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222 - The Altar Of Burnt Offering

1. Introduction

Sacrifices to God were a critical part of worship under the Law of Moses. Although we can read about sacrifices being made by the Patriarchs prior to this, there's no detail regarding how the sacrifices were made. In this lesson we'll take a look at **The Altar Of Burnt Offering** as a foreshadow and focal point that foreshadowed the Messiah.

2. Death at the slaughter site

As we read the scriptures we come across accounts of sacrifices being made but we don't really stop to consider what that entailed. We understand that the sacrifices were a type of Christ representing the pure blood that would reconcile man to God. There are many however that don't think we should spend time studying the sacrifices under the Law in detail and don't consider such a study as necessary or relevant. As we look deeper into the Law we find that a knowledge of the sacrifices enhances our appreciation for Christ. It also emphasizes how much simpler worship is for us today when compared to the duties of the Levites and priests.

As we look at the sacrifices we find that there were procedures put in place by God for a number of offerings. We find that the sacrifices were offered in a specific place, by specific individuals and were to be done at specific times. The place where this was done was separated from where God manifested his presence and in a more literal translation is rendered as the "**slaughter site**" by Everett Fox in **The Five Books Of Moses**, indicating the brutal and gruesome nature of what was done there. In this lesson we'll examine:

- a. God's command to build the Altar of Burnt Offering
- b. Dimensions, materials and construction of the altar
- c. Placement of the Altar in relation to the Tabernacle, and
- d. Foreshadows in the Altar

Let's take a look at each of these.

3. God's command to build the Altar of Burnt Offering

Reading through the list of objects God commanded Moses to make at Sinai, the Altar of Burnt Offering appears seventh (**Ex 27.1-8**). Details in the command to make the altar are simpler than for many of the other objects. As we look at the materials from which it was made we see a striking difference between the altar and the objects we've studied so far. Items inside the Tabernacle were fabricated from gold, silver and fine linen. Now, in the altar, we see a more practical and durable nature to it that sets it apart from objects inside the Tabernacle. While the materials and other aspects of the altar are different, its equally important in the worship and

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work of the priests and Levites.

4. Dimensions, materials and construction of the altar

God provides detail concerning what the altar should look like and how it was to be made. *“And 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. And 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. And thou shalt make his pans to receive his ashes, and his shovels, and his basons, and his fleshhooks, and his firepans: all the vessels thereof thou shalt make of brass. And thou shalt make for it a grate of network of brass; and upon the net shalt thou make four brasen rings in the four corners thereof. And thou shalt put it under the compass of the altar beneath, that the net may be even to the midst of the altar. 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. Hollow with boards shalt thou make it: as it was shewed thee in the mount, so shall they make it.”* (Ex 27.1-8).

From this description we can note similarities and differences that stand out between the altar and items inside the Tabernacle. We can start with the basic structure. The altar was to be *“Hollow with boards”* and these were shittim, or acacia wood. When I discussed the Ark of the Covenant I noted that acacia wood was lighter material known for its portability and durability. The wood is specified in the opening of this command (Ex 27.1). As we compare all of the items as well as the Tabernacle itself we see that acacia wood appears in the principal structures created for worship.

The altar began as a box that was hollow (Ex 27.8) and was to be perfectly square (Ex 27.1). The length and width of the box was to be five cubits. Using our estimate of eighteen inches for a cubit that made the box approximately seven and one half feet in length and width. The height of the altar was to be three cubits high, or approximately four and a half feet. The height would place the altar at about waist level for an average person. The boards from which this was made were then to be overlaid with bronze. The King James Version renders this as brass which may be confusing to some. Historically the rendering of bronze is considered more accurate. Whatever the material was, the altar was built to last.

At the corners of the altar Moses was to place *“horns”* which were also to be overlaid with bronze. Rings were to be set at the corners made of bronze as well. These were to hold staves also made of acacia wood and overlaid with bronze. These were to be placed in the rings on the sides for the purpose of moving the altar.

Since the altar would be used for burning the bodies of the sacrifices there was a need to

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be able to separate and remove ashes from it. In order to do this a grate was created. Referred to as a “*net*” in the King James Version, this was a practical part of the design. The grate or net, was to be made of bronze and was placed halfway down the hollow body of the altar. In addition to this were implements to maintain the altar.

