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## The Altar (The Cross) Governs Everything

*by T. Austin-Sparks*

*Transcribed from conference messages given in Taipei, Taiwan in January 1957. The spoken form has been retained verbatim. The complete series is in the book "The Persistent Purpose of God".*

[In Ezekiel forty-three] in verses 13 to 27 we have the great altar and its service. We will not read the whole section, but just the first verses of that section: "And these are the measures of the altar by cubits; the cubit is a cubit and a handbreadth; the bottom shall be a cubit, the breadth a cubit, the border thereof by the edge thereof round about a span; and this shall be the base of the altar."

Then we are given more particulars about the measurement and the ministry. We all understand that the altar in the Old Testament is always a type of the Cross. This altar is the place of the whole burnt offering. This corresponds to Hebrews, chapter 11, where the Lord Jesus is likened to the whole burnt offering. So we are going, this morning, to think about the centrality and the universality of the Cross.

Now, we have seen that the whole area of the temple was square. If we draw diagonal lines from each corner, those lines meet at the place where the great altar was. The central place in the whole area was the altar. You will recognise that this is different from the tabernacle in the wilderness. The court of the tabernacle was not square, and the altar of burnt offering was right at the gate, but in this temple the altar is right in the centre of a square. It is important to realise that. All the lines meet in the altar, and all the lines go out from the altar. The central place of everything is the altar.

This represents the temple, and I would like you to know that this is not drawn to scale. Probably my temple is bigger than the actual temple was, but I've only put it there to show you the position. The actual temple was there, this is the whole temple area, and the central place of all is the altar.

The altar governed everything. It governed everything as to the house; that is, all that was actually in the temple was governed by the altar. It governed all that was immediately around the house. If you had a plan of this whole house, with the different course and the whole area, you would see that all the chambers of the priests were round about and the places where the offerings were prepared were all round. Everything was gathered round the house, but everything in the house and in the whole area was governed by the altar.

And then, all the ministry of the House was governed by the altar. We could say that there was no ministry that was not related to the altar. And then beyond the house, and beyond the immediate area, right out to the whole land, everything was governed by the altar. We shall see that when we see that the river, which came down through the whole land, came by way of the altar, but we turn inside first.

Here we have a very important and vital truth. *When the Cross is in its place, with its full measure, everything else will be in order, and everything else will be given its meaning and its value.* I feel that I cannot say this too strongly. We are so often concerned about the *outside* things, about the *order* of the House of the Lord, about the *ministry* of the House of the Lord, about the *people* who are related to the House of the Lord. We are always beginning on the outside. We are trying to set up an order of the House of God. We are trying to put the people of the House right. We are very much concerned about the ministers, and the ministries. But if the Cross was really in its place with its full dimensions, all those things would see to themselves. The people would be right if the Cross was in its place. The ministries would be living if the Cross was in its place. The order of the House would be right if the Cross was in its place. It just does work that way. If the Cross is right at the centre in full measure, and note that it is a *large* altar, then everything else will come into its right place and into a *living* relationship.

Although it is not said so here, I think we are right in concluding that this altar was of brass. The altar in the tabernacle was of brass, the altar in Solomon's temple was of brass, and I think we can assume that *this* altar was of brass. We have already met brass. We have met brass in the Man in the gate, and we have said that with His reed He measured everything according to what He was. Brass is the type of the righteous judgments of God. This great altar represents the fullness of the righteous judgments of God. This altar of brass is measured by the Man of brass, so that this altar represents God's thoughts in judgment.

In this altar of whole burnt offering, the one unrighteous man is *completely* removed. That altar of brass sees one man brought to ashes. The ashes were taken from this altar and emptied onto the ground at the side of the altar. That is a picture of God's Mind about the unrighteous, or the natural man. He is consumed in the fire of God's judgment, he is reduced to ashes, and he is poured out on the ground. That is God's mind about the natural man. On the other side, it is only the righteous man that can stand here in the presence of this altar. Of course, those are the two sides of the Person and work of the Lord Jesus. On the one side He was made sin for us, and in that capacity He was wholly consumed and brought to ashes. When He cried, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me" - it was the cry of the ashes! He had been brought to ashes and poured out on the ground.

But then there was the other side of the Cross - "He knew no sin". In Himself, there was no unrighteousness, and therefore He can go *through* the altar, He can *live* after the fire! "Thou wilt not suffer Thy Holy One to see corruption" because in Himself there was no sin, He could not be holden of death. His own nature could overcome all the righteous judgments of God. This is the meaning of

the great altar: one man is brought to an end, and Another Man stands in his place. *Everything* has been judged at the altar. *Everything* is judged in the Cross.

