

The Brasen Altar

From Hebrews chapter 13, we learn that it is our privileged position to have an Altar to partake of, which those who served under the Law had no legal entitlement to: “we have an altar, whereof they have *no right to eat* which serve the tabernacle” (Heb. 13:10). Under the Mosaic dispensation, the peace offerings could be eaten by the offeror: they had a legal entitlement to them. But in our dispensation, Christ is our representative Altar, upon which we can both offer up spiritual sacrifices (i.e. “... The sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name” (Heb. 13:15)), and also partake of antitypical peace-offerings, which provide spiritual sustenance to meet our spiritual needs.

There is an eating and drinking of the elements of sacrifice each Sunday when we join together in fellowship, to memorialize the offering up of Messiah. So the Apostle speaks of “the Lord’s Table” (1 Cor. 10:21) which contains the emblems, in a way not too distantly removed from the altar which held the sacrifices. In fact, under the Mosaic dispensation, the Peace Offerings were described as being the “bread of God” (Lev. 21:6, 17), with the AV marginal rendering being “*food*” of God. And the Altar to be erected for receiving sacrifices in the Age to Come is called: “*the Table* that is before Yahweh” (Ezek. 41:22). Putting these things together then, we find that the sacrifice of the peace offering was a meal – a meal in which Yahweh was served first. His part was placed upon the altar first, and then only once it had been consumed by fire, the offeror could take and eat his part. The Brasen Altar thus became a place of fellowship between Yahweh and Man, being the place of a fellowship meal.

STEALING THE SACRIFICES

When we come to consider the example of Eli’s sons in the days of Hannah and Peninnah, we find that they had inverted this Divine order. Not only did they steal part of the sacrifice, they also took their portion first. When a man came to offer his sacrifice, “the priest’s servant came, while the flesh was in seething, with a flesh hook of three teeth in his hand; and he stuck it into the pan, or kettle, or caldron, or pot; all that the flesh hook brought up the priest took for himself” (1 Sam. 2:13-14). And if the offeror complained, and told them to offer Yahweh’s portion before taking his own, “then he would answer him “Nay, but thou shalt give it me now: and if not, I will take it by force.” (1 Sam. 2:16). So it is recorded: “wherefore the sin of the young men was very great before Yahweh ...” (2 Sam. 2:17).

There is an important point of exhortation that comes out from these things: in all our ways, Yahweh must come first. He is to be elevated, and not ourselves. We must not misuse the gifts that our Father provides us in a way not acceptable to him, like Eli’s sons did with their gifts of sacrifice. Such a course is bound to lead us against the general trend of human practice: we are constantly bombarded by peer pressure, the media and internet to put ourselves first, to satisfy our own wants and desires. We can all too easily become overtaken by “the cares of this life,” so that the germinated seed of the Spirit becomes strangled, and eventually dies. In all our ways and in all that we do, we must seek to put our Father first: – as Messiah commanded, to “seek first the kingdom of God and His Righteousness”, and He will provide for anything else that we might need.

CLEANSING THE ALTAR – FORSHADOWING CHRIST

Exodus chapter 29 describes how that prior to its use, the Brazen Altar had to be cleansed by means of atonement through sacrifice. And once sanctified, it then had the power to confer holiness upon whatever touched it:

“And thou shalt offer every day a bullock for a sin offering for atonement: and thou shalt cleanse the altar, when thou hast made an atonement for it, and thou shalt anoint it, **to sanctify it**; and it shall be an altar most holy: whatsoever toucheth the altar shall be holy.” (Exo. 29:36-37).

This procedure “to sanctify” the Altar, foreshadowed the sanctification of Messiah, in order that he, as the antitypical Altar, might in turn sanctify his brethren. So, in his prayer of John chapter 17, the Lord said:

“ ... and for their sakes **I sanctify myself**, that **they also might be sanctified** through the Truth. Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe in me through their word” (Jno. 17:19-20).

Here is a shadowy principle (Heb. 10:1) established in the cleansing of the Altar: as part of the process of the sanctification of the saints, Messiah also had to sanctify himself. There are those who teach that sacrifice is for committed sins only, and that therefore Jesus did not himself require sanctification, or, as the Apostle describes it, to be “purified”. But in commenting upon the cleansing through blood as taught by the Law, the Apostle writes:

“... almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood, there is no remission. It was therefore necessary that he patterns of things in the heavens **should be purified with these; but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these**. For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us ...” (Heb. 9:22-24).

According to the Apostle then, Christ who entered into heaven itself, needed to be “purified” after the pattern of the purging of the Mosaic law. This is a difficulty for those who do not accept that human nature is itself unclean, and in need of sanctification: why did the Lord Jesus need to be “purified” if he had no moral defilement through committed sin? The Bible answer (as examined in our article: “*Atonement for Nature?*”, see page 1) is that human nature has a resident evil, called “the law of sin”, “sin in the flesh” or the “*diabolos*”, which Christ brought to destruction (Heb. 2:14) and thus condemned (Rom. 8:3). Bringing it victoriously to the grave, Messiah delivered a fatal blow to the serpent head (Gen. 3:15), and the grave being unable to hold him, Christ revived, and rose again, to be given a pure, sinless and incorruptible nature. Upon the basis that “he that is dead is freed from sin” (Rom. 6:7), the resurrected Jesus is no longer subject to the wiles of the flesh, and has laid the foundation for the elevation of his brethren upon the same sacrificial principles. Christ therefore provides an example for us:

“Forasmuch then as Christ hath suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves likewise **with the same** mind: for he that hath suffered in the flesh **hath ceased from sin**” (1 Pet. 4:1).

