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MINISTRIES

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The Tabernacle: The Altar of Sacrifice

The tabernacle in the wilderness was God’s dwelling place among the Israelites after he freed them from slavery in Egypt. It can be a chore to read through the passages that describe the tabernacle, but it turns out that the tabernacle is full of symbolism and spiritual lessons that teach us about our relationship with God. For a quick introduction to what the tabernacle was, we recommend watching our teaching, [The Tabernacle: An Introduction](#). In this teaching, we’re going to take a close look at one particular component of the tabernacle: the altar of sacrifice. We’re going to examine how this altar was used, and how it relates to our spiritual relationship with God. Let’s get started.

The tabernacle was a building that contained various sacred vessels, including the Ark of the Covenant, where God’s glory dwelled. Surrounding the tabernacle was an open-air courtyard, surrounded by walls made of linen sheets. To enter the courtyard, one would have to enter through a “gate,” a thirty-foot long curtain that was hung on its east side. The first item one would encounter upon entering the courtyard was the altar of sacrifice. This altar is described in Exodus 27:

Exodus 27:1-8

You shall make the altar of acacia wood, five cubits long and five cubits broad. The altar shall be square, and its height shall be three cubits. And you shall make horns for it on its four corners; its horns shall be of one piece with it, and you shall overlay it with bronze. You shall make pots for it to receive its ashes, and shovels and basins and forks and fire pans. You shall make all its utensils of bronze. You shall also make for it a grating, a network of bronze, and on the net you shall make four bronze rings at its four corners. And you shall set it under the ledge of the altar so that the net extends halfway down the altar. And you shall make poles for the altar, poles of acacia wood, and overlay them with bronze. And the poles shall be put through the rings, so that the poles are on the two sides of the altar when it is carried. You shall make it hollow, with boards. As it has been shown you on the mountain, so shall it be made.

So, this altar was shaped like a square, and each of its sides was five cubits long, which is about seven and a half feet. Its height was three cubits, or four and a half feet. It was made of wood overlaid with bronze. At its corners were four bronze “horns.” These horns would be anointed with blood and oil at

various times. Like all the rest of the tabernacle items, the altar was designed so that it could be carried and moved from place to place. So, it had four bronze rings in its sides so that poles could be put in the rings and the entire altar could be carried.

The purpose of the altar was to burn sacrifices on it. When an animal was sacrificed, the meat from the animal was typically eaten by the priests. The animal's blood was either put on the sides of the altar or poured out at the altar's base, depending on the kind of sacrifice. Then the animal's fat and internal organs were burned on top of the altar. Whatever was burned on the altar was considered to be "YHWH's portion" of the sacrifice; it would burn up and its smoke would rise as a "pleasing aroma to YHWH."

There are several different kinds of sacrifices that were offered on the altar. The one we are probably the most familiar with is the sin offering. Whenever a person sinned by breaking God's commandments, he would bring an animal to the tabernacle, and it would be slaughtered. The animal's blood would be put on the horns of the altar, and its fat would be burned as YHWH's portion. This sacrifice would provide atonement for the person's sin, and he would be forgiven (Leviticus 4).

Why did this sacrifice provide atonement? Because the animal's blood served as a substitute for the blood of the sinner. Rather than the sinner having to die, the animal died on his behalf:

Leviticus 17:11

For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life.

This presents a more fundamental question: why was it important for sins to be forgiven? In short, because God judges sin, and God's presence was there in the midst of Israel. If the people did not obtain atonement for their sins, then they would have to face God's wrath. At the tabernacle, if they approached God in a sinful state, then they would physically die (Leviticus 16:2-3).

When we consider that the entire tabernacle was symbolic of the kingdom of God, we can see the spiritual application of this sin offering. Most Christians are very familiar with the spiritual side of sacrificial atonement, which is described throughout the New Testament. Jesus, or Yeshua as he was called in Hebrew, was a spiritual sin offering on our behalf:

Ephesians 5:2

And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Yeshua's blood atones for our sins, so that we do not have to face God's wrath.

Hebrews 10:12-14

But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

Romans 5:9

Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.

We find forgiveness for our sins in the atoning work of Christ. His blood substitutes for our own, just like the blood of the sin offering did. Because of this atonement, we are delivered from the second death—not the death of our body, but the death of our soul. This is one of the main themes of the New Testament, and one of the fundamental things symbolized in the altar. It's impossible to overstate the significance of Christ's atoning work, and of this symbolism that we find in the altar. However, you may not realize that there is even more symbolism to the altar, because there are other offerings besides sin offerings. One of these other offerings was the burnt offering. When a burnt offering was given, the animal was slaughtered, and its blood was put on the sides of the altar. Then, instead of just the fat, the entire animal was placed on top of the altar and burned.

What does this burnt offering represent? Well, in a normal offering, only the fat was burned. The flesh, that is, the meat, was eaten. But in a burnt offering, the flesh is offered along with the fat. This represents what we do when we come to God. Beyond receiving forgiveness from our sins, which is represented in the sin offering, we also sacrifice our flesh, meaning, we no longer live the way our flesh wants to live, but instead we seek to live by God's spirit. Paul writes about this in Romans:

Romans 8:12-13

So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

He later refers to this as offering ourselves as a "living sacrifice." We consider our flesh, our sinful desires, to be dead, and we live instead by God's spirit, his will, which fills us with righteous desires:

Romans 12:1-2

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

David also speaks of this complete submission to God's will, and he also calls it a sacrifice:

Psalms 51:16-17

For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

So, the burnt offering represents laying down our own life, our own will and fleshly desires, as a sacrifice to God.

In addition to the sin offering and the burnt offering, there was also an offering called the peace offering. This offering was usually not obligatory, but was given voluntarily. What do these sacrifices symbolize? Well, once we have been forgiven of our sins, have put our flesh to death so-to-speak, and we are filled with righteous desires from God's spirit, we will go on to do righteous things that are pleasing to God. Peter tells us that these righteous acts are like spiritual sacrifices being offered to him:

1 Peter 2:4-5

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood,

to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ [Messiah Yeshua].

The author of Hebrews has similar comments:

Hebrews 13:10-16

We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat. 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. So Jesus [Yeshua] also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

So, the physical offerings given on the altar symbolize the spiritual offerings we give in our daily lives. When we do good to others, bringing wholeness and peace to them, it is like bringing a voluntary offering, a peace offering, before God.

Matthew 25:37-40

Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'

So, let's recap the symbolism of the offerings given on the altar. In the sin offering, we see the atonement for our sins that we have in Yeshua. In the burnt offering, we see how we must lay down our own lives, denying our own flesh. And in the peace offerings, we see the spiritual sacrifices of service that we freely give as members of God's kingdom. All of this symbolism points toward one thing: making us righteous. The sin offering points to Yeshua's sin offering, which makes us righteous:

Romans 5:17-19

For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ [Messiah Yeshua]. Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

The burnt offering represents laying our own life down, totally submitting to God, giving up our flesh and living by God's spirit. This, too, makes us righteous, as it says in Ezekiel:

Ezekiel 36:27

And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

Deuteronomy 6:25

And it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to do all this commandment before the LORD [YHWH] our God, as he has commanded us.

Finally, the voluntary peace offering, which symbolizes obeying God in our daily life, and loving other people, also makes us righteous.

1 John 3:7, 10

Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous...

... By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.

Just like the physical offerings given at the altar allowed one to enter the tabernacