**THIRSTING FOR THE SPRINGS - SERMONS BY JOHN H. JOWETT**

**06. ALTARS AND ALTAR FIRES by JOHN H. JOWETT**

*"The God that answereth by fire, let Him be God."*

*1 Kings 18:24*

I SUPPOSE that the altars built by Elijah and the prophets of Baal would be very much alike. To all outward seeming they were equally promising, and we should have been unable to surmise to which of them the fire would be sent. Anybody can build an altar; we need a God for the creation of a fire! Now it is just that flame-element which the Christian religion claims to be able to provide. It claims to be judged by its ability to kindle and inflame, to turn the cold altar into the place of living fire. When I have built my little heap of stones, the Lord God will consummate my erection in hallowed flame. God will supply the essential, the element of inspiration, the radiant gift which will convert the little altar into His own dwelling- place and sanctuary.

**(1) Anyone can build an altar; it requires a God to provide the flame. Anybody can build a house; we need the Lord for the creation of a home.** A house is an agglomeration of bricks and stones, with an assorted collection of manufactured goods; a home is the abiding-place of ardent affection, of fervent hope, of genial trust. There is many a homeless man who lives in a richly furnished house. There is many a fifteen-pound house in the crowded street which is an illuminated and beautiful home. The sumptuously furnished house may only be an exquisitely sculptured tomb; the scantily furnished house may be the very hearth stone of the eternal God. Now the Christian religion claims to be able to convert houses into homes, to supply the missing fire, and to bring an aspiring flame to the cold and chilling heap. The New Testament does not say very much about homes; it says a great deal about the things that make them. It speaks about life and love and joy and peace and rest! If we get a house and put these into it, we shall have secured a home. Here, then, are two houses. In both of them there is no love, no joy, no peace, no rest. There is no flame of geniality and radiant hope. Let us bring the Christian religion into one of the houses, and do as you please with the other. In one house the tenants shall all kneel before King Jesus. They shall be one in common purpose, and they shall strive together with common mind and will. What will assuredly happen? With absolute certainty the house will become a home! That is a glorious common-place in the history of the Christian faith. Where Christ has been enthroned, and every member of the family becomes a worshipper, there steals into the common life a warmth of affection which converts even trivial relationships into radiant kinships. What shall we do with the other house? Sin reigns! Passion reigns! Estrangement reigns! There is continued tumult and unrest. What shall we do? Call upon Baal! Call upon "the god of this world!" It would be a fruitless quest. There is nothing for it but the grace of Christ. God changes houses into homes; let Him be God.

**(2) Anyone can proclaim a moral ideal; we need the Lord for the creation of moral enthusiasm.** I suppose in fundamental ethics there is not a single person in my congregation who has any need of instruction. Probably we could all become teachers. What need is there for teaching about such matters as lust, false hood, and avarice? Everybody knows all about them. But the possession of a moral ideal does not necessarily transfigure the life. A man might draw up, for the guidance of his fellow-men, an exalted code, and yet he may be the most notorious scamp in the city. The man who compiles the moral headlines in the copy books which our little ones have to transcribe may yet be the deepest-dyed villain who walks the ways of men. You may have a neatly printed list of moral maxims standing beside your calendar upon the desk of your counting-house, and yet they may no more influence your commercial life than does the wall papers which covers the walls. The erection of moral ideals is the building of an altar. Now we want the flame, the fire of a passionate moral enthusiasm. Where shall we get the fire? We exalt our moral ideals in the minds of our children, but how shall we get them to love the right, and to fervently aspire after it? The Christian religion claims to answer the question. Here are two lives. In both of them there is knowledge of the moral ideal. In both of them the character is immoral. Let us bring the Christian religion to the one, and you shall do as you please with the other. "He will baptize with the Holy Ghost, and with fire." The issue of fellowship with the Christ is to be the inspiration, whose influence shall be felt like fire. Love becomes a factor in the life, and cold duty becomes a fervent delight. How will you deal with the other man? How will you bring to him the fire? I confess I know no answer. Apart from the Christ, there seems to be no way of bringing fire on to cold altars. The Lord brings the spirit of burning, which makes aspiration fervent, and consumes away the indwelling filth. "The God that answereth by fire, let Him be God."

**(3) Any nation can make legal enactments against crime. We need the law to make men hate it.** The only defence against crime is not a punitive law, but a passionate, spiritual recoil. If we would deliver men from sin, we must make them loathe it. Some way or other we must kindle a holy hatred in man, the fire of blazing indignation. There are many men who are kept from crime, who nevertheless do not dislike it. Abolish the police, and at the moment of abolition, these men would stretch out their hands and grasp the forbidden fruit. But virtue created by fear of the prison will be quite out of place in heaven. The only worthy virtue is the virtue which is the fruit of love. The only security from sin is found in the ardours of a passionate resentment. We must make men hate it. How shall we light the fire? Let us turn to the Christ. "No man can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other." Let us pause here. "Hate the one." That appears to be suggestive of what we need. We are in search of a hatred. We are told we cannot serve God and mammon. If we love the one we must hate the other, and so for the hatred of sin we must turn to the love of our Lord. We are brought back to the old fellowship. Kinship with the Christ begins in humble surrender, deepens into intimacy, and fructifies in loving dispositions. Out of the love there is born the hatred. Let a man love the virtuous, and he will loathe the vicious.

**(4) Any municipality can coerce men into charity. We need the Lord for the creation of philanthropy.** The Poor Law system may compel us into giving, but in the gift there may be nothing of the fervour of a passionate good-will. How can we get cold charity converted into radiant philanthropy? Who will bring the fire to the frozen altar? There is an old man in the Christian Scriptures who speaks in this wise: "He loved me and gave Himself for me"; "we love, because He first loved us"; "the love of Christ constraineth me." Out of that love for the Master there spring all the beautiful ministries which seek the welfare of our fellow-men. Love for the Lord just blossoms into philanthropy. There is no other way for the making of philanthropists. It is kindled by our attachment to the Christ of God. "The God that answereth by fire, let Him be God."