God commanded , “*And thou shalt make his pans to receive his ashes, and his shovels, and his basons, and his fleshhooks, and his firepans: all the vessels thereof thou shalt make of brass.*” (Ex 27.3). These implements were practical and would be used to remove ashes from the altar, handle the sacrifices as they were placed in the altar to be burned and to carry ashes away to be disposed of. Bronze would prove to be more durable and longer lasting as working utensils. The nature of these actions are also reflected in the placement of the altar which we’ll talk about next.

5. Placement of the Altar in relation to the Tabernacle

On the first day of the first month of the second year, the work on the Tabernacle was done and Moses ordered it to be setup. As I mentioned in an earlier lesson, this followed an inside - out sequence. The Tabernacle structure was setup with its curtains then the Ark of the Covenant was setup followed by the Vail. The table of shewbread, Lampstand and altar of incense were then put in the Holy Place after which the door of the Tabernacle was hung. Next in the list is the placement of the altar of burnt offering.

The Altar of Burnt Offering was placed between the door of the court of the Tabernacle and the door leading into the Holy Place. It may have been centered between the two since the Laver was placed between the Altar of Burnt Offering and the door of the sanctuary. Its also unclear what family of the Levites was responsible for moving the altar but from the text indications are that this would have been done by the sons of Kohath (**Num 3.31**). In sequence the Altar of Burnt Offering would be in place followed by the Laver after which the court of the Tabernacle would be setup, forming a line pointing to the Most Holy Place. Figuratively there are a number of elements associated with the altar that foreshadow the sacrifice of Christ.

6. Foreshadows in the Altar

I won’t spend a lot of time detailing the procedures followed in making the sacrifices but there are some general characteristics that are significant. From the placement of the altar to the manner in which the sacrifices were offered we see a harsh picture of death connected to redemption and atonement.

Leviticus chapters one through seven detail steps followed in making a number of sacrifices. When animals are involved the procedures are clear. The animals were apparently bled and the priests collected the blood in the appropriate container. The animal was then divided so

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that the parts specified by the Lord were separated. The sacrifice was then burned on the altar, the blood was poured around the base of the altar, sprinkled or otherwise handled as specified in each particular sacrifice. This was done daily, in the morning and evening, on the Sabbath day and every holy day such as the day of atonement. In addition to these offerings, the Hebrews were able to present freewill offerings, thank offerings or sin offerings among others for themselves which the priests would offer.

If we simply think about the sacrifices being made we may not fully appreciate what the area around the altar was like or the sheer volume of animals that were killed. Consider the sound of the innocent animals as they were bled and killed. Imagine the sight of the bodies being cut apart, separated and placed on the altar. Think of the odor of burning flesh, blood and grain as it was placed on the altar. Imagine the priests needing to purify their garments because of the blood, the continual management of the wood, coals and fire on the altar. Think of the smoke that rose over the altar and hung in the air. Think of the never ending nature of the offerings and the tedium connected with them. As we read Leviticus we find that the procedures for preparing the animals had a surgical precision to it and the priests were obligated to see that they were followed correctly. On one hand the priests would have looked more like butchers while from another perspective they appeared as skilled surgeons handling the variety of animals and the steps they had to perform.

Its hard to imagine the time and effort expended to accomplish these things but as we take a look at the magnitude of what is being done we can start to understand God's blessings, the sheer volume of sacrifices needed and the complexity of service under the Law. The New Testament sheds some light on this that helps us understand. The writer of Hebrews states, "***For the law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect. For then would they not have ceased to be offered? because that the worshippers once purged should have had no more conscience of sins. But in those sacrifices there is a remembrance again made of sins every year. For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins.***" (Heb 10.1-4).

In the discussion of the scheme of redemption I covered the fact that the Law of Moses was an instrument for that time but it was a shadow of a better law that was to be revealed. Paul speaks of this in his letter to the Galatians. "***Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster.***" (Gal 3.24-25). As I noted a moment ago, the sacrifices under the Law were incapable of taking away sin. As the faithful offered their sacrifices, God set their sins aside. This is true for the sacrifices offered by the patriarchs. It wasn't until Christ offered himself that those sins were finally taken away permanently. The writer of Hebrews states, "***And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called***

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might receive the promise of eternal inheritance.” (Heb 9.15). The sacrifices prepared the world for Christ and their volume indicates the magnitude of forgiveness needed to reconcile mankind to God.

