

The Way to the Father

Exodus 38:1-31

Introduction

This is not a typical Christmas passage, but it's all about coming near to God. To get to Him you must go through the courtyard, have your sins paid for at altar, and be made holy at the laver of cleansing. We do all of this through Jesus, the way to the Father.

Summary of the Text

The altar of ascension is the largest piece of tabernacle furniture, a square 7 ½' x 7 ½', and 4 ½' tall (v1). Bezalel makes it with four horns and covers it in bronze (v2). It has pans, shovels, basins, forks and firepans to offer sacrifices and keep the fire going (v3). A grate inserts halfway up with rings on the corners that hold the carrying poles (vv4-7). The bronze laver is made from the mirrors of the women who serve at the tabernacle (v8). He makes the south and north walls of the courtyard with fine woven linen, each 150' long with 20 pillars (vv9-11). The west and east walls are 75', but the east side has walls that run about 22 ½' each from the sides, and then the screen of blue, purple, and scarlet thread for the door is 30' (vv12-20). They take inventory of everything made by Bezalel and Aholiab and all the materials given (vv21-24). It comes to more than a ton of gold, three tons of silver, and two tons of bronze for a total exceeding 12,000 pounds of precious metals (vv25-31).

The Shedding of Blood

The bronze altar is the focal point of the courtyard and central in Israelite worship: "And according to the law almost all things are purified with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no remission" (Heb. 9:22). We understand that the worst crimes merit the death penalty, particularly murder: "Whoever sheds man's blood, By man his blood shall be shed; for in the image of God He made man" (Gen. 9:6). When Adam ate from the tree of the knowledge of God and evil, he was trying to dethrone God, in effect to unGod Him (Gen. 3:5). Adam had one restriction, one job, which was to not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The penalty was crystal clear: in the day he eats of that tree he'll surely die (Gen. 2:17). The surprising thing after the fall is that Adam didn't physically die immediately. His fellowship with God was broken and he died spiritually, but no blood was shed. The sacrificial system foreshadowed the real atoning blood of Christ to come. It's like an early chapter in a story. Why didn't God just get to the central action right away? If the blood of bulls and goats couldn't take away sin, why require them? Because good stories have build up. Characters, including people groups, mature and develop. This is like asking why we don't we arrive in the world as teenagers. Because babies are adorable, and little kids are fun. They teach us about God and His world. The whole gospel is visible at the altar: sin offerings atone for transgression; ascension offerings transform into a sweet smelling aroma; peace offerings provide a communal meal (Lev. 9:8-24). The whole thing is ominously bloody. The baby Jesus born at Christmas was born to die. He was born to have His back shredded with a whip, His wrists and feet pierced with nails, and His brow torn with a crown of thorns. The incarnation is not only about Jesus' atoning death, but it is included. He was marked from the beginning, which is why every nativity set ought to include the soldiers of Herod.

NOTES

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The Laver of Cleansing

The bronze laver sits between the altar and the tabernacle (Ex. 30:18). We learn here that it's made from the mirrors of the women who serve at the door of the tabernacle (v8). While God never appointed priestesses, these women serve important roles just like women do in the ministry of Jesus and the church (cf. 1 Sam. 2:22; Lk. 8:2-3; 1 Tim. 5:9-10; Tit. 2:3-5). Egyptian women were famous for having mirrors made of cast bronze or copper. On the way out of Egypt, Israelite women were given plunder, which must have included these treasures. The women serving the Lord then gave them in order to make the laver of cleansing. We don't know the dimensions, but the laver cleanses the hands and feet of the priests whenever they serve at the altar or go into the holy place lest they die (Ex. 30: 19-21). To come into the courtyard, you have to be clean. To go into the holy place, you have to be holy. Israel was passed over in the tenth plague when the blood of the lamb was shed and put on their doors. They left Egypt through those bloody doors. Then they were baptized into Moses in the Red Sea (1 Cor. 10:2). Only priests were "baptized" in the courtyard, but now all of God's people are baptized into Christ. Our sins are atoned for by His blood, and we are cleansed with power by the Holy Spirit. Paul says we are not saved by works of righteousness, "but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit" (Tit. 3:5).

Pillars in the House of God

The tabernacle is all about people. Israel loved to worship there: "How lovely is Your tabernacle, O Lord of hosts! 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. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness" (Ps. 84:1-2, 10). The house of God is made of human pillars, like the living stones Peter refers to (1 Pet. 2:5). It's harder to move stones through the desert, but the same idea is present here. Pillars frame and uphold the tabernacle: "That our sons may be as plants grown up in their youth; That our daughters may be as pillars, sculptured in palace style" (Ps. 144:12; cf. Gal. 2:9). God calls us into His house and then uses us to build and edify it. The abundance of bright and beautiful material reveals the riches of Christ's body, the church, the fullness of Him who fills all in all (Eph. 1:23).

Conclusion

This is a gorgeous house. It has three doors. The first is at the east end leading into the courtyard. The second leads into the holy place. And the last one goes into the most holy place. All of our lives we have wanted to get in—into the right place, the right company, the right relationship, the inner circle of friends, the place acceptance, happiness, and success. Jesus came to give us abundant life by bringing us God Himself, the source of all of it: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (Jn. 14:6). Christmas is not a conspiracy hatched by children who want to get stuff. Christmas is God's great scheme to give Himself to us.