

CHRIST IN THE TABERNACLE

by

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CHAPTER FIVE

THE BRAZEN ALTAR A SHADOW OF THE CROSS Exodus 27:18; 38:14

WHEN the Israelite passed through the gate into the court of the tabernacle with his offering, he stood before an altar made of wood covered over with brass. Although the five different offerings were presented to God here, yet this “**brazen altar**” was called by the Holy Spirit “**the altar of burnt offering**” (Exodus 38:1); and the burnt offering was only one of the five.

We shall see the significance of this name in this study and in our next lesson, which will have to do with the different offerings required of Israel by her righteous God.

The New Testament, especially the book of Hebrews, makes it very plain that this altar foreshadowed the cross of the Lord Jesus, and that the sacrifices offered thereon pictured in type His broken body and shed blood on Mount Calvary. This is what the Holy Spirit meant when He said, through the inspired apostle,

“We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle. For the bodies of those beasts, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned without the camp. Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate. Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach. For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come” (Hebrews 13:10-14).

These wonderful words were addressed to Hebrew Christians who had left the temple worship, following the death and resurrection of Christ. The temple was still standing; and the nation of Israel, as a whole, still rejected Christ as her Messiah. But the Hebrew Christians, having withdrawn from the temple worship because they realized that the Lord Jesus had come to fulfill the Mosaic Law and to put an end to all the ceremonies and ritualism that had foreshadowed His coming into world, these Hebrew Christians were being bitterly persecuted by the unbelieving Jews for their stand. That was the immediate occasion for the Epistle to the Hebrews — to establish the young Jewish believers in the faith, to encourage them in their persecutions, and to warn them not to return to Judaism, which system had crucified the Lord of glory.

The Holy Spirit was proving, from the Old Testament Scriptures, that Christ is better than Judaism, which was only “**a shadow of good things to come**” (Hebrews 10:1).

Within a few short years after Christ died and rose again, God permitted the Jewish temple to be destroyed; it was no longer needed to show forth the promised Redeemer. He had already come! But until it was destroyed in 70 A.D. by the Roman emperor, Titus, the Christless Jews still offered the sacrifices in the temple, still continued with the empty ceremonies and ritual that had already been “**done away**” in the Lord Jesus.

That is why, in the verses which we have just quoted from the thirteenth chapter of Hebrews, the Holy Spirit said that “**we have an altar**”; that is, the cross of Jesus, “**whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle.**”

Those who rejected the Lamb of God had no part in the worship at the foot of His cross!

The bodies of the animal sacrifices for the sin offering and the trespass offering were burned outside the camp of Israel; that is why the Lamb of God “**suffered without the gate**” of Jerusalem when He died upon the accursed tree.

He came to fulfill the law!

Surely the Hebrew Christian would not be ashamed or afraid to “**go forth therefore unto him without the camp**” of the nation that had rejected the only true and worthy Sacrifice! It would be a privilege thus to bear “**his reproach.**” And for every trial suffered here, an abundant reward awaited the Christian in that “**continuing city . . . which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God**” (Hebrews 11:10).

My Christian friend of today, whether Jew or Gentile, are you willing to suffer shame and reproach and persecution, if need be, for the Lamb of Calvary? I ask myself the same question.

He became “**a curse for us,**” bearing our reproach, even the sins of all the world. May He help us, by His grace, to rejoice in trial for His name’s sake.

It is a wonderful lesson that lies before us today.

- The cross of our Lord is our altar.
- The brazen altar of burnt offering was but a faint shadow of the cross.

This was a part of the meaning implied by the Spirit of God when He wrote, saying that the law of Moses was “**a shadow of good things to come.**”

As we compare the description of the pattern of the brazen altar which God showed to Moses in the mount (Exodus 27:18) and the description of the finished altar (Exodus 38:14) with the Holy Spirit’s explanation of the meaning of this altar of sacrifice, as set forth in Hebrews and in other portions of the New Testament, we shall praise God, with enlightened hearts and minds, for the wonders of the meaning of Calvary.

