

# Groves Around the Altar

by John Rhys Watkins

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of the cross in our lives, warning against obscuring its significance and calling for a return to the gospel of salvation through Christ alone.*

**Duration:** 35:49

**Scripture:** Deuteronomy 16:21, Matthew 10:38, 1 Corinthians 1:18, Galatians 5:21, Philippians 2:5, Hebrews 12:2

**Topics:** "Worship"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the importance of the cross in the Christian faith. He explains that the world hates the cross and often mocks it, but it is through the cross that God displays His Son. The preacher emphasizes that the cross is not just a doctrine or theory, but an essential experience that believers must go through. He also highlights the need for conviction and brokenness before restoration can occur, and urges believers to think, walk, and talk like God in order to be a true church for Christ. The sermon concludes with a reminder that the cross reveals the full horror of sin and the sacrifice of Jesus, and calls for the cross to be preached and embraced in the Church today.

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## Transcript

Deuteronomy chapter 16, the beginning of verse 21, and it says this, Thou shalt not plant thee a grove of any trees near unto the altar of the Lord thy God which thou shalt make thee, neither shalt thou set thee up any image which the Lord thy God hateth. We're going to talk about the cross tonight. In this passage of scripture, it's easy to see that the altar represents the cross.

The Hebrew word for altar means a place of sacrifice. There are no prizes for working out that the cross of Christ was a place of sacrifice, that great sacrifice of Calvary. On that cross, God offered the one and only sufficient sacrifice for sin, the spotless lamb of God, the man Christ Jesus.

Salvation is not Christ plus self-effort, it is Christ and Christ alone. We must reconcile that in your mind tonight. It is only Christ, nothing of self, cannot add anything to that perfect sacrifice.

He paid the price, but we are responsible. I said we are responsible for what we receive and what we do with the gift which we have received. The altar of the Old Testament is the cross of the new.

Moses writes in this book, warns of the dangers of misinterpreting the intrinsic value of the altar. This is not only a warning to Israel concerning the proper place of the altar, but also a warning to the church

concerning the proper place of the cross. Without the cross, we are not his people.

A church without the cross is just an organization. It's just a happy club without that cross. This is why we see so much breakdown in the church culture, in the Christian culture, because the cross is not there.

It's not in its rightful place. The altar was central in ministering to God in both the tabernacle and the temple. In the time of Jesus, the altar was at the very center of that temple grounds.

If you strung a line from one corner of the altar to the other, they would cross in the center of the altar. All lines joined at the altar and all lines went out from that altar. The same can be said of the cross.

It must be the very center of our ministry. Just as the altar governed all covenant ministries, so the cross governs all new covenant ministries. Without the cross, the place of sacrifice, there is no real substance and certainly no reality in the life of the church.

The work of the cross is and must be a continuous thing amongst the people of God. If we are Christ's people, that cross will be continuously working amongst us. It hasn't ended the cross.

It continually works the principle of the cross. All believers have already been judged. You've been judged in the cross of Christ.

That old Adamic nature has been tried. It's been found guilty by God. It's been done away with in the cross of Christ.

We're to reckon ourselves dead to sin but alive unto Christ. We must understand that salvation is of the Lord. It's all His work, nothing to do with us.

When the perfect sacrifice was accepted, we were declared new creatures. He doesn't look upon that Adamic nature anymore. He looks at us as the new creatures in Christ, the new creation.

That was the first and the foremost work of the cross. Just as the Lord led us to Christ, the cross will ultimately lead us to heaven. You must have assurance tonight of salvation.

Do you know tonight whom you have believed? I'm not coming here to knock anyone's salvation. But you must know, you must not have any doubts at all. If there are doubts, there must be something wrong.

I'm not talking about little misgivings. You'll always get them. But you must know that you're saved.

If you don't know that you're saved, then you're not saved. You've not come to that cross. Paul writes in Galatians as a new creature to the new creation.

He says this, he says, God forbid that I should glory save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ by whom the world is crucified unto me and I unto the world. It was the cross that Paul preached and we must like Paul preach the same cross. We must continue in this calling.

