

THE BRAZEN ALTAR - PLACE OF SACRIFICE EXODUS 27:1-8

INTRODUCTION:

There were actually two altars in the tabernacle. One was an altar for sacrifice and the other was an altar for incense. One revealed the redemptive work of Christ in type and the other revealed the intercessory work of Christ in type. Tonight we focus our attention just on the altar of sacrifice.

I. DETAILS TO REMEMBER:

There are several significant details given in the instructions for the building of the altar. In order to fix in our mind the nature of the historical place itself, I want us to consider these details.

1. The location - in the court before the holy place.

Once you entered through the only doorway into the court that surrounded the tabernacle, the first thing that you would see was the altar for sacrifice. It was the largest piece of furniture in the confines of the tabernacle, and thus was very prominent. You could not miss it. In fact, the priest could not proceed to minister until he had gone by the altar for sacrifice.

2. The material - brass and acacia wood.

The instructions that Moses received on the mountain made it clear that two elements to be used in the making of the tabernacle were brass and acacia wood. The acacia wood

was used throughout the structure of the tabernacle. It was a wood that was accessible to the people of Israel and was very hard and durable. All of the pieces that were inside of the holy place and Holy of Holies were made of gold. The two pieces that were outside in the courtyard were made of brass. Many scholars see the wood as being typical of the humanity of Jesus while the brass is typical of his deity. And brass is most often associated in Scripture with God in judgment.

3. The size - about 4 1/2 feet square, 4 1/2 feet high.

Specific details were given about the size of the altar. The instructions indicate that it was to be: three cubics high; it is to be square 5 cubics long and 5 cubics wide." In the best judgment that we can make concerning the length of a cubic in that day we come out with a box like structure that was 7 1/2 feet square and 4 1/2 high. Thus, it would be a rather impressive thing as one approached it.

4. The horns - one on each corner.

In the instructions Moses was told, "Make a horn at each of the four corners, so that the horns and the altar are of one piece and overlay the altar with bronze." These horns would be structurally a part of this altar itself. There was one on each corner. Evidently, the horns had a practical use as well as a spiritual significance. The horns had a practical use in that they were used to tie the sacrificial animal in place on the altar. With the use of the horns the sacrifice could be kept from slipping from the altar. As we will notice later, there were times when the horns were used as a place to grasp hold in search of sanctuary or security. You may remember that David's son, Adonijah, went in to the temple and

took hold of the horns on the altar in an attempt to escape the wrath of Solomon, the new king of Israel. And it worked for him. Solomon spared him as he hung on to the horns of the altar and asked for mercy. However, when Joab sought to do the same thing at a later time he was not spared. So evidently, the horns were seen as a place where you could grab on and find security.

5. The name - place of slaughter

The word that is ordinarily translated "altar" in the Old Testament comes from a root that means to sacrifice or to slaughter. So in a literal sense the altar was a place of sacrifice or slaughter. It had other names given to it in the Old Testament. It is sometimes called "the brazen altar." This emphasis upon the brass that covered the altar associated it with judgment. It is often called the altar of "burnt offerings." This calls attention to it being a place where sacrifices of devotion and worship were offered to God.

All of these details are given to us so carefully in the scriptures. So, we should expect them to have some spiritual significance for us. I will not look for significance in each of the details, but I do want us to look for spiritual significance in the altar itself.

II. TRUTHS TO RECEIVE:

There are some great truths of faith set forth typically in the altar. I want us to identify them and to appreciate them.

1. The altar is a type of the cross of Jesus.

This is the primary truth that is set forth in this piece of the furniture. In God's eternal scheme of redemption, the altar is at the center. It occupied it such a prominent place as you approached the sacred grounds of the tabernacle. In the same way, the cross of Jesus Christ stands at the heart of our Christian faith. What the altar was to the Old Testament worshipper the Cross is to us who have committed our lives to Jesus Christ.

(1) As a place of judgment

We must never forget that it was the brazen altar. We must never forget that the blood of countless sacrifices were poured out upon and around this altar year after year in the history of Israel. God placed the altar strategically in the tabernacle to keep His people mindful of the seriousness of sin. They must associate sin with death. Sin demanded a death. In order to show mercy upon the Old Testament worshipper and not require that he die personally for his sins, God taught him how to take an innocent animal and offer it as a sacrifice for his sin. So there were regular sin offerings burned upon this altar while the blood of the animal was poured out around the altar. There were special sin offerings offered on this altar. Whenever you became aware that you had sinner against holy God and you were ready to acknowledge that you deserved to die for your sins, you brought an innocent animal to die in your place. The priest would cut the throat of the animal, and its blood would be poured out and a part of the animal would be burned upon the altar in sacrifice to God.

All of this was done to impress upon the people of Israel with the judgment of God upon sin. It prepares us to understand the event of Calvary. Too long our understanding of

what happened at Calvary has been too shallow. We have failed to see Calvary as a place of judgment. We have failed to see Calvary as a place where the judgment of a holy God fell upon our sins. The New Testament tells us that Jesus bore our sins in His body on the tree. It tells us that He who knew no sin was made to be a sin offering for us. That dark Friday as Jesus hung on that cross He went through the judgment of holy God upon our sins. He satisfied the demands of holy God upon us.

This helps us understand a statement found in that great prophetic 53rd chapter of Isaiah. In that great chapter the prophet said it pleased Him, it pleased God to bruise him. We have struggled with the thought that it pleased the eternal Father to bruise the eternal Son. We must ever keep in mind; however, that the eternal Son clothed in our flesh was actually hanging on the cross in our stead. It pleased the Father to bruise Him because it was the will of the Father to save us. The thing that pleased the Father was that He knew the bruising of the Son, the judgment upon our sins as they were on the Son, would bring to us ultimate salvation. We must never forget that Calvary was a place of judgment. The altar in the tabernacle reminds us of this solemn truth.

(2) As a place of forgiveness.

Since it was awesome place of judgment, it became a place of forgiveness. The guilty worshipper could walk away from the altar after having seen the sacrifice presented to holy God on the altar with assurance that he was forgiven. He would not have to bear the penalty for his sin because this innocent animal had borne the penalty for Him. The

sacrifices of the Old Testament were never as adequate as man needed but they were a step in the direction of that ultimate event of sacrifice at the Cross.

The beloved apostle says, "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins." We must never forget that the basis of divine forgiveness is the brazen altar and its sacrifice. The basis of divine forgiveness is the Cross and its sacrifice. When God says to you, "I forgive you," it is because and on the basis of what Jesus did on the altar of the cross in your behalf. Because He paid the price for your sins, God can forgive your sins. We must never think of forgiveness as something that God extended freely and thus it was cheap. He does extend it freely, but it cost Him dearly. It cost Him the death of His son.

2. The altar is a place of devotion.

The emphasis upon it as the "altar of burnt offering," sets forth this truth. The burnt offering was a sacrifice of devotion. When you presented the burnt offering, it represented the presentation of the worshipper in his entirety to God. This brazen altar was thus the altar of burnt offering or the altar of devotion.

This is a reminder to us of the two things that must be present if we are to approach holy God. First, there must be present the sure knowledge that our sins have been atoned for by the blood of His Son. Second, there must be present an inner awareness that we have committed ourselves to God totally. The altar demands that. The cross of Jesus Christ demands this! We will never be able to present acceptable worship to God that does not

involve the total commitment of our lives to Him. This is the part of the altar that we have our most difficulty with. We are so reluctant and so slow to present the burnt offering. Jesus presented Himself and entirely to the will of His Father on the altar of the cross. Now, we must come to the cross and on the basis of what He did for us on the cross, present ourselves to God totally as an act of devotion and worship.

3. This altar is a place of safety.

I have already referred to the shelter that the altar provided for Adonijah, the son of David. He held on to the horn of the altar. The horns of the altar were sprinkled with the blood of the sacrificial sin offering. So, when he grabbed hold of the horns of the altar, he was laying claim to the forgiveness that sacrifice offered. He was acknowledging himself to be a judgment-deserving sinner, but was pleading for mercy. Oh, how there is a need for us to grab hold of the horns of the altar of Calvary and hold on for dear life knowing that it is in Christ and in Christ alone that we can be forgiven.

There is an interesting reference to the altar in the book of Revelation. The Scriptures teach us that each of these pieces of furniture in the tabernacle was a replica of a piece of furniture in heaven. That in the heavenly temple there is for instance a brazen altar. When John saw the seals being broken from the book, he caught a vision of the altar in heaven. It was when the fifth seal was broken that John saw the soul of those who had died as martyrs under the altar. I have wondered about this reference. I do not pretend to have a final word concerning the significance of this. Some have contended that it was a reminder that these had willingly poured out their blood unto God as a sacrifice, that

there was a sacrificial element in their brutal deaths at the hands of their persecutors. I do not discount this. However, I wondered if a primary lesson from this might not be that John saw them in the place of sanctuary, a place of security. While they were on earth, they may have been subject to the wrath and anger of the world. The world may have been able to do them great harm. Now, their lives are under the altar. They are in a position where no harm can ever befall them anymore — under the altar.

I know this to be true: that the only real place of security there is in the world is holding on to the horns of the altar. By this I mean holding on to the crucified Savior, who is our altar and sacrifice with all that there is in your being. The writer of Hebrews declares in his letter, we have an altar! In the context, he sees the altar as being Jesus. It is interesting how all things come together in Him. He is at one and the same time the altar, the sacrifice, and the priest who offers the offering on the altar. In other words, all of our redemption and salvation is in His hands. Indeed, we do have an altar. Our altar is the Cross, the crucified Jesus, the blood that was shed at Calvary and we are ready to declare with the beloved apostle, "God forbid that I should glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ!"