ASSOCIATION WITH THE BRAZEN ALTAR

As we have seen, the Brazen Altar, once sanctified, was able to make that which came into direct contact with it holy. This would appear to have been the basis for the forgiveness of Adonijah, who had lifted himself up in David’s last days, to become the king over Israel instead of Solomon. But once his plans were thwarted, and Solomon had been made king, we read that:

“Adonijah feared because of Solomon, and arose, and went, and caught hold of the horns of the altar.”

Solomon, upon hearing of this action, said:

“If he will shew himself a worthy man, there shall not a hair of him fall to the earth: but if wickedness shall be found in him, he shall die. So king Solomon sent, and they brought him down from the altar. And he came and bowed himself to king Solomon: and Solomon said unto him, Go to thine house” (1 Kings 1:50-53).

Under the Law, taking hold of the Altar would have made Adonijah holy, and this action demonstrated his humility in recognizing his need to sanctify himself. Wickedness was evidently not found in him, and so he was demonstrated to be “a worthy man”.

However, if a man was guilty of innocent bloodshed, even if he grasped hold of the horns of the Altar, he would himself be slain and taken away:

“... if a man come presumptuously upon his neighbor, to slay him with guile; **thou shalt take him** from **mine altar**, that he may die ...” (Exo. 21:14).

This was the case with Joab, who was guilty of shedding innocent blood for his own particular reasons

“... Joab fled unto the tabernacle of Yahweh, **and caught hold on the horns of he altar**. And it was told king Solomon ... Then Solomon sent Benaiah the son of Jehoiada, saying, Go, fall upon him”. And Benaiah came to the tabernacle of Yahweh, and said unto him, Thus saith the king, Come forth. And he said, Nay; but I will die here. And Benaiah brought the king word again, saying, Thus said Joab, and thus he answered me. And the king said unto him, Do as he hath said, and fall upon him, and bury him; that thou mayest take away the innocent blood, which Joab shed, from me, and from the house of my father” (1 Kings 2:28-31).

Joab did not recognize the need to repent and be made holy, and so whereas Adonijah was sanctified, Joab was condemned, and was slain upon the Altar.

THE SHED BLOOD

Whilst the carcasses of the sacrifices were placed upon the altar, the shed animal blood was applied in a very different way. Speaking of the consecration of the priests, the inspired narrative informs us:

“... Moses took the blood, and put it upon the horns of the altar round about with his finger, and purified the altar, and poured the blood at the bottom of the altar, and sanctified it, to make reconciliation upon it” (Lev. 8:15).

So, the blood was firstly placed upon the horns of the altar, and secondly underneath it, things which we shall consider in turn:

THE HORNS OF THE ALTAR

These four horns were each at a corner of the altar itself. Psalm 118 provides us with more information regarding this arrangement in relation to the sacrifice:

“El is Yahweh, which hath shewed us light: bind the sacrifice with cords, **even unto the horns of the altar**” (Psa. 118:27)

The horns therefore, were not simply for decorative purposes: they were also functional. The sacrifices were bound with cords to the horns, in order to secure them to the altar. In this arrangement, we again find the aspect of fellowship, with the offering being bound together with the altar upon which it was placed. So Hosea speaks of the blessings of Ephraim:

“I taught Ephraim also to go, taking them by their arms; but they knew not that I healed them. *I drew them with cords of a man, with bands of love ...*” (Hos. 11:3-4).

It is evident the “man” here is a reference to Messiah, being drawn towards Israel by means of love. Messiah himself spoke in a similar fashion:

“No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me **draw him**: And I will raise him up at the last day.” (Jno. 6:44).

Yahweh “draws” us to himself by the bands of His Son’s love. Christ was himself a “horn of salvation” (Luke 1:69), and we are bound to this horn of the altar with the bands of his love, which found its fullest expression in his laying down his life for his friends. Under the Mosaic Law, the burnt offering spoke of Messiah yielding himself as a complete, blemishless sacrifice – but it also speaks of his brethren who also yield their lives in service to him:

“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, **that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice**, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service” (Rom. 12:1).

UNDER THE ALTAR

The placing of blood upon the horns again represented how Messiah, as the “horn of salvation” was himself be sanctified by his own blood, to provide the means by which the offerings were united with the altar. But in addition to this, the blood was also to be thrown underneath the altar. To repeat the passage cited above:

“Moses took the blood, and put it upon the horns of the altar round about with his finger, and purified the altar, **and poured the blood at the bottom of the altar** and sanctified it, to make reconciliation upon it” (Lev. 8:15)

There are a number of passages that are relevant here, particularly Revelation chapter 6:

“and when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw *under the altar* the souls of them that were slain for the Word of God, and for the testimony which they held: And they cried

with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?" (Rev. 6:9-10).

Whereas Leviticus 8 puts the blood under the altar, the Apocalypse places "the souls" of the righteous there. The explanation given, is that their blood had been shed, and they cried out for vengeance. They had lived a life of sacrifice, and were slain for the testimony that they preached. It is a matter of Divine authority that the blood represents the life (Lev. 17:11, 14), and this scenario therefore depicts those who had lost their lives at the hands of those who dwell on the earth. Just as the blood of Abel cried out from the ground (Gen. 4:10), for vengeance upon Cain, so their blood cried out for justice and vengeance upon their slayers. The blood of Messiah similarly cries out: his was "the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel" (Heb. 12:24). The "better things" are the principles of righteousness and mercy, better than a cry for vengeance.

When we come to consider the Brasen Altar, we see many points which help to illustrate principles that lie behind the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ. And we also see the principles upon which we can offer our sacrifices of praise, one of the forms of peace-offering, "that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to his name" (Heb. 13:15). Let us therefore come unto the Christ-Altar to receive sanctification and redemption, that we might become part of that immortal throng who will sing the praises of the Lamb in the day of coming glory.

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