

## CHRIST'S RELATION TO HIS CHURCH

Preached at Galeed, Brighton, Wednesday evening, 17th July 1940.

*"Then David said, This is the house of the Lord God, and this is the altar of the burnt offering for Israel."* I Chron. xxii. 1.

The passage is connected with the event which, as we have read this evening (I Chron. 21st & first 5 verses of 22nd. chapters) occurred in the life of David while King over Israel. It was a very solemn event, and yet it was a very wonderful event in its issues; very solemn because of God's displeasure against sin and the inroads it made in the number of the children of Israel, but it was very wonderful that God should, in the display of His sovereign mercy, make that event to be an occasion for shewing peculiar mercy to David, very great mercy to Israel, and in particular intimating to David the place where the temple of God should afterwards be built. God's ways are so much higher than our ways, that unless we have faith in living exercise we cannot conceive that, when our sins have procured God's judgments, God could ever make use of that event to bring about the purposes of his grace, and to show His astonishing, amazing, saving grace to poor sinners. Yet it has frequently been the case. When God, for sin, destroyed the ancient world by a flood, He showed mercy to Noah and his family by causing Noah to build an ark, which he did in faith, and in which Noah was placed. It was a type of the saving grace of Christ, the Son of God Who should come. When God took away from Israel their centuries-old privileges and liberties of worship He sent the gospel in all its saving health and benefits among gentile sinners, so that the glory of God's grace was no longer confined to a single nation, but it apprehended sinners out of every nation, kindred, tribe, tongue and people according to the election of grace. But now at long last, after much forbearance with us as a nation, God has visited us for our sins, for the way in which we have put Him behind our back, disregarded His day and His Word, given ourselves over to all manner of senseless and improper pleasures and entertainments. But what a display of God's sovereign grace it would be - and who can tell but what it may be? - if the Lord should make use of our present situation to cause us to humble ourselves, that as a nation we might seek His face, confessing our sins, enquiring for the gospel once more,

filling our houses of prayer with sinners anxious to hear the gospel of the grace of God. It would be an unspeakable mercy if, out of all this strife, confusion and dismay, the Lord were to return to His church and to revive her, so again establish the doctrines of revelation that we might return with repentance to our first love. It would be a remarkable instance of the sovereignty of His grace, and it would be yet another proof that God uses such occasions as these to further the purposes of His grace. This is particularly true in the incident with which our text is connected. David had sinned, and with him so had the people. This is true of us as a nation, but in a more personal and experimental sense it is true that "all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." It is not every sinner that knows it, it is not every sinner who realises with David, that they have sinned in what they have done. It is an act of God's grace to a sinner to open his eyes, and to give him in his conscience to acknowledge that he has sinned against God, that he is deserving of His displeasure, but desires His mercy for the sake of Christ.

Because of sin God is pleased to appoint unto David the choice of three terrible evils. David dare not trust himself; each of them was very solemn indeed, and he begs with great propriety that he might not fall into the hands of man, but into the hands of God, recognising God's mercy. The Lord therefore sends an avenging angel, who goes through the land slaying many of the inhabitants; and when the angel came to Jerusalem, bent upon his mission, we read that "the Lord beheld.... and said to the angel, It is enough; stay now thy hand; and the angel stayed his hand and stood by the threshing-floor of Ornan the Jebusite." What a wonderful display of God's mercy, something of which some of you have in a measure realised in your experience. When God convinced you of your sin, that was not salvation; it brought you into trouble, and God's displeasure followed you in various ways. The sentence of condemnation was in your conscience; you feared it would sink you to hell; but there came a moment in your experience when God, in infinite mercy and compassion, said in effect, "It is enough;" His hand was stayed, and with it there came into your heart, as in the heart of David, a spirit of confession and an importunity in prayer. You had prayed before, but never do we pray so fervently nor with such importunity as when God

