

The Altar

Exodus 27:1-19

What must happen for sinners to be in the presence of a holy God? The old covenant worshipper longed to be in God's presence: "My soul longs, yes, even faints for the courts of the Lord; My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand" (Ps. 84:2). Finding the way to God is finding your true identify, who you were made to be. This happens at the altar. Israelites would come and offer sacrifices at the altar looking by faith to Christ the true sacrifice.

Brazen Oven

The altar is the largest piece of tabernacle furniture, a square, hollow box made of acacia wood, 7 ½' long, 7 ½' wide, and 4.5' tall (v1). It has four horns, one on each corner, all made of the same piece of wood, and everything is covered in bronze (v2). It comes with pans, shovels, basins, forks and firepans for handling the sacrifices and the fire (v3). A grate inserts halfway up with rings on the corners so it can be removed presumably to clean out the ashes and debris (vv4-5). Poles to carry it are also made of acacia and covered with bronze, the whole thing after pattern shown to Moses on the mountain (vv7-8). The altar resides in the courtyard, which is rectangular, 75' wide on the east and west and 150' long north on the north and south, and 7 ½' high (vv9, 11, 18). Gold covers everything inside the tabernacle where God is enthroned. The pedestals that hold the tent posts are made of silver where heaven meets earth, and in the courtyard of the earth everything is made of bronze (v19).

One Altar

An altar is a place where blood is shed to make atonement for transgression: "And according to the law almost all things are purified with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no remission" (Heb. 9:22). The first altar explicitly mentioned in Scripture was built by Noah (Gen. 8:20), but the first offerings were brought by Cain and Abel. Cain brought fruit, but Abel brought "the firstborn of his flock and of their fat. And the Lord respected Abel and his offering, but He did not respect Cain and his offering" (Gen. 4:4-5). The text doesn't explicitly say this, but it's clear that Cain didn't think his transgressions required blood atonement, and against God's counsel he gave into sin and went on to scapegoat and kill his brother Abel (Gen. 4:6-8). The need for blood atonement is inescapable, and the god of the system will get it, whether we're talking about Aztecs offering human sacrifices to Quetzalcoatl or Americans requiring abortions to protect autonomous "choice". Blood will be shed to make everything right; the only question is whose blood it's going to be. Many Christians are Marcionites at this point, acting like the God of the Old Testament if different than the God of the New Testament. But true worship has always happened at altars where substitutionary death takes place: "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 6:23). As soon as God tells Abraham He will give Him the land, Abraham builds an altar in Canaan (Gen. 12:7). He moves to Bethel, and

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builds another one (Gen. 12:7-8). Previously God required that no altar of hewn stone be built because He didn't want any man-made way of atonement (Ex. 20:25). Now Israel has a central sanctuary, God devises the one altar where they will offer sin, ascension, and peace/thank offerings in His courtyard. Israel: "Iniquities prevail against me; as for our transgressions, You will provide atonement for them. Blessed is the man You choose, and cause to approach You, that he may dwell in Your courts. We shall be satisfied with the goodness of Your house, of Your holy temple" (Ps. 65:3-4). The worshipper was under no delusion that the blood of bulls and goats took away sin. Rather, this was an act of faith in God's promises of mercy.

The Cross as God's Altar

The horns of the altar represent God's strength and mercy: "The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer; My God, my strength, in whom I will trust; My shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold" (Ps. 18:2). People who believed they were wrongly accused would run to the altar and take hold of its horns (1 Kgs. 1:50-51, 2:28). Of course this could be abused, so God required the guilty to be held accountable (Ex. 21:14). The horns were handles of mercy because they secured the sacrifices of mercy. Psalm 118 is quoted by the crowd during Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem: "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" (Matt. 21:9; Ps. 118:25-25). The next verse describes the sacrifice bound to the altar: "God is the Lord, and He has given us light; bind the sacrifice with cords to the horns of the altar. You are my God, and I will praise You; You are my God, I will exalt You" (118:27-28). Jesus came as the sacrifice bound on the altar of the cross. The cross has its own four corners, reaching out with mercy to the ends of the world. The Father is the priest: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved" (Jn. 3:16-17). Opponents of penal substitutionary atonement slander it as divine child abuse, as if the Father acted against the Son. But it was the will of the entire Trinity to save the world (Jn. 10:18).

Life on the Altar

Run to the cross for mercy, forgiveness, thanksgiving, joy, and strength. Because Christ died for us and we are completely accepted by His once-and-for-all sacrifice, we live in Him and our lives become a pleasing sacrifice to God: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service" (Rom. 12:1). Jesus is the sacrifice in whom the Father is well pleased, and in Him so are we (Matt. 3:17; cf. Matt. 25:23). Offered as atonement, good works are insulting at best. But offered as gratitude, the Father delights to receive you and every sacrifice you offer in Jesus' name.

Exodus Sermon Series

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