He says, for the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness, but unto us which are saved. It is the power of God. It's the power of God unto salvation, the preaching of the cross, nothing else.

The devil knows full well that all he has to do to shipwreck the faith of a church is to corrupt or even to just obscure that cross. In the days of Moses, they were told not to plant a grove around the altars. A grove of trees would hide away the full impact of that sacrificial system.

Those pagan religions around them, they also had their altars, they had their sacrifices, but they surrounded those very altars with groves. They had their own sacrificial system. They had their own way of doing things.

Very often the difference between the two religions could hardly be noticed. Nevertheless, the pagan altars were a detestable thing to the Lord. They were not open to God.

They were not ordained of God. The Lord commanded that no groves be planted around that altar. There must be no visual obscurity of this bloody spectacle that was to take place.

The altar spoke of death. It was a place which could be smelt long before it could be seen. A place where living flesh would die.

Blood would stain that altar day after day and night after night in both the tabernacle and the temple. It was not a place of beauty. It was not a place of fragrance, of sweet perfume.

It was a place of awful to hedge it around. It must be seen in its own nakedness. This is a bloody religion which we preach.

This is a religion of sacrifice. We forget this. If the church forgets it, it does at its own peril.

No matter how much the church would like to get away from the truth of the cross, and we've lost Christ. The cross of Christ is not a thing of beauty or prestige. It is and always must remain a vulgarity to the world.

They must despise the cross. The cross must never be dressed for window display or acceptability. It must remain a bloody and a naked splendor to the church, but a vulgarity to that world.

Death cannot be dressed. A corpse may be dressed, but you can never hide the fact that that corpse, it is dead. It has no life in it.

You cannot perfume the stench of death. There is an unmistakable odor that comes long before death sets in. Death is an ugly thing.

It cannot be hid. It cannot be put away. It cannot be disguised.

Death is death, and that's what it is. And the death of the cross is the most terrible of all things. It's a cursed thing, but the cross must be in operation in the church of Christ today.

To preach the cross is to preach the full horror of sin. It was sin and sin only that crucified that innocent man. He knew no sin, says the word of God, but sin nailed him bodily onto that cross.

There was no robe around that cross of Calvary, mister. There was no lilac coverings, no curtains to hide behind. Naked he was displayed for all to see.

The only covering was the blood and the dirt that mingled freely with his sweat. There were tears that scored thin lines through that scarlet balm of Elam. There was nothing to hide from that accusing and mocking maddened mob that stood before him.

If you were not there, then I'll guarantee you that your sin was there in mocking tones, praying that the Lord God that was on that tree. There was nothing to hide him. The whole mob, the whole world was there

mocking the one that had no sin.

You may not have been there in person, but your pride, your envy, your jealousy, gluttony, lust and murmurings, all of it was there that day being crucified with Christ. No quarter was given in modesty. Even his own mother came to behold him.

It was a vulgar sight she saw, her own son naked, tortured and twitching in the agony of his shame. What son could look upon his mother in such nakedness? It truly was a cursed thing, a naked and a bloody aura. There is no robes around the cross of Christ.

The cross still speaks of shame today and it is and must be a cursed thing to that world. Moses warned Israel about false altars. He said this, For I know that after my death you will utterly corrupt yourself and turn aside from the way which I have commanded you.

And evil will befall you in the latter days because you will do evil in the sight of the Lord to provoke him to anger through the work of your hands. He was prophesying to Israel. But this is also true of the church today.

The church has corrupted herself by denying that very cross. The fulfillment of the first prophecy there is found in Judges. It says in the children of Israel that evil in the sight of the Lord and forgot the Lord their God and served Balaam and the groves.

Balaam is anything other than the Lord God. Who does the church worship today? Who does the church worship today? In words she may say the Lord but in practice more often than not it is an image molded of religion. An image made in a man's mind.

An image of self. The reason a false God was being served was because the planting of a grove had obscured the vision of the altar. When the altar was edged around the Israelites forgot the Lord.