softens our hearts by staying the hand of His displeasure and giving us to see that if we are not in heaven we are out of hell, and there is hope in a Saviour's blood. David prayed very fervently indeed, and he was directed by God to erect an altar in the very place where the plague was stayed, the threshing floor of Ornan. This he obeyed; the altar is erected and everything is in readiness for the sacrifice, and then David calls upon God, just as a poor sinner is brought to call upon God when he pleads for mercy for the sake of the atoning sacrifice of Christ. God answered David, and He indicated the acceptance of his sacrifice in no ordinary manner. He sent fire from heaven, just as He did when Elijah called upon God on the mount, when it was demonstrated that God was God over all. This was very remarkable in the estimation of David, that he not only saw that the plague was stayed, he not only knew that God accepted his sacrifice, but it intimated to him in some peculiar manner that this was the site which God had chosen where the temple should be built; for He said, "This is the house of the Lord God, and this is the altar of the burnt-offering for Israel." You see how his faith goes beyond the immediate circumstances, and embraces the will of God as revealed to him. Before ever there was a stone laid, before it was ever erected in its place it was revealed to David that God had chosen this spot. Jacob's case in the wilderness was very similar. You remember how, when driven from the house of his father because of Esau, he spent the first night - and other nights - in the open. But on the first night, with nothing but a stone for a pillow, he slept; and while he slept God appeared to him, spoke graciously to him, renewed to him the promise which had been given to Abraham and to Isaac; and when Jacob arose he was filled with godly fear, for he said, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I knew it not." (Gen. xxviii. 16) There was in that open field and in that naked threshing floor, that which made both Jacob and David speak as they did about the house of God; and why? Jacob's word supplies the answer, for he said, "This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." How was it the house of God and the gate of heaven? Because God's special presence was there, because God had spoken mercifully, and revealed His truth and His grace to both of these men. The four walls of a building do not make God's house; it is God's blessing, God's special presence; it is for God to come to poor

sinners in the gospel of His grace. This was no secondary matter with the ancient Jew. It was a matter of importance to him as to where was the house and where was the altar: it was the very centre of worship. No offering was accepted that was not brought to the door of the sanctuary, and no offering was sanctified unless it was offered upon the altar of the burnt offering. When the woman of Samaria spoke to the Lord Jesus about the controversy between the Samaritans and the Jews as to where they should worship, she was simply giving expression to the reality of that controversy which divided them. The question was this, whether the house of the Lord and the altar of the Lord was on Mount Gerizim or Jerusalem. You remember Christ answered her, "Woman, the hour cometh when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem worship the Father." (John iv. 21) That hour has long since come; and with the coming of that hour every shakeable thing in the Levitical Priesthood was taken away, but the kingdom of Christ remained. The circumstances surrounding the words which I have read for a text have passed away, but the truth fundamental to it remains in all its force and authority. I might here raise a point, and ask, whether there is a place or a person of which or of whom it may be said that, "This is the house of the Lord God, this is the altar of burnt offering?" Yes, there is, but it is not in the apostate and blasphemous church at Rome, neither is it in the church as established by law in our land, with its excellent articles which are so wantonly ignored. Neither is it among the corrupt Nonconformists of our land; and while I would speak as well as I can of our beloved denomination, and can, I hope, claim for it that we do hold the doctrine of Christ, the doctrine of the atonement and every relevant truth, yet I dare not, neither can I, claim for the denomination that it is the seat of the residence of God and His church, nor the place where the altar of burnt offering is. That belongs properly and alone to the Person and Work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We may point to Christ in His substitutionary work, we may point to the mystical Church of Christ as built upon that atoning death and say, "This is the house of the Lord, this is the altar of burnt offering." Just as David gave directions that the temple should be built upon and about this particular site where the plague was stayed and fire came down from heaven, so it is the pleasure of our God to build His Church, the mystical Body of

Christ upon the very altar, the very foundation of what the Lord Jesus Christ has suffered in the room and stead of His people. The altar is the centre of worship, it is the glory of the house, just as the finished work of Christ is the glory as well as the ground of hope for every quickened sinner who is drawn and attracted to the Person and Work of the Lord Jesus Christ for life and salvation. There can be no salvation for a poor sinner without an offering, without the sacrificial work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Man is a sinner, and God is just. He never saves sinners at the expense of His justice, and mercy never shines so sweetly and transcendently as when it shines in the finished work of Christ as made known to the heart of a believing sinner. Justice must be satisfied and it is satisfied by Christ. Every vessel of mercy needs an atonement for his sins, and certainly every sinner born of God the Holy Ghost lives to prove continually that without the offering of Christ his sins could never be put away, nor could he ever hope to enjoy the felicity provided by God for His Church. Christ is the Altar for his people; He is not only the Altar but He is the Sacrifice; and never has there been such a sacrifice as the sacrifice of Christ. Other sacrifices had been made for centuries daily, and in large numbers at times, but still sin remained, guilt was not put away, justice was not satisfied; but when the Son of God became incarnate, when He took our place, when our sins were imputed to Him, when justice demanded satisfaction at His hands, when the fire of wrath descended upon Him for our sins, He cried, "It is finished." He made an end of offering Himself, and since then there is no necessity for another sacrifice, though it is necessary for faith, as well as being a privilege to plead the sacrifice once made, and to say with Watts,

"My soul looks back to see  
The burdens Thou didst bear,  
While hanging on the accursed tree,  
And hopes her guilt was there."

