregone his word, and foresworn himself. But that also can never be. Wherefore, dear heart, cling to Jesus, and say still, "If I die, I will die here."

Moreover, if thou canst perish trusting in Christ thou wilt discourage all the saints of God; for if Christ can break his promise to one, then why not to another? If one promise fails, why not all the promises? If the blood has lost its power, how can any of us ever hope to enter heaven? I say it will breed great discouragement in the hearts of all people if this be true; for what a wet blanket would it throw over all thy fellow-sinners! If they are coming to Christ, they will start back, and say, "What is the good of it? Here is one that came to Jesus, and he did not save him. He trusted in the precious blood, and yet his sin was laid to his charge." If one fails, why not the rest? I must give up preaching the gospel when once I hear of a man trusting Jesus and not being saved; for I should be afraid to speak with boldness, as I now do.

If one poor soul that puts his trust in Christ should be cast away it would spoil heaven itself. What security is there for glorified spirits that their splendours shall endure except the promise of a faithful, covenant-keeping God? If, then, looking down from their celestial seats, they behold the great Father breaking his promise, and the Son of God unable to save those for whom he died, then will they say, "We will lay our harps aside, and put our palms away, for we, too, after all, may perish." See, then, O man, heaven and earth, ay, God and his Christ, as to their credit and their glory, do stand and fall with the salvation of every believing sinner. If I were in your stead tonight, I think that I should bless God to have this matter put so plainly to me. I know that years ago, when I was under a sense of sin, if I had heard even such a poor sermon as this I should have jumped for joy at it, and would have ventured upon Christ at once. Come, poor soul; come at once. You have heard the gospel long enough; now obey it. You have heard about Christ long enough; now trust in him. You have been invited and entreated, and pleaded with; now yield to his grace. Yield to joy and peace by trusting in him who will give you both of these as soon as you have rested in him.

Look! sinner, look! A look out of thyself will save thee. Look away from all thy works, and prayers, and tears, and feelings, and church-goings, and chapel-goings, and sacraments, and ministers. Look alone to Jesus. Look at once to him who on the bloody tree made expiation, and who bids thee look, and thou shalt live.

God make this present hour to be the period of thy new birth. I pray it, and so do his people. The Lord hearken to our intercessions, for Christ's sake. Amen.

Portion of Scripture read before Sermon—Psalms 61 and 62.

Hymns from "Our Own Hymn Book"—560, 589, 514.

LETTER FROM MR. SPURGEON

DEAR FRIENDS AND BRETHREN,—As I am expected to report myself weekly, and have only this corner left to do it in, the bulletin shall be brief. Weather unsettled; progress fair, but not rapid. I find myself too readily depressed with small matters, and I have a sense of unfitness for my future work. This shows that while rest has done much, there is more to be done. Three weeks have worked such marvels that I hope in due time to return in full vigor.

My heart is with the Special Services at the Tabernacle; for which I beg every reader to pray daily.

Mentone, February 21st, 1885.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/ch-spurgeon/the-horns-of-the-altar/>

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