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The Altar of Brokenness

Introduction

In the Old Testament, the sacrificial altar was located inside the entrance to the Tabernacle of Moses (see Ex. 27-29). It was the first item of protocol that had to be observed in order to approach the presence of God behind the veil (the Most Holy Place) from the Outer Court.

One time every year the high priest had to take the blood of an animal, slain at the sacrificial altar, into the Most Holy Place and make atonement for the sins of the people. By this, God was indicating that, apart from the shedding of blood, there is no remission (forgiveness and cleansing) of sin. Apart from blood sacrifice, the presence of God would only be a terrifying and destructive experience for sinful people (see Heb. 9).

The means of dealing with sin in the Old Covenant was ineffective in removing the guilt of sin and the fear of death (Heb. 2:13-14 & 9:26). Some people in the Old Testament testified to its ineffectiveness and looked by faith for something much better. As the psalmist revealed: "In sacrifice and offerings you had no pleasure, but a broken heart and contrite spirit" (Ps. 51:16-17). God knew beforehand that only one thing would be powerful enough to break the sin-hardened hearts of the sons of Adam. That one thing would be His great love fully revealed through the sacrificial death of His Son.

"In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. (10) In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation (God's mercy revealed) for our sins" (1 Jn. 4:9-10).

"In this the love of God was manifested" and "In this is love" indicate that all former revelations of God's love to humanity was incomplete. God determined beforehand that only in His Son would His fullness be revealed. All prior revelations were only intended to point to Christ—the One who is full of grace and truth.

Because the means of dealing with sin in the Old Covenant was faulty, there had to be a better covenant established through a better blood sacrifice. Officially, God's intention for the Old Covenant was to "tutor" the people in preparation for the New (Gal. 4). It never was intended to perfect anyone. Today, in the New Covenant, we are commanded to draw near to the Holy of

Holies (the Most Holy Place) by the blood of Christ (Heb. 10:19-23).

An Altar of a Different Design

As stated earlier, the blood taken into the Most Holy Place once a year by the high priest was first shed at the sacrificial altar. In appropriately following the Old Covenant pattern, at what altar was Christ sacrificed before He took His blood into the Most Holy Place in Heaven?

Hebrews 13:10-14 sheds light on what that altar is:

“We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat. (11) For the bodies of those animals, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned outside the camp. (12) Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate. (13) Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach. (14) For here we have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come.”

On what instrument of death did Jesus suffer and die? Long before His death, He revealed the altar on which He was to be sacrificed.

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, (15) that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn. 3:14-15).

“Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out. And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself” (Jn. 12:31-32).

This New Covenant altar was not overlaid with bronze as prescribed by God to Moses concerning the altar of the Old Covenant. It originated from a completely different design. Its design was fired in the hearts of wicked and cruel men. Just the sight of it could cause the most hardened of criminals to cringe. For this cause, it was intended. It was used as an ensign to all would-be criminals and anti-government proponents that such would not be tolerated. This instrument of merciless death was the dreadful Roman cross. As horrible as it was, this was the altar chosen by God upon which He would take away the sin of the whole world.

How horrible, how heart-rending, how grievous it was for onlookers to have to watch, for at least three days, their loved ones die such an unmerciful death. It was a sight that would never be forgotten. An indelible mark was probably left upon anyone who just caught a glance at such suffering. Possibly, it was the most gruesome death surmised by the evil hearts of men during that time.

Amazingly, God in His great wisdom took the most unthinkable evil, used by evil men to convey a warning message, and accomplished the most profound good. Even as the cross was used by the Romans to send a warning message to all nations, God used it to reveal His love in its greatest splendor to all nations. By it, as Jesus proclaimed, many people of all nations would be gathered to Him.

While the sacrificial altar in Moses' tabernacle was overlaid with bronze, it is also interesting to note of what material the serpent was made of that Moses lifted up on the pole. "Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live'" (Nu. 21:8). Verse 9 reveals that the serpent was also made of bronze. Why bronze? Because it represents God's judgment against sin. As quoted earlier, Jesus indicated that His death on the cross would parallel Moses' lifting up the serpent in the wilderness.

Why did Moses lift up the serpent anyway? The story, as recorded in the book of Numbers, reveals that the Lord sent serpents among the children of Israel because they complained against Him. Most likely, the serpents were described as "fiery" because of the burning sensation produced by the venom. After the people confessed they had sinned against the Lord and after Moses prayed for them, the Lord told Moses to make a bronze serpent and put it on a pole. The saving message to those who were bitten in Israel was: "Those who look at it shall live."

Even so, Jesus' death on the pole (cross) is God's remedy for the venom of sin. He became "sin judged" on the cross. Those who look to Christ on the cross as their only remedy shall live. Why? Because He lives—He is risen from the dead! By the power of an endless life, He intercedes to make sure we receive the "cure" that we so desperately need.

Now, we have an altar through which great boldness of faith against sin is secured in our hearts. This boldness entirely displaces all false security and presumption that would otherwise have gotten people killed in the Old Covenant. It only comes from God's remedy—remission (removal) of sin through the blood of the Lamb.

The Power of Christ's Sacrifice

As previously quoted, Jesus suffered outside the city on the altar of the cross, the hill of Golgotha. We are commanded to identify with Him, throwing off the fear and the praise of men, and live as those who have no citizenship here in this world. The writer further exhorts:

"Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name. (16) But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased" (Heb. 13:15-16).

So, what are the sacrifices that God requires of us? At the New Covenant altar we are to offer the sacrifice of praise continually. Our praise is to bear the fragrance of the Lamb's sacrificial suffering. This is the only type of sacrifice that the Lord accepts. By continually praising God for Christ's finished work, our focus will remain continually on the remedy for sin's venom. We will, therefore, not only receive life but will walk in it. This will remain true as long as we keep our "gaze of praise" on Christ's finished work. Our well pleasing sacrifices of good works will then come from our faith in His good and finished work. All that we do and are must be of faith, honoring Christ's sacrifice and not the "sweat of our brow" as did Cain. Remember, the Lord rejected his offering.

The altar from which we worship God is the cross, and worshipping from this place will cause us to know its life-changing power. As we offer the sacrifice of praise continually because of Christ's sacrifice, the power of that sacrifice becomes a reality to us. God inhabits the praise of those who worship at the altar of the cross. This is true worship indeed. As the aroma of Christ's sacrifice ascends from our lives before God's throne, His resurrection power will rest on us.

We remain in submission to the power of the cross by continually acknowledging and experiencing, through praise and thanksgiving, its effectiveness. Praise and thanksgiving offered from the altar of the cross keeps the forgiveness and cleansing of sin alive in our lives. We are kept from becoming like those who are blind because they have forgotten that they were purged from their old sins (2 Pt. 1:9). As we rejoice in the love of God revealed through Christ's death, no matter how we feel, our whole being will come into harmony with its power. Our spiritual hope and strength will be resurrected.

Our hearts will become hardened if we lose sight of the cross of Christ and began to strive in our flesh to accomplish what Jesus has already finished. We will create altars of self-righteousness and dead works, because of which we will be rejected as was Cain. By offering up a continual sacrifice of praise from the finished work of the cross of Christ, we will be kept from the endless, non-productive, and life-draining toil of those who do not know God. Jesus said to such people, "Come onto me all you who labor and are heavy-laden and I will give you rest."

Praise and thanksgiving of this type will keep the sacrifice of Christ current to us. We will live life as if all of our sins were just recently washed away, and we will, therefore, not hesitate to forgive others. How do we stay at the cross? By honoring God's sacrificial Lamb above all human effort, ingenuity, talent, skill, wisdom, and knowledge. We can only do this by virtue of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Oh, if we only knew the benefits of being indwelt by Him.

When we stray from the shadow of the cross of Christ, we will lose sight of our only means of justification, sanctification, redemption, and wisdom and will be left to follow the dictates of our hearts and that of other people. Thanksgiving and praise to God for Christ's finished work will no longer be the rule but the fear and praise of men will become the rule instead. Our standard for loving others will be what is based on what is acceptable to men instead of God. From this comes a pseudo-spirituality that seeks to please people and not God.

What is intended by the use of the phrase "shadow of the cross?" It entails spiritual heart focus. It is a state in which we keep our heart so that Christ's finished work and victory never becomes vague to us. Two things that will aid the believer in maintaining this focus is to often partake of the bread and the cup of the Lord's Supper and to fast (do without) food.

Walking in the Spirit must begin at the altar of the cross. The Holy Spirit only honors Christ's sacrifice for sin and not our efforts. In the Kingdom of God, this is why that surrender to God must precede all effort on our part. Otherwise, we are honoring our efforts above Christ's sacrifice. This will grieve the Holy Spirit, and we will, consequently, receive nothing from the Lord.

Learning God's Protocol the Hard Way

King David learned a hard lesson in honoring God's means of redemption from sin above his own determination and presumptuous ways. In 2 Samuel 5, David attempted to bring the Ark of the Covenant back to Jerusalem. The Philistines had taken it years earlier in a battle against Israel during the days of Eli the high priest. Because it brought ill will to them, they sent it back to Israel on a cart pulled by two cows (1 Sam. 5).

Perhaps, David decided to outdo them and place it on a "new cart" when bringing it into Jerusalem. However, this was not God's way. While they were attempting to transport the ark, "Uzzah put out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen stumbled. (7) Then the anger of the LORD was aroused against Uzzah, and God struck him there for his error; and he died there by the ark of God" (2 Sam. 6:6-7). Afterward, David became afraid and left the ark in Obed-Edom's home for an interim. If He had followed God's instructions in carrying the ark in the first place, this incident would have been completely avoided.

Listen to how David brought the Ark into Jerusalem on the final and successful attempt:

"Now it was told King David, saying, 'the LORD has blessed the house of Obed-Edom and all that belongs to him, because of the ark of God.' So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-Edom to the City of David with gladness. (13) And so it was, when those bearing the ark of the LORD had gone six paces, that he sacrificed oxen and fatted sheep. (14) Then David danced before the LORD with all his might; and David was wearing a linen ephod. (15) So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting and with the sound of the trumpet.

They had played music on the previous attempt but forgot Divine protocol. On the final attempt, they played music and worshiped, but at every sixth pace, blood sacrifice was honored. The priests were carrying the ark as prescribed by God, and there was a continual offering made, all the way to Jerusalem. Now their worship and rejoicing were legitimate. They had clout before the Lord. The fear of the Lord had replaced presumption.

David became afraid of and forsook the ark because of its power but became encouraged to retrieve it because of the blessings it brought. He learned that its power was nothing to fear as long as you handled it correctly. It was not designed by God to harm anyone but for blessing those for whom it was made. *The mishandling of and presumptuousness concerning the holy things of God will make them dangerous to us although God's aim is to always bless and not curse.*

Does this help you understand how that we must offer up the sacrifice of praise continually at the altar of the cross, honoring Christ's sacrifice? All else is vain and could be dangerous for those who already know the Lord. It is not enough to just have determination, zeal, and to be a people who desire God's presence, but we must also understand and follow His protocol or ways.

A Desperate Heart

Why is the cross of Christ the altar of brokenness? Because when we behold His inconceivable suffering on it, when the light of the depths of His mercy and grace dawns upon us, and His unconditional love pierces our poisoned and embittered hearts, our selfish preoccupation will be swept away and our hearts will become like clay in the hands of a potter. This is the power of the cross—the power of God's perfect love revealed!

We will know the power of Divine love when we become as desperate before the Lamb on the "pole" as the children of Israel were desperate before the bronze serpent that Moses made and placed on the pole. Desperation arose among the children of Israel as they sensed the effects of the poison in their bodies. As more people died from the poison, they became even more desperate. By seeing and experiencing the effects thereof, the children of Israel were ready to fully embrace God's remedy as the only remedy.

How often have God's people tried to overcome sin's power and effects by their own resolve? How often have we turned to supposed worldly remedies and self-imposed means of dealing with the "poison?" How often have we sought to use anger, manipulation, flattery, spitefulness, accusation, jealousy, self-pity, alcohol, drugs, and other means as a solution to our "unhappiness"? We would flee from these things if we realized that all these things are futile attempts to circumvent the cross of Christ.

These things are clear indications that we are self-deceived and bound up by unbelief; an unbelief that refuses to believe in the comprehensive power and efficiency of Christ's finished work. Such unbelief always looks elsewhere for relief from the torment associated with not walking in perfect love (1 Jn. 4). Looking to Christ's finished work would mean that we would have to be completely responsible for the condition of our heart before God and man without having someone else to blame.

As we steadfastly behold the Lamb of God who has taken away the poison of sin, then our souls will find complete contentment and rest from all toil. Our hearts will become as forgiving and merciful as the meek and lowly Lamb who died for us.

Contrary to popular belief, low self-esteem is not the result of a lack of confidence in one's self, but is the result of our not loving others as Jesus as commanded. By loving others, we will assure our hearts before God and receive His esteem (see 1 Jn. 3). True self-esteem only comes from esteeming others above ourselves. The ability to do this comes from our glorying in and surrendering to Christ's finished work alone.

"By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1 Jn. 3:16).

When we lay down our lives for others, according to Christ's example, then we will not think to lowly or to highly of ourselves. The cross is the end of self-will, self-pity, self-hatred, the need for self-esteem, self-justification, and self-exaltation.

Will you cry out before the Lamb who was lifted up from the earth so that you might live?

Come before Him as one who has been bitten by the “serpent” and you will be made completely whole. Receive the saving message now. No longer doubt the power of His love for you.

May we all be found honoring Christ's sacrifice with all that we are and do when He returns to gather us unto Himself. May our hearts bear the marks of brokenness accomplished by embracing the love of God revealed through the cross.

*Oh, to stay in the shadow of the cross,
No foe can there withstand,
God's grace revealed, His love aflame,
Flowing from the Son of His right hand.
Gruesome was the sight
On Golgotha's hill that day,
The Lamb of God poured out His life,
And washed our sins away.
The hosts of Hell shouted with glee,
When Jesus breathed His last.
But, they did not foresee
Nor did they understand,
Their evil would shortly pass-
God used their scheme to fulfill
His redemptive plan.
So, our whole life must bear
The fragrance of Christ's death
Lest we fail of God's grace
And to our enemies be left.
We must, therefore, stay
In the shadow of the cross
So, when Christ returns
to receive His own
We will suffer no loss.*



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