

One Bronzed Altar
Exodus 27:1-8; 38:1-7
10/20/2013

If you were the average Israelite in the times of Moses and Aaron, and you needed to go into the tabernacle area, you would open the screen to the courtyard, and the very first thing you would see would be the bronze altar. There was to be a perpetual fire underneath that altar. So you would always see an altar at work. The fire that perpetually burned beneath the altar was a symbol of the complete and unceasing holiness of God. No one could enter the Tabernacle without a sacrifice. The altar stood in the way of anyone going into the Tabernacle. Without the sacrifice for sins, there is no forgiveness, and also no communion with the Lord. So it is that in speaking about the altar today, we speak of those things that are absolutely central to the Christian faith. We speak of Christ's sacrifice for the sins of His people.

The dimensions of the altar are large. It is seven and a half feet long and seven and a half feet wide, a square. Of course, it could not be very high (only four and a half feet high), because of the difficulty of getting the slain animals on top of the altar. Right away, we are confronted with something difficult. Why would the altar be made of wood? Wouldn't it burn up? Even if we add in the fact that the wood was covered with bronze, there is still the problem that getting the bronze hot enough would ignite the wood.

We get two clues about this problem from verses 4-5 when combined with chapter 20:24-25. The first clue we get is that the grate, or network, of bronze, was made to be about halfway up the height of the altar. This implies that the fire itself would be underneath that grating. Added to this is verse 8 which tells us that the altar described here is hollow on the inside, while the outside is made of wood overlaid with bronze. This suggests that the altar described here is actually a sort of outer shell. This brings us to what 20:24-25 say. There we learn that the altar has to be made of earth or uncut stones. There it makes no mention of the fact that a few chapters later on there would be commands for making an altar of bronze. How do we fit these two passages together? The solution is that the bronze altar is the outer shell, while underneath the grating was the altar of earth or stones. The earth or stones would therefore be receiving the lion's share of the heat, while the wood overlaid with bronze provided the framework for the altar. This raises the question of why it had to be this way. Practically speaking, the Israelites needed a movable altar that would keep the forgiveness of sins and sacrifice front and center for them all the time. However, wherever they were in the wilderness, there would be stones and earth that could be made into the actual place where the fire would burn. They always needed to be reminded not only of their sin, but what it costs to get rid of that sin. This is just as true of us today. We need to keep the sacrifice of Christ front and center so that we will always remember what it cost Jesus to take away our sin.

Speaking of bronze, it is worthwhile noting that the precious materials of which the Tabernacle was made become less and less valuable the further one gets from the Most Holy Place. In the Most Holy Place, everything is gold. In the Holy Place, there is some gold, but a lot of silver. Outside where the altar is, everything is bronze. This shows us how precious a thing it is to be in the presence of God. Not only is it a precious thing to be in the presence of God, but it costs us something to gain that access. For the Israelite, it cost a sacrifice. Even then, most Israelites could not directly enjoy God's presence. The priests would have to experience that presence for them. The altar is as far as most Israelites would ever get. The altar would be a tremendously instructive instrument in the hands of God. God would use that

altar to teach His people about forgiveness and sacrifice, and people's need for a substitute.

One of the most interesting features about the altar is the horns that were at the four corners. These horns were to be of one piece with the rest of the altar. This means that they were not optional add-ons. They were an essential part of the altar. What has confused many people over the centuries is the meaning of those horns. Why were they necessary? There are practical and symbolic aspects to the answer to that question. Practically speaking, the horns were the place where the animals would be tied in preparation for the slaughter. Psalm 118:27 says, "God is the Lord, and He has given us light; bind the sacrifice with cords to the horns of the altar." In the context of that verse are the prophecies about the stone which the builders rejected becoming the chief cornerstone. Plainly Jesus is lurking just around the corner. The sacrifice was held to the altar at the horns.

Many of the sacrifices would themselves have had horns. These animals with horns being tied to the horns indicate that there was a very close relationship indeed between the sacrifice and the altar. The horns were the symbolic way of identifying the animal with the sacrifice. The horns would also be pointing upwards, thus showing the worshiper in what direction the sacrifice had to go. Horns also symbolize strength. So it is that the strength of the animal is burned in such a way that the sacrifice goes upwards. The horns are the symbolic way that the animal is given to God.

People came to realize that having a sacrifice at the altar was safe for them. They knew that they needed their sins forgiven, and so they tied the animals to the horns. Perhaps this is why the horns came to be a place of safety for someone who was fleeing the wrath of someone else. You might remember that Joab, when he is fleeing Solomon's wrath, goes to the temple and takes hold of the horns of the altar. He is saying by that action that he is dedicated to the Lord, giving his strength to God, such that he should be spared. In that case, of course, Joab's actions were only a profaning of the horns. Solomon's men removed him from the horns and executed him. Joab was treating the altar like some sort of magic charm that could protect him from justice. That is hardly what the altar was all about. So Solomon's men were right to take him from the altar and execute him for his crimes.