“AN ALTAR OF SHITTIM WOOD” COVERED WITH BRASS

TWO materials went into the making of the altar of burnt offering: a very durable wood called “**shittim wood**,” or acacia, and a complete covering of brass. Three other pieces of furniture, all in the tabernacle and all covered with gold, were made of this same “**incorruptible**” wood. And in each case the shittim wood pictured the spotless humanity of our Lord.

In our last lesson we saw that the brass typified judgment borne for us; whereas the gold, seen only by the priests in the sanctuary itself, was a symbol of Christ’s deity and glory. None but His blood-bought children know Him as very God! But on the outside of the sanctuary, in the open court, visible to all who entered through the gate, there were the altar of burnt offering and the laver of brass, reminding the sinner who approached God that “**the wages of sin is death**,” and that the defilement of sin had to be cleansed before any child of Adam might enter into the Lord’s sanctuary.

In the altar of burnt offering the brass was also a symbol of “the all-enduring strength” of Jesus, “**the mighty God**.” He was, indeed, the God-Man, perfect in His humanity, without sin; at the same time eternal God, the Creator, Redeemer, and Judge of all the earth.

Before He was born in Bethlehem, the Angel Gabriel told Mary that He was to be the holy Son of God. When the apostles prayed, applying the prophecy of the second Psalm to Christ, as they were guided by the Holy Spirit, they referred to Him as the “**Holy Child Jesus**.”

During His earthly ministry even the demons bore testimony to the fact that He was “**the Holy One of God**.”

And both Peter and Paul said that the sixteenth Psalm was a prophecy of His resurrection; for the body of the sinless Son of Man “saw no corruption.” (See Luke 1:35; Acts 4:27; Mark 1:24; Acts 2:27; 13:35).

The body of Jesus was raised from the dead! Thus Old Testament and New tell us of Christ’s spotless, incorruptible life on earth — first in prophecy, then in fulfillment. And these passages quoted may be multiplied manifold.

- His life, His teachings, His miracles of grace, bear witness to His sinlessness.
- The Father’s voice, His disciples’ testimony, even the admission of Pilate and the centurion and the thief on the cross, declared the spotless character of Jesus, the Lamb of God.

The wood of the altar of burnt offering was completely covered with brass, giving strength to endure the fire that was kept burning day and night as the continual sacrifices were being offered to God.

Had the Lord Jesus been less than God, He could not have borne the anguish, the fires of testing, that He suffered on the cross. Had he been less than God, He could not have been the spotless Substitute for the sinners’ guilt.

The incorruptible wood and the brass remind us of these precious truths.

“THE ALTAR . . . FOURSQUARE”

God had said to Moses, when He gave him the pattern in the mount,

“Thou shalt make an altar of shittim wood, five cubits long, and five cubits broad; the altar shall be foursquare: and the height thereof shall be three cubits” (Exodus 27:1).

It has been suggested that the altar was foursquare, the same on all sides, to show forth completeness and equality.

- **“God is no respecter of persons.”**
- **“All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.”**

Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, bond and free — all must be washed in the blood of Jesus, if they are to stand before a holy and righteous God.

Nicodemus, the respectable, highly educated ruler of the Jews, went to heaven just as the dying thief was received into Paradise, on the merit of the atoning blood of Christ.

The sinful woman of Samaria, the self-righteous Saul of Tarsus, stumbling Peter, mercenary Matthew — all were given new hearts and changed lives on the basis of the cleansing, transforming blood of Christ.

Not only was the brazen altar foursquare, offering equal opportunity to all; but it rested on the ground within reach of all.

It was only three cubits high. There was no ladder to climb, in order for man to place the victim upon the altar; nor can the sinner reach heaven by any upward progress of his own. God had to come down to sinful man. He was Jacob’s ladder, the only Way to heaven and eternal life.

There was no abatement of the penalty because of the worthiness of the Substitute — all was foursquare. He who knew no sin became our Sin Bearer. From Him even His righteous Father turned His face away when He bore our sins **“in his own body on the tree”** (I Peter 2:24).