The image of self was now the object of worship. There was no sacrifice needed to be done for the God of self. And the scandal of the church today is that the altar of God not only has a grove around it but the altar in real terms is abstract and totally void in the church of Christ today.

The church has planted a grove around the cross. The church has allowed this cursed symbol to be used as a decorative adornment. The world has learned from the church.

We have learned from the church to show contempt for his cross. You see those popes, those priests, those vicars and nuns. The greater the blasphemy the bigger the cross they'll wear.

Crosses of gold and silver. These are the crosses of the money preachers today. Ivory and marble, lacquered wood, polished veneer.

Some with graven images of Christ still hanging on that tree. It's idolatry. Nothing but idolatry.

Beautiful things but they only hide away the awful truth of his passion. If our doctrine in this church is pure and holy then we also must be pure and holy before the Lord. Jesus didn't say if any man come to me let him wear a cross.

Jesus said this, if any man will come after me let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me. Follow me he says. Where you going Lord? The only place he takes his people is to the cross.

The gods of this world, the celebrities of Hollywood and MTV see how they mock the cross of Christ on the television, in the films, in the newspapers. See how they mock that cross. The most twisted and perverted of them always seem to wear the most outrageous of jewel encrusted crosses.

They hang them from their belts. They dangle crosses from ears and from navels. They sew them through eyebrows and noses.

They will even scar their bodies with needle and ink. All of this a misrepresentation of the true facts of crucifixion. Why is there no offense in the cross today? Why do people not find the cross offensive? Because the church has lost that gospel.

The church has lost. They find no offense. Preach that cross.

There was great offense. They killed those men. They drove them out of cities.

They stoned them. They whipped them. They beat them.

There was great offense. But now the world has taken our cross, the cross of Christ and made something other than what it was meant to be. Why would a sodomite wear a cross? Why would a lesbian wear a cross? Why would a paedophile wear a cross? Why would a murderer wear a cross? Because there's no convicting power in the church today.

They don't wear those crosses as sodomites, lesbians, paedophiles or murderers. They wear them today as pop stars, as actresses, footballers and politicians. If the convicting power of the cross is not preached in the church of Christ today, then how will they know what they are? They will not know unless the cross is preached.

They stand condemned and doomed and their judgment hangs around their neck in silver and gold crucifixes. How can the church convict the world of sin when it not only practices these things but approves also of them? How can a church preach Christ crucified when it has refused to carry his cross? The quickest way to empty a church today is to preach the naked reality of the cross. Use those things as an example only because they are the things that God hates the most.

Those perversions are rapidly becoming the norm and they are accepted in the church today. Make no apologies for what I say but warn you now that we are near the very end. In the very near future paedophilia will become accepted just as homosexuality is accepted in the world and in the church.

They will tell us that it's genetic and that we must show love. The government will lower the age of consent not only for sodomy but also for heterosexual practices. The age will be lowered to 14 in line with Europe and then to 12.

But no matter what man's law says it is perversion. I know Christians that openly endorse abortion because it is a lust for the perverted. When the revival of Israel broke out through Josiah in 2nd Kings we read this.

He broke down the houses of the sodomites that were by the house of the Lord where the women wove hangings for the grove. Not only were they planted groves around woven tapestries to make the place look more acceptable. This is a failing in the church today.

It's a cursed thing. We have devised plans and schemes to make us more seeker friendly as Marcus said. In our devised insanity we invite the world into the church and then we hedge around them with the weave-ins of clever and clouded speech.

Get up and leave. How can a sinner sit in the church week after week and not be offended? How can the immoral fellowship amongst the broken and not be offended? How can perverts eat what the church eats? Pig pods from golden plates. I'm not apologizing for what I've said today.

The church is wallowing in the mire. The mire of filth is not what she thinks she is. We must preach.

How have we come to this? How can we make light of the cross of Christ? How has the church come to this over all these years? It's because we've put garlands around that altar. We've adorned the altar with the fragrance of the world and we've called it success. We've replaced worship and showmanship.

We've replaced prayer with greed. We've replaced conviction with lawlessness. We've replaced God with self and we've replaced the bloody cross with a crutch and called it the church today.