There was just one problem with the altar. You see, there was a perpetual fire, and there were always offerings being slain and burned on the altar. Every time a person sinned, he owed an animal to God. The unceasing fire of God's holiness that burned on the altar was not ever satisfied by the burning animals. As Hebrews tells us, the blood of bulls and goats can never take away sin. All that blood, all that smoke, all those animals killed, and for what? Did they take away sin? Not in and of themselves! They pointed forward to the one perfect sacrifice that did take away sins. What they needed was a once for all sacrifice that would forever quench that flame on the altar for them. Ultimately speaking, the Israelite who offered up an animal in sacrifice was really exercising faith in Jesus Christ.

And isn't it wonderful that Jesus Christ has come to offer the one perfect sacrifice for sins? He offered up all His strength to God. To use the biblical metaphor, He offered up His horns to God, to the unceasing cleansing fire of God. He did that as our substitute. You see, every time an Israelite offered up an animal on the altar, he knew that it should have been him on the altar. The animal was a substitute. So also is Jesus Christ our substitute. He took on Himself the unceasingly burning fire of the infinitely holy God. He is the reality to which the altar, the sacrifice, the Tabernacle, the lampstand, the table of showbread, the bread itself, the priesthood all pointed. It is all about Jesus.

Have you laid hold of the horns of the new altar? Have you laid hold of the strength of

Jesus Christ as your substitute? Do you believe that Jesus Christ took on Himself the curse of the law for sin, while He Himself was without sin, and thus able to be our substitute? Do you believe in the perfection of that offering? Do you believe that no other sacrifice is required for the forgiveness of sins? Do you believe that Jesus was fully human, and thus able to take our place? Do you believe that Jesus was fully God, and thus able to bear up under the load of all that sin and guilt?

The problem with a lot of people is that they do not recognize their need of this salvation. This problem is not helped by lots of evangelism programs that start out with the love of God. For instance, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life" is not a helpful way to start out in evangelism. We cannot direct people to a solution if they don't even recognize that there is a problem first. Now, don't get me wrong, the love of God is essential to any evangelism. However, that is not a helpful place to start. And so, one of the things we can do is to point out the significance of the animal sacrifices, that the person offering them was making a statement of faith that, in reality, it should have been him on that altar. To this end, we preach the law, in order to show people that the standard is absolute perfection, and that we all fall short of that standard. The penalty for any and all sin is burning on the altar. If we burn, then we are talking about the fires of Hell itself. We are called to flee that wrath, and lay hold of the horns of the altar of Jesus Christ. That is a safe place. For the horns of that altar are strong enough to withstand the very last blows of the wrath of God. Lay hold of that altar while there is yet time!

For those of us who have done so, we have an inexpressibly sweet opportunity to offer ourselves as a very different kind of sacrifice to God. Paul tells us in Romans 12 that we are to offer our bodies as living sacrifices to God. Do you see how much grace there is in that word "living"? Who ever heard of a "living sacrifice?" All the sacrifices of the Old Testament were dead sacrifices. Jesus Christ Himself, the great sacrifice, died. And yet, because He now lives, we can live too. Our sacrifice to God, then, is that we offer up ourselves to the service of God. This is only reasonable. Look at the end of verse 1 of Romans 12: "which is your reasonable service." That word "reasonable" is well translated in the NKJV. It conveys the idea of "rational" or "logical." What is it that is logical? The idea here is that because Jesus offered up Himself as the perfect sacrifice for sins, we should offer up ourselves in gratitude for what Christ has done. This is only logical. Of course, we do not do that in order to pay God back. Paul just got finished telling us at the end of chapter 11 that no one can give to God in such a way as to put God in debt.

So what does it mean to give ourselves as living sacrifices? Most of all, it means that we seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, instead of seeking our own little kingdom. We sacrifice all selfish ambition, pride, vanity, and one-up-manship. We sacrifice our fleshly desires and our idolatries. In fact, we sacrifice everything that gets in the way of our relationship to God. We sell ourselves all-out to the service of God. Our problem is that, most of the time, we try to reserve something for ourselves. We will serve God when it is convenient, and when it doesn't get in the way of our own pleasures. But the minute anyone suggests to us that we ought to give up something because it is getting in the way, we get all riled up. But remember this: the sacrifices of the altar do not leave anything behind. They are completely given to God. And that is because Christ has given Himself completely for us.