

Heb 13:10-16 The Christian Altar (part 1) (I preached a version of this sermon back in 2017 as a more topical sermon on the Christian Altar)

What do you think of when you hear the word “*altar*?” If you grew up Lutheran or Episcopal, you may find a special table or platform in the front of the church where people come and kneel and take the Lord’s Supper. Some churches have a special table in the front where the communion is served. To Catholics, the altar is the most important place in the building. It serves as a table for the Eucharist, and it is a table of sacrifice. If you grew up Baptist, you may think of the front of the church, just below where the pastor preaches. It may be the place you pray during the “altar” call. So, what are we as Christians to think of this term “altar” in Christian worship? (Remember, this is our context going back to 10:28: “**let us offer to God acceptable worship . . .**” What does the writer of Hebrews mean when he says, “**We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat?**”) In order to answer this question, we need to look through the Bible and see how this word is used.

The first place we see the word “altar” is Gen. 8:20. It is a place of “stone” or “earth” and the root of the word means “slaughter” or “sacrifice.” We read: “**Then Noah built an altar to the Lord . . .**” When the flood waters had subsided God told Noah to leave the ark with all the animals and to be fruitful and multiply. And after God spoke to him, he built this special place called an altar. And we are told that he sacrificed various animals and birds on that altar.

The next time we see the word “altar” is in Gen. 12 with Abram in the place of Shechem. God appeared to Abram and said, “*I will bless you. I will give this land. And I will make you into a great nation.*” And after God spoke with him, he built an altar. Later, he moved to a place east of Bethel and we are told in 12:8 that he “**built an altar to the LORD and called upon the name of the LORD.**” Abraham will build other altars, including the one to sacrifice Isaac.

Later, Isaac built an altar and he also called upon the name of the Lord (Gen. 26:25). Jacob also erected an altar at the place where God first appeared to him (Gen. 33:20). Later, Moses would also build altars. The first one was built after the battle with the Amalekites when Aaron and Hur held up Moses’ hands. God gave them a miraculous victory. And Abraham worshipped God, built an altar, and called it, “***The Lord is my Banner***” (Exod. 17:15-16).

The next altar we see is the brazen altar built within the boundaries of tabernacle. THIS is the altar the writer of Hebrews refers to in 13:10. Though there are many passages that speak of this altar, the specifics are found in Exod. 27:1-8. Of the 7 pieces of furniture in the tabernacle, this one was of first importance. It was the largest of the furniture pieces in the tabernacle, the first visible piece of furniture for the worshipper. It was made of wood, but covered with brass, making it able to withstand the fire which burned continually (Lev. 6:13). It was here (on the outside of the holy place and holy of holies) where the priests would bring animals to be sacrificed.

Speaking of the brazen altar, in Exod. 29:42-43 we read: “**It shall be a regular burnt offering throughout your generations at the entrance of the tent of meeting before the Lord, where I will meet with you, to speak to you there. There I will meet with the people of Israel, and it shall be sanctified by my glory.**” This altar was really the basis of the whole Levitical system,

for on it all Israel's offerings were sacrificed (burnt offering, meal offering, peace offering, and sin offering). Blood was put on its horns, sprinkled upon it, around it, and poured out at its base. And, the people were so identified with this place that even certain parts of the sacrifices were to be eaten by the priests. Paul refers to this place in 1 Cor. 10:18 when he says, "**Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar?**"

This was an altar for all of Israel, and for no one else! They were so jealous of this place that the thought of having another altar brought great jealousy, wrath, and anger at the one who would even consider building another like it. Do you remember when Joshua and the 12 tribes conquered the Land of Canaan? And later the 2 ½ half tribes who lived on the east side of the Jordan built an "altar" for themselves. And when the others heard, they were angry and ready for battle. But, those who built the altar said, "*God forbid that we should build an altar to offer sacrifices. Ours is only a memorial*" (Josh. 22).

And we come to Heb. 13:10 which says, "**We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat.**" Can you imagine such words? He is saying, "*As Christians, we have another altar. And, those who serve the old altar have NO RIGHT to take part in this new altar.*" As Christians, we know the altar was a picture of Christ. In the altar, we have the type. In Christ, we have the real. This is why the old types and shadows do not work. Now that the REAL has come, we don't need those any longer. Today, Jesus Himself, IS the altar, which is the point of Hebrews. He says: "**I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh**" (John 6:51). He also says, "**Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you**" (John 6:53).

With this in mind, I have 7 truths from this text about the Christian altar, 3 this week, and 4 next week. Here they are for today: 1) The Christian altar is a place of holiness; 2) The Christian altar is a place of sacrifice; and 3) The Christian altar is a place of provision.

1. The Altar Is a Place of Holiness. I get this from v. 11 as the altar is seen as a "holy place." Also, as we have seen in the OT, altars are the places God meets with his people. And from a manner of speaking, where God is, there is holiness. What did God say to Moses at the burning bush? Take off your shoes. For the ground where you are standing is holy. Mt. Sinai: When Moses went up, the people could not follow. They could not even touch it, nor their animals, lest they die. At the brazen altar in the holy place, ONLY the priests could offer sacrifices. ONLY the priests could do the work around the altar. They were given special privileges with the holy things of God. And they had to wear special clothing that only they could wear. And if they were not dressed accordingly or did EXACTLY as God said, they could be consumed by the awful, holy, wrath of God.