We have been judged in the Cross of the Lord Jesus and in our own selves we have been brought to an end. *Everything* of the natural has been judged and brought to an end in the Cross of the Lord Jesus. It is a *very important* thing to recognise that! You see, that makes anything possible. That is why I have said that if the Cross is in its place, everything else will be right. The House will be right; that is, the Church will be right. The ministry will be right. The order will be right. You will not have to go to work to try and bring about a right order, it spontaneously comes out of the work of the Cross. I do hope that you're writing that in your minds.

You may meet disorders in the House of God. You may meet the natural man in the House of God. You may meet conditions which are all wrong in the House of God. How are you going to deal with them? You can only deal with them by the principle of the Cross. You cannot deal with the people themselves, you cannot deal with the *things* themselves; but if only you can bring the Cross into that situation, you have solved the whole problem.

I remember many years ago I was speaking in America and I was asked to go and speak to the teachers of a great Sunday School. You may know that in America Sunday School does not mean little children, Sunday School means adults just as much as little children. And this was one of the biggest Sunday Schools in America. It was in one of the most famous churches in America. They had everything that you could think of. Right in the centre of the great Sunday School building there was a pond and a fountain and goldfish! Up at the back of the great building was a wonderful pipe organ and then there was an echo organ; there was a chime of bells attached to the organ. And I could go on describing this wonderful Sunday School.

The Superintendent of that Sunday School asked me to go out to lunch with him; this was before I was to speak to all the teachers. At the lunch table he told me a very terrible story. He said, "Mr Sparks, I want your help. I have a great problem in this Sunday School: I cannot get my teachers to study the Bible and teach the Bible. They bring *anything* along to the Sunday School and read it to the classes. Any book that has anything of religion in it, they bring that and read that as their lesson to the class. They are *worldly* people. They will not come to a prayer meeting and I cannot do anything with them. I dare not say anything, or they would resign. What am I to do? Will you please give me the solution to my problem?"

I said, "Yes, I think I've got the solution." So I took my Bible and I opened it at Romans 6. Now, everybody here knows Romans 6! And I went through Romans 6 with him, and I said, "What you need to do is to speak to these teachers about their identification with Christ in death, and burial, and resurrection. In other words, you must make them see the meaning of the Cross." And I spoke to him about the meaning of union with Christ, that is, the real meaning of the Cross. And as I spoke to him about that, I saw the light coming into his face.

He said, "Mr Sparks, you have solved my problem! You have put your finger on the key to the whole situation. I myself have never seen that before, therefore, in my teacher training classes, I have never said anything like that! I believe if I go back to my teacher training classes with that message, it may solve my problems."

Well, I went to the teachers that afternoon, you can be sure that I felt the Lord had given me my message, and I spoke to them about the Cross. I was very surprised to see how attentive they were, they all opened their eyes and followed every word that I said. They had never seen it before! I do

not know what permanent effect it had upon them. I never heard of what happened afterward, I had to go away, but there's no doubt about it, the Cross made an impression that day! And at least one man saw that it would solve all the problems if only they realised it. If only the Cross had its place, all the other problems would be solved. It is like that. We do not start from the outside. We do not start with the people. We do not start with the order of the Lord's House. We do not start with the ministry - we start with the Cross. And if only people see the Cross, everything else would put itself right.

### **Everything is Judged by the Cross**

Now I am going to indicate something to you that I shall not be able to follow through. If brother Wei would just put his fingers in his ears for a minute, and a few other people, I will tell you that I think this is what the Lord is saying to me for Hong Kong next week. So if you want to hear it all, you must all come to Hong Kong next week! But I just give you the outline.

The letter to the Romans is the message of the Cross in its *full* measure. In that letter to the Romans, you see the *great measurement* of the Cross. There the Cross comprehends *all* things. It brings the *whole race* in Adam to an end, and it begins an entirely *new race* in Christ risen!

It is very impressive that the first of these letters should put the Cross there in its full measurement. You all know that the letter to the Romans was not the first letter written by Paul, but the Holy Spirit has put it first in the arrangement. I think the Holy Spirit had something to do with the arrangement of the books in the New Testament, and in His sovereign arrangement of this book, He has put the altar in its fullness right at the beginning. Well, of course, you'll have to recall all that you know about the letter to the Romans to see that.

In the first letter to the Corinthians, the Cross is applied to the natural and the carnal man *inside* the Church. The natural and the carnal man has come in where he has no right to be. This unrighteous man has slipped in through the gate, and so the apostle brings Christ crucified over against the natural and the carnal man. The Cross in 1 Corinthians has to do with that man, not outside the Church as in Romans, but inside the Church.

The second letter to the Corinthians sets the Cross in relation to ministry. That letter shows us that ministry flows out of a broken and a humbled vessel. I can only say these things and leave the full explanation.

The letter to the Galatians, in that letter the Cross is brought down upon making Christianity into another legal system, and bringing Christians into bondage. How strong the apostle is in that letter, but see how he uses the Cross! He uses the Cross *tremendously* against that effort to make Christianity into a legal system, and to bring believers into bondage again.