“THE HORNS OF THE ALTAR”

At each of the four corners there was a horn or projection, of one piece with the altar proper, even as God said to Moses,

“Thou shalt make the horns of it upon the four corners thereof: his horns shall be of the same: and thou shalt overlay it with brass” (Exodus 27:2).

At least two significant facts were associated with the horns of the altar: there the innocent victim was doubtless bound as the blood was shed; and the horns of the altar were a place of refuge in time of trouble.

Psalm 118 was always the concluding anthem of the Jewish Passover Feast; and it is believed that this was the “hymn” which our Lord sang with His disciples at the Last Supper. Of course, we know that the Psalms were Hebrew poems, set to music, and used in the temple worship.

Now the significant fact is that Psalm 118 is without doubt one of the Messianic Psalms. And in verse 27 we read these heart-searching words, “**Bind the sacrifice with cords, even unto the horns of the altar.**”

Evidently the custom was to bind the animal sacrifice, presented alive to God, to the horns of the brazen altar. And when the Holy Spirit applied the figure to our Lord, He used this familiar custom to show us that our heavenly Sacrifice was bound to the horns of the altar, as it were, by the cords of love — His own fathomless love!

It was His love that led Him from heaven’s glory to Calvary. When He set His face steadfastly toward Jerusalem and the altar, which was His cross, He knew the anguish of soul, the suffering and sorrow that He was to bear for a guilty world. The love of Christ that passeth knowledge nailed Him to the accursed tree!

The horns of the altar were sprinkled with the blood of atonement (Exodus 29:12); and Calvary’s cross was stained with the precious blood of our Lord and our God. The blood-sprinkled horns of the altar pointed to the four corners of the earth; the cross of Jesus towers above “the wrecks of time,” inviting all men of all ages to look unto Him for eternal life.

The cross of Jesus offers a worldwide remedy for a guilty world.

To the horns of the altar the guilty fled for refuge; and to Christ the sinner flees for safety from the righteous judgment of God.

Two men who lived in the days of David and Solomon stand out before us in striking contrast — Adonijah and Joab. Both fled for safety to the horns of the altar. Adonijah was spared at the time, though afterwards executed for a later rebellion; whereas Joab was slain, even at the horns of the altar. (See I Kings 1:50-53; 2:28-34).

Why the difference?

It seems as though Adonijah’s finding refuge and safety during David’s lifetime speaks to us of mercy in this age of grace; while Joab’s execution during the reign of Solomon foreshadows swift and certain judgment upon all rebels during the reign of Christ, the greater than Solomon. “**Now is the day of salvation.**” It will be too late for the Christ-rejecting word to look for mercy when they see the righteous King coming again in glory to reign. If they reject His mercy now, they will meet Him as the holy and just Judge of all the earth.

“THE VESSELS . . . AND GRATE . . . OF BRASS”

All the vessels used at the altar of burnt offering and the grate on which the sacrifice was consumed were of brass — again reminding the sinner of judgment borne by the substitute, a type of the only Substitute for the guilty one. There were the brass pans to receive the ashes of the victim, the shovels, basons, fleshhooks, and firepans.

The “**grate of network of brass**” was to be “**even to the midst of the altar**” (Exodus 27:45).

That means that the grate on which the sacrifice was burned was one and one half Cubits high, for the altar was three cubits high (27:1). Thus the height of the grate was exactly the height of the mercy seat which covered the Ark of the Covenant, in the Holy of Holies. It is a beautiful truth — that God’s justice and His mercy are of equal dimensions.

His justice demands the vindication of His holy law; but His mercy provides the Sacrifice to put away sin, paying the penalty in the sinner’s place.

The Psalmist expressed it in words we love to remember.

“Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other”
(Psalm 85:10).

“THE BRAZEN RINGS” AND THE STAVES

When God was showing Moses the pattern in the mount, He said,

“. . . and upon the net shalt thou make four brazen rings in the four corners thereof . . . And thou shalt make staves for the altar, staves of shittim wood, and overlay them with brass. And the staves shall be put into the rings, and the staves shall be upon the two sides of the altar to bear it” (Exodus 27:47).