The author of Hebrews says that we have a different altar. In fact, the entire book speaks of Christ as the ONE who has fulfilled ALL the types given in the Mosaic Law, including the brazen altar. Today, Christ is holy. He is holy because He is God. And, as with the brazen altar, the only way to meet God was through this altar. Of Jesus we read: "**He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶ For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities--**

all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷ **And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.** ¹⁸ **And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.** ¹⁹ **For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell . . .** (Col. 1:15-19). Today, Jesus says, **“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me.”** (John 14:6). Today, Jesus is the altar of God. And those who come to Him are “sanctified” (v. 12). Today, if you are in Christ, your sins are forgiven. By faith, as you have “come” to Christ, the altar of God, you are counted as righteous in God’s sight. This means there is only ONE altar by which sinners are sanctified.

2. The Altar Is a Place of Sacrifice. Look at v. 11: **“For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp.”** The people couldn’t just sacrifice at any old place. Under Mosaic Law, they had to come to the altar with a sacrifice, whether it be an animal, or some kind of food like the grain offering. Remember, the root meaning of the Hebrew word for “altar” is “slaughter” or “sacrifice.” And beginning with Moses, these sacrifices must be offered on the altar. And this offering was a sacrifice for sin. An animal (bull, goat, lamb, bird, etc.) would be slaughtered and killed on this altar. Life would be taken. For the wages of sin is death. There is no difference with this truth today.

I imagine the Israelites, especially the priests, could never lose sight of this fact. We tend to look over such things. We think, *“Oh, they sacrificed animals,”* and we move on. But to the Israelites, the brazen altar was continually covered with blood and guts, and the smell, never left them. (I can’t hardly clean fish for 30 minutes and not be disgusted.) The altar was NOT a pretty place. And these sacrifices happened all throughout the day, every day. I believe that those who came to that altar with their sacrifices (with the priests) by faith, really knew that they themselves should have been on that altar instead of those “innocent” animals. But, in God’s mercy, their sins were forgiven. In some way, their sins were taken away.

The theological term for this is expiation. In order for any person to be able to come into God’s presence, he/she must have his sins “expiated” taken away. It is like the Psalmist who thinks of his sins and says, **“God has taken them and thrown them (removed them) as far as the east is from the west”** (Ps. 103:12). Do you remember the scapegoat used on the Day of Atonement? The priest would lay his hands on the head of the scapegoat and confess both his sins and the sins of the people and then let the goat go into the wilderness, never to be found again. This was a picture of God taking away (expiating) their sins.

But there is more. In order for sins to be taken away, there must be sufficient punishment. The theological term for this is “propitiation.” The wrath of God poured out on the sacrifice. So when the Israelites brought their sacrifices to the brazen altar they were saying to God, *“Accept the death of these animals in our place. Let them be burned up as a pleasing aroma to satisfy the wrath we deserve.”* But, the problem of their sin ultimately remained. Otherwise, they would not have continued year after year after year after year and so on.

So, what was missing with those sacrifices? A lot! They were mere creatures. They were of this world. They were not perfect. They could not actively obey the law of God. They were not willing and free to offer themselves. (And so much more.) They were insufficient to cover, take

away (expiate) the sins of the people, nor to take away God's wrath (propitiation). This is why the writer of Hebrews says, "***The blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sins***" (Heb. 10:4). There was something missing in those sacrifices offered on THAT altar. They were not sufficient. But of Christ we read . . .

Is. 53:10-11: "**Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. ¹¹ Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.**" John 1:29 says, "**Behold the lamb of God who takes away (expiates, propitiates) the sins of the world.**"¹ John 2:2 says, "**He is the propitiation for our sins . . .**" In this way, Jesus is our altar. As the brazen altar was a place of sacrificial judgment to take away and punish sin, so was the death of Christ. This means that nothing less than the atoning work of Christ is sufficient to take away my/your sins and appease the wrath of God. Today, Christ is our altar.

3. The Altar Is a Place of Provision. It only follows that good things come from the altar, namely the provision of God. In the OT, God himself was the provision. At the altar, God told Noah, I will be with you. At the altar God told Abraham, I will be your God. The brazen altar (as well as future altars leading into the temple) was a place of provision. At the altar, God would provide for his people. It is interesting that for all the burnt offerings in the Mosaic law, the priest were allowed to eat what remained from the offerings. And you might say, "*Yes they ate. They had to. Otherwise, how would the priests live. For the Levite had no land inheritance.*" At the altar, God provided for the Levites by giving them portions of meat from the animals.

But, did you know there was ONE sacrifice, one burnt offering, from which the priests could not eat. Do you remember? It was the burnt offerings on the Day of Atonement. They could not eat any leftover meat from the bull or the goat offered on the Day of Atonement. ALL the remains must be taken outside the camp and burned up. Why was this sacrifice different than all the rest? This ONE sacrifice on the Day of Atonement especially pictured the person and work of Christ. I believe this pictured the depths of their (and our) sin and the completeness of Christ's sacrifice. The death of Christ COMPLETELY takes away our sin. There is nothing left, no remains, nothing left to eat. ***Though your sins be like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow*** (Is. 1:18).

Therefore, Christ is our provision. And not simply at the Altar. For as the remains of those animals were burned outside the camp, so was Christ crucified outside the camp. Christ did what the blood of bulls and goats could not do. They could not provide for what we needed. In this way, Christ is the altar of God. Next week, we will move into the rest of these verses, which will be very applicable to us. In conclusion, we have an altar. And it is not one that we have built. It is an altar that can only come from heaven. It is a place of holiness, a place of sacrifice, and a place of provision. And because of the person and work of Christ, our worship is 24/7. Let me read vv. 20-21 in closing. "**Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.**"