There is this that is to be said for the sacrifice of Christ: it is the only way by which God will come to a sinner, it is the only way that we shall ever go to God, if we go at all; and some of you have reason to believe that God has spoken to your hearts by His Son, especially by His atonement; and you are sadly

deceived if you have not been privileged to go to Him by virtue of the Saviour's precious blood.

"We have an altar," said the apostle, "whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle." (Heb. xiii. 10); but if God has divorced us from legality, if He has stripped us of every confidence, if He has led us to the Person and work of Christ we shall never want for an altar. The merits of Christ are ever available; the Spirit of Truth delights in His wisdom to apply them with efficacy to the soul. The blood of Christ as applied to the conscience is more powerful to heal, to cleanse and to save than the power of sin is to destroy and to condemn. Christ our Altar is our only plea; we may not, we dare not plead anything else when we come to God as sinners. It would be wrong, it would be worse than wrong it would be sad ingratitude indeed to dishonour God by speaking to Him about attainments. We have most success in prayer, we have sweetest nearness to him in trouble, when we can plead for Jesus' sake. Christ our Altar is our only Hiding place. Some of you have sought to hide yourselves in various ways, but when you are driven out of every one of them, how welcome is the sacrifice of Christ to you, especially when He is pleased to cover you in the cleft of the Rock, to pronounce your sins forgiven. You could then your

"fierce accuser face

And tell him Christ has died."

Christ our Altar is the only way by which our offerings, whether of trust, of obedience or of worship can be accepted in the sight of God. His merits give acceptance to our poor attempts either to serve Him or worship Him. Without an Altar we can have no hope; without an Altar there can be no Church. The house that Solomon built was built upon and around the place where David said, "This is the altar of the burnt offering." So God, in the purposes of His grace and by the operations of His Holy Spirit, builds quickened, repentant and believing sinners upon and around the Altar of the Lord Jesus Christ. These sinners never come to this spot themselves, they do not know it, neither do they wish to know it; they have no concern for it. What a wonderful thing it is, and what an unspeakable mercy, that God's purposes of grace will ever triumph over man's depravity and Satan's powerful opposition to the

salvation of a sinner. A sinner may be determined to destroy himself, he may be determined to put as great a distance as possible between himself and true religion, but his counsels are nothing in the face of Him Who says, "My counsel shall stand, and I will do My pleasure." (Isa. xlvi. 10) God, by His omnipotent grace, brings the sinner to bow before Him, to acknowledge his sins, to receive the remission that God gives in His Son; and as God leads His people and directs them into the truth of revelation they feel they have cause to be thankful; they fear they shall sin against Him in such a manner as shall demonstrate that they are not really among God's people. How the child of God cries, especially at times, to be made right and to be kept right; to be so led and blessed by the Spirit of Truth that as a repentant and believing sinner he may spend his days as a sinner indebted to God alone.

When God would speak to the Church, the mystical Church, in respect of her security, He recommends His people to go round about Zion as a city, and to mark well her bulwarks." (Ps. xlviii, 13) The idea underlying this passage is not so much of security, though it implies that, as of residence. This is the house of the Lord God; this Church that He builds upon the finished work of Christ is the place where He dwells. The Psalmist says, "God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved." ( xlvi, 5) and in the valedictory discourse of Christ He says to His disciples in respect of spiritual obedience: - "If a man love Me he will keep my words, and My Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make Our abode with him." (John xiv. 23) Paul said the same thing when he gave utterance to this, "Know ye not that ye are the temple of the Holy Ghost?" (I Cor. iii. 16; vi. 19) What a mercy that God does build poor sinners upon the finished work of Christ; and what a mercy if He has so built you and I! What honour He puts upon His people in that He dwells with them, in them, and among them! He has His spiritual residence in His mystical Church, to nourish them, to communicate of his fulness, to keep them in His fear, to conform them to His image and to protect them in all His appointed ways. God dwells in His Church. "This is the house of the Lord, and this is the altar of the burnt offering for Israel." In the midst of the Church, and supporting it, is the Altar of Christ, which declares, among other things, that "there is no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not

after the flesh but after the Spirit"; and there is no separation from the love of God in Christ Jesus. The glory of a gospel church is when it holds the doctrine of Christ and His relation to His church in faith; and when that doctrine holds them by grace and unction, then He comes to them. But O, remember this, that the Lord Jesus alone, in His mediatorial glory and grace, is the Seat of the mystical Church, the Altar of Sacrifice in which God dwells, and in which His glory dwells.

May He add His blessing, for His Name's sake. Amen.

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