There are some who consider the sacrifices to be a ritualistic superstition, but the reality is that those animals represented the blood of the sinless son of God. Their presence since the beginning of the biblical narrative is a reminder of our separation from God and inability to achieve reconciliation on our own. The sacrifices laid a foundation of types and shadows that would connect with Christ when the fulness of time came and the final sacrifice made. If Christ would have just appeared in the world without such a foundation the validity of the Bible would be suspect. On the other hand we have thousands of years of prophecies, foreshadows and types that all share the same characteristics and reach their ultimate meaning in the death of Christ. While some doubt the credibility of the Bible and dismiss the sacrifices, God and Christ, what we find on closer examination is that this is not something humans could have manufactured and made sense of. The sacrifices as foreshadows, prophetic elements and types are proof of a higher intelligence at work. And we can see that in every detail including the placement of the altar.

The Ark of the Covenant represented the place where God would manifest his presence, acknowledge the blood of the sacrifices on the day of atonement and commune with Moses. The Holy Place with the various objects inside it represented other aspects of God including his presence with his people. As the priests left the Tabernacle they were going farther away from the presence of God in a figurative sense. The Laver represented cleansing that had to be done before entering the Tabernacle. Beyond that was the altar of burnt offering representing the destruction of evil. The blood of the sacrifices represented a life given to appease the wrath of God. The bodies of the animals represented the embodiment of sin that had to be destroyed. Destruction which came in the form of fire. Destruction outside and away from the presence of God in his sanctuary.

Christ was ordained as the sacrifice for sin before the world began (**Titus 1.1-2**). He was sent into to the world at the fulness of time (**Gal 4.4**) and was on Earth to do the will of the father and complete his work (**John 4.34**). When Christ was arrested and eventually condemned he did so at the hands of the world represented by the Jews through the priests, and the Gentile world through the Romans. Christ became the embodiment of sin at the will of the father and taken outside the presence of God represented by the Temple where he was killed, just as the sacrificial animals were killed and offered by the priests.

The body of Christ was destroyed in a trial that can be easily seen as fiery as was the destruction of the body of the animal sacrifices. When Christ died, the sin of the world that had been and would be forgiven was completely destroyed. The remnants of which were taken away never to be remembered by the Lord just as the ashes of the sacrifices were taken from the altar

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and disposed of never to be seen again. The writer of Hebrews illustrates this point very well. *“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.”* (Heb 13.11-13)

The destruction of the sacrifices foreshadowed God’s desire to destroy sin and thus the work of Satan. The writer of Hebrews speaks of this as he writes, *“Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil...”* (Heb 2.14).

A final note that connects the altar with Christ is the sanctification of the object on the day the Tabernacle was setup. God told Moses, *“And thou shalt take the anointing oil ... And thou shalt anoint the altar of the burnt offering, and all his vessels, and sanctify the altar: and it shall be an altar most holy.”* (Ex 40.9,10). Christ was the anointed of God who was sanctified as the final sacrifice for sin. Like the altar, Christ represented the point at which sin was destroyed through the offering of the sacrifice. Christ became the focal point at which God removed the sins of the faithful who lived prior to the time of Christ and will remove sin from the life of believers until the end of time as they come to the Lord in faith and obedience.

7. What we’ve learned

- a. The Altar of burnt offering was the single point where the sacrifices were offered to God
- b. The altar was outside the sanctuary, away from the Most Holy Place where God manifested his presence.
- c. Blood of the sacrifices was offered by being poured at the base of the altar and carried before God in the Most Holy place on the day of atonement
- d. The Altar of Burnt offering was anointed with the holy anointing oil which made it sacred and sanctified in the sight of God
- e. Christ was the focal point as the final sacrifice for sin for all time
- f. Christ was offered outside the gate, away from the Temple and presence of God
- g. Christ offered his blood in his death which was able to take away the sins of the world
- h. The bodies of the sacrifices were destroyed on the altar just as the body of Christ was destroyed and killed on the cross

8. Next

In the Holy Place was a golden altar that was maintained before the Lord. This stands as a

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silent representative of the coming of Christ and God's blessings to the world. In the next lesson we'll examine **The Altar of Incense** and how it foreshadowed the coming of a new law, the Messiah, the presence of God and prayer.