The priests and the Levites had complete charge of all the sanctuary. Before Israel journeyed on the march, the priests went into the Holy Place and into the Holy of Holies, and covered all the sacred vessels and pieces of furniture before the Kohathites, one of the three families of the Levites, carried them on the journey. The Kohathites were not to “**touch any holy thing, lest they die**” (Numbers 4:15; cf. 4:1-15).

These Levites were to carry the pieces of furniture by the staves that went through the rings.

For the golden-covered articles inside the sanctuary, the rings were made of gold; while the staves were covered with gold. For the altar of burnt offering the rings were of brass, the staves covered with brass.

In this manner these vessels of the tabernacle and all connected with the worship were protected from the gaze of men; and in this manner they were reverently carried on the march.

Of course, every Israelite who entered the gate could see the brazen altar and the laver; but none but the priests were allowed to see the beautiful vessels in the Holy Place; none but the high priest, the Ark of the Covenant and the mercy seat.

Surely in all of this God was teaching His people to worship and honor the One of whom these sacred things spoke; and He was teaching them that, before the guilty one could enter into His holy presence, sin had to be put away.

THE PLACE OF SACRIFICE FOR SIN

The whole burnt offering, the fat of the sin and trespass offerings, and memorials of the peace and meal offerings were burned upon the brazen altar; but the flesh and bones of the sin offering and of the trespass offering were burned outside the camp, at some distance from the tabernacle.

It was to this that the Holy Spirit referred in Hebrews 13:10-14, which we quoted in the beginning of this lesson.

We shall have more to say upon this subject in our next lesson, concerning the five offerings; but just here we need to remember that the brazen altar was the place of sacrifice for sin. There the animal sacrifice was led by the offerer.

This guilty one confessed his sins, symbolically transferring his guilt to the substitute by laying his hands upon the head of the victim, even as he acknowledged his sins. There the blood was shed and poured out on the ground before the altar, a constant reminder of the atoning power of the blood of Him who was to come.

“The life of the flesh is in the blood.” And **“it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul”** (Leviticus 17:11).

By this sacrifice the offerer was accepted before God — by faith in Christ, of whom the animal sacrifice was but **“a shadow”** or type. Sin had been confessed and dealt with; faith had taken hold of the promise of a Redeemer who was to shed His blood upon the altar which is Calvary’s cross.

THE CONTINUING SACRIFICE

“The fire shall ever be burning upon the altar; it shall never go out” (Leviticus 6:13).

This was God’s express command concerning the fire upon the altar of sacrifice. Day and night the fire burned. “The claims of the altar had to be met in full.”

*God in His holiness was teaching sinners that sin must be judged, that **“the wages of sin is death.”***

Moreover, He was teaching His children that He was always ready to accept their offering. Never, never does He turn the penitent sinner away unforgiven!

Day after day, year after year, century after century, Israel brought the continuing sacrifice for sin; but when our Lord offered Himself upon the altar, when He endured the fires of condemnation for all our sins, He did it **“once for all.”**

“He needeth not daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for his own sins (He had no sins of His own; the priests in Israel needed a Saviour), and then for the people’s: for this he did once, when he offered up himself” (Hebrews 7:27).

“Nor yet that he should offer himself often, as the high priest entereth into the holy place every year with blood of others; for then must he often have suffered since the foundation of the world: but now once in the end of the world [age] hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself” (Hebrews 9:25, 26).

There was no chair in the tabernacle, because the priest’s work was never done.

The fire had to be kept burning; the ministry in the sanctuary had to continue. Priests died, and others took their places. But when our Lord finished the work of redemption, He ascended into heaven, and **“sat down”** on the right hand of the Majesty on high, to await the day when all His enemies should be made His footstool. (See Psalm 110:1; Hebrews 1:3, 13).

My friend, do you get the picture? No earthly priest, no human being, could redeem a soul; but Jesus, our Great High priest, has finished His work of redemption; there is nothing that you or I can add to what He has done! It is all of grace. And our eternal security depends not upon us, but upon Him who bears the marks of Calvary in His hands and feet and side. **“There is no more offering for sin”** (Hebrews 10:18).

We cannot know the depths of suffering which Christ bore for us. He endured the fires of judgment that no human being can fully comprehend. Fire is a symbol of judgment in the Word of God. Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, offered strange fire before the Lord; judgment in death fell upon them in the form of fire (Leviticus 10:1, 2). Fire and brimstone fell upon wicked Sodom and Gomorrah, and consumed them. The wicked will spend eternity in a place which our Lord described as a lake of fire and brimstone, **“where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched”** (Mark 9:48).

Upon the altar of burnt offering, in the very heart of it, the fire burned. In the heart of the sinless Son of God the fires of judgment burned — not for His own sins, for He had none — but for the sins of a guilty world. Not the physical suffering alone, not the mocking and shame which He endured; but the anguish of soul when He became **“an offering for sin”** — that was the real suffering of the cross for the sinless Son of God. (See Isaiah 53:10).

There are those who find fault, saying that it was not just for God to lay the sins of the world upon Jesus. But they do not know what they are saying. Jesus was God; and He took the sins of the world upon Himself. Has God not a right to do what He pleases with Himself? In the eternal councils of the eternal Holy Trinity God took upon Himself the sins of the world. And Christ Jesus was **“God manifest in the flesh.”**

THE REMOVAL OF THE ASHES TO A CLEAN PLACE

After the burnt offering had been accepted by God and burned upon the altar, the priest, in white linen garments, took the ashes out from underneath the grate, and they were taken to a clean place without the camp. The ashes were precious because they were to be used in sprinkling the unclean, as in the case of the leper.

This part of the ritual speaks to us of our Lord's crucifixion "**without the gate**" of the city of Jerusalem, and of His burial in Joseph's new tomb, wherein "**corrupting flesh had never lain.**" It was "**a clean place**" provided by loving hands for Him whose body "**saw no corruption.**"

"The value of the ashes does not lie in what we think of them, but in the high estimate put on them by God Himself." And how precious in the eyes of the Father were "**the ashes of the whole burnt offering,**" when the fires of judgment had consumed the Sacrifice!

"If the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God" (Hebrews 9:13, 14).

Thus the Holy Spirit speaks to us concerning the efficacy of the cleansing power of the blood of Jesus!

FROM THE ALTAR TO THE THRONE ROOM

If we could have been a witness to the ministry of the priest in Israel, we should have seen him going from the altar of burnt offering on into the sanctuary day after day; but first he ministered at the place where the blood was shed.

That blood was sprinkled on all the vessels in the tabernacle by the high priest, as on the Day of Atonement, he went into the very throne room, the Holiest of All, to represent his people before the Shekinah Glory. The altar was thus associated with all the vessels in the sanctuary.

Before we may talk to God in prayer, before we may know Him as the Light of the World and the Bread of Life, we must meet Him at the foot of the cross, where His blood was shed.

The light for the golden candlestick was taken from the altar of burnt offering.

The fire for the golden-covered altar of incense was taken from off the brazen altar.

Nadab and Abihu took "**strange fire**" before the Lord; they refused the way of the cross; therefore, they died by devouring fire from God. God is "**the light and life of men**" only as men put their faith in the Sin Offering upon Calvary's altar.

God hears the prayers of men only as they go to Him in the name of His only begotten Son!

“He is able to save them to the utter most that come unto God by him” — Jesus! (Hebrews 7:25). But first the sinner must approach the Father in the name of the Son.

There was no other altar of burnt offering in Israel. And **“there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved”** but by the name of Jesus (Acts 4:12).

“Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach.”

“The Brazen Altar smokes no more,
On which the Victim lay,
Where sin’s unmeasured doom He bore
When I had naught to pay.”

~ end of chapter 5 ~

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