In the letter to the Ephesians, the work of the Cross is to put the Church on heavenly ground. The Cross in Ephesians *completely* cuts the Church off from all earthly ground. It puts the Church outside of time. It puts the Church outside of the world.

The letter to the Philippians, the Cross in Philippians is applied to that which is spoiling the harmony of the Lord's people. There is a painful dislocation inside the Church. There is a spot where things are unhappy; that is because of personal interests and pride. Some people will not let go their personal interests. Some people will not let go their pride. They have been offended and they are not going to forgive. So the apostle brings the Cross in there over against this discord and

dislocation, and he points out that if only the Cross were in those lives, everything would be put right.

The letter to the Colossians - this letter shows that the Cross delivers from all false spirituality. The Cross sets aside all that is mere mysticism, and everything that would make Christ less than He is.

The letters to the Thessalonians. Here the Cross is the strength for suffering and inspiration unto the coming of the Lord. There may not be much said about the Cross actually, but the principle of these letters is the principle of the Cross. The people were suffering for Christ's sake. They were suffering the loss of all things, and they had thought that the Lord would have come to deliver them and the Lord is delaying His coming. So the apostle tells them that their sufferings will issue in the coming of the Lord and glory. These sufferings are suffering with Christ. They are sufferings for Christ's sake: it is fellowship in the Cross, but the sufferings issued in the glory. The Lord is coming, and then it will be all right. The Cross has a very real message for suffering believers.

And then we just conclude this survey with the letter to the Hebrews. In the letter to the Hebrews, the Cross shows how *everything is brought to fullness and to finality*.

Now all this relates to the House on its inside. It touches conduct. It touches character. It touches order. It touches ministry. If the Cross is in its place, *everything* will be effective.

Now, I have not just given you some Bible teachings, I know that this is true. I could tell you a story out of personal experience; I have seen all these problems solved just by preaching the Cross. I have seen a revolution in a church just by preaching the Cross. I have seen the Lord producing His new order just by preaching the Cross. The Cross is the key to everything!

Then, what is true on the inside is also true on the outside. It is the Cross which effects the *whole* range of the Church's influence. The river comes by way of the Cross. That is the influence that goes out from the sanctuary to the whole land. It is the *Cross* which gives effectiveness to the ministry to the whole world. So the apostles preached everywhere Christ crucified.

And then we note another thing: the altar was the great defensive against the enemy.

If you look in the book of Ezra in chapter 3, and verse 3, you have this: "They set the altar in its place, for *fear* of the peoples of the land was upon them..." Because fear of the people of the land was upon them, they put the altar in its place. The Cross is a *great defensive* - the Cross defends us from... [*Unfortunately the recorded message ends here, but we do have a transcript of the remainder of the message which follows.*]

The Cross defends us from the world. The world is the great enemy of the Church. The spirit of the world has always been the Church's great enemy. Satan has always tried to get the world into the Church and so wreck the Church and its ministry, to destroy the influence of the Church in the world. It is a very clever and subtle move of the enemy to destroy the influence of the Church in the world by bringing the world into the Church. For Paul said, "*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*" (Gal 6:14).

A truly crucified people are never in danger of the world. It is only when the Cross has not done its work that the world has a place. The world has no place with a crucified man or woman, or a crucified company of believers. The Cross is a great defensive against the world. If you want to keep the world out, put the Cross in its place. If the Cross is truly in its place in fullness, then everything

else will come into order. THE CROSS is the great defensive against the world. THE CROSS is the great defensive against evil powers. THE CROSS makes everything safe; it makes everything safe for the Lord.

You see, the Lord wants to commit Himself. He wants to trust Himself to His people, but if the Cross is not there at work, the Lord cannot trust Himself to them. The Lord says, "It is not safe for Me to give Myself there, or I should be involved in their un-crucified condition." The Cross makes everything safe for the Lord, and the Cross makes everything safe for the Church. If the Cross is really at work in all of us, we can trust one another. It is quite safe to trust yourself to a crucified man or woman.

Now I close this morning by emphasizing that the Cross is not a doctrine to be taught. It is not a subject to be preached. Of course, it will be taught, and it will be preached. But in the first place, it is not a subject to be taught. It is not just a doctrine. The Cross is power. The Cross is an experience. The Cross is an event in our lives. The Cross is a crisis. The Cross is a revolution. The Cross is an earthquake. There was an earthquake when Jesus was crucified. If the Cross comes into our life, there will be an earthquake. Everything will be shaken, everything will be overturned. The Cross is an earthquake. It is something tremendous. The Cross is not just a theory, not just a doctrine: *the Cross governs everything*. Well, that is our message about the centrality and universality of the Cross.

*The Lord grant that we shall all be crucified men and women. The assemblies to which we belong - may they be crucified assemblies. The Lord grant that His whole Church may see and view the meaning of the Cross.*