This road we're on is not a sainted path. We're not here to be entertained until the rapture happens. No, no, this is reality.

The cross is reality. Nothing ever died without sin. If we're dead, if the church today is dead, it's because sin is there.

It's couching at the door. Nothing died without sin. Only fools would mock sin.

The saints at their peril can make light of it. The devil will always try to justify sin, but it's a fearful thing to be found in the hands of an angry Godmester. It's a fearful thing.

Whether you be a saint or a sinner, it's a fearful thing. We can add nothing to the cross. The best of self, the best of me will always defile that cross.

It will seem like hell in the simplicity of life. Josiah not only broke down the hand-worn work of lots of tapestries in the church. We are without doubt inoffensive, but if they at any point detach from the severity of the cross, they must be broken down.

Lots of things that we do in a church, they are inoffensive, but if they distract us from that cross, from the work of Christ in our lives, must be torn down. We must be crushed. The tapestries are there to justify our own sin.

Well, everybody does it. None of us are perfect. Surely God will understand my one weakness.

This is the attitude in the church. We never allow the Holy Spirit to deal with us personally when we think like this. His job is to set us free.

His job is not to condemn us. His job is, and He will set us, must be in His rightful place. His work must be allowed in our lives.

You may not be a pervert, but if there is bitter, envy, jealousy, malice, unforgiveness, if you have an unbridled tongue, if these things are in your heart, you are not right with God. You cannot be excused. We must allow the Holy Spirit to break through that labyrinth within us.

We need an altar. That altar is Christ. Nothing else can you put on tonight except Christ.

You get nothing from the preacher. You get nothing from the teacher. It is Christ, and Christ alone is the Holy Spirit.

We have to think like God. We have to walk like Him. We have to talk like Him.

If we want to be a living and a real church for Christ. The promise in His forgiveness is to bring about a deliverance from these things. Very things that we suffer and stumble from today are the small things in life.

Most people have trodden down those great things. Those mountains in their lives are gone, but it's the little things that will swell into our hearts. That little bit of leaven that will go through the whole lump.

The sin of art is the result of not carrying the cross. There must be a cross in your life, and we must preach the cross. We must preach Christ.

We must preach the crucified life if we are to make disciples in His name. Jesus said, if I be lifted up from the earth, will you all men unto me? He must be lifted up. The cross must be preached.

No more easy believers in the church. There's never been easy believers in this church. But in general, I'm talking tonight about the church in general.

It's too easy to become a Christian. One minute prayer at that altar, and after you go you can just live on those pig pods. But that's not the work of God.

His work is not only to save you, but it's to sanctify you. To make you that saint that He shows His desires. Therefore, in which God can display His Son.

The world hates the cross. This is why they mock it. This is why they make fun of it.

But the lamp to our feet, this lamp, the word of God, takes us only to one place, to Calvary, to that cross. I made an appeal for compassion to be shown last week. But compassion must never be allowed to override conviction.

We are too quick to pamper the flesh of others. If a person is convicted by God, then we must let God, we must let Him break them in order to restore them. This is the work of God.

This is the mind of God in the church. Before these have broken us, touch them up with flesh. Cross is not doctrine or theory.

It is essentially experience. You can know all about the cross, but unless you experience it, you cannot know it. The cross is an event in your life.

It's a point of crisis, a point of decision. It's a matter of the will. It's a matter of your will, and will you walk with the world.

It's a decision, the cross. In the book of Ezra, it says this, And they set the altar upon its bases, for fear was upon them because of the people of those countries. The cross is there to protect us from the world.

When the cross is erected in its rightful place, the center of our very lives, then it's going to be a great upheaval. If the cross is not working, when you first place it in your life, there's going to be great upheaval in your life. When Christ was crucified, there was a great earthquake that day, wasn't there? The whole earth shook.

The whole foundation of the temple was shaken from top to bottom. The veil was rent in two. Rocks that were previously unmoved were shattered, broken into a thousand pieces.

The veil was rent from all of this, was a supernatural shaking of God. And when the cross is in place, there will be a shaking of the life's foundation. The world values that are still in us will and must crumble.

When the cross is in place, the whole church will be in collision with every accusation that she threw. The cross points to self. Everything that we've done, every accusation that we've cast will come back our way.

It's called conviction. It's called pointing the finger at the in self. It's not being judgmental.

The cross will only point to yourself. It will never ever point to someone else. You can only be broken for yourself.

The cross will bring order to a life, but first there must be a violent shaking. Before those veil covered eyes can clearly see again, there will always have to be a breaking up of that earthy foundation. When the rocks were shattered, men who had been dead a thousand years lived again.

And the destruction of world values in the life of a believer will again bring this life. If you're cold, half-hearted or dead, when that world system is broken up, that man inside, that inner man will live again. The value of everything can be weighed in the cross.

What value is there in those things that the world has given to us? What value is there in that old way of life? What value is there now? Now that you're on this road with Christ, it's all lost. It means nothing. When a church walks and does the things of the world, even in disapproval, there is no reality in that church.

It's a prophecy and the world knows it, even if the church does not. God will not wink at anything. That altar made by Ezra was there for one purpose, to keep the world out.

It is the cross that separates us from the world. We are different because there is a different life governing principle in our lives. It's the cross.

If they ask you to go on a drinking binge and you say no, they're gonna say you're crazy. When they ask you to fiddle your taxes and your money and your refills, they're gonna say you're crazy. If you don't dress like them, they'll say you're crazy.

If you don't talk like them, they'll say you're mad. If you won't be entertained with the things that entertain the world, they're gonna say you're crazy. The cross is spiritual madness to the world.

It's the madness that we must be in. It's madness to that world. But we have to be careful and wise in this age.

If we're not like them, they're gonna hate us. If they hated Christ, they will hate the crucified life. Radical, fanatic, zealot, that's what they're gonna be screaming in the face of the church.

France has just passed the law denouncing all Pentecostal churches as cults. Britain will be next. We're not even a denomination here.

I don't even know if they'll call us a cult. But it is coming. It's gonna come.

But are we really radical? Are we really fanatical for Christ in our discipleship? Are we really zealous for the Lord? Could we really say those things about this church? Is our crime only the conviction of the cross of Christ? Are people alright only if the cross is true? Must be a true cross and everything is judged in that cross. What type of cross do we bear? Does the cross govern our life situation? How do we react when we face the convicting judgment of the cross? The final mention of the cross in the New Testament is found in Hebrews in chapter 12. It says, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.

The Lord Jesus Christ endured the cross for us. Salvation is settled. His own life was an example for us of how we are to bear that cross, to walk the way that he walked.

The first mention of the cross is found in Matthew and he says this, and he that taketh not his cross and followeth after me is not worthy of me. Much of the church today in general is unworthy of Christ because it has planted groves around that altar. It has hidden the bloodiness of sacrifice with the tapestry of antinomianism.

Antinomianism said that because we are saved we can live as we please, to live as we did before we were saved. This is right in the church, isn't it? This is what goes on in the church, antinomianism. The book of Romans was written by Paul.

This is what it terms antinomianism as, lawlessness, rebellion, and immorality. Such people are not worthy of Christ and they shall not inherit the kingdom of God. It is impossible to know Christ apart from his cross.

Nothing should ever lighten the full aura of sin. The cross was never meant to be a pretty swimmer. It was never intended to be a romantic image.

In reality it is a cursed and vulgar spectacle. The cross is a naked and a bloody splendor. The cross is still a place where men die daily.

To the church, to those who know the cross of Christ and follow after him, it is the power of salvation and of sanctification. The cross is a place where men must die. When did you last come to the altar of sacrifice? When did you last put yourself on an altar? When did you last know of death that sin brought? When did you last smell that place of death? When did you last yield to the convicted power of the cross? The cross is a place where sin dies.

It is a place where sin dies continuously. Where sin died, love grew. The test of the cross is in his power to make a sinner into a saint.

We have to thank God for that principle of the cross. And the church today must remove those groves from around the altar. And let us go on and serve the living God in the power of his cross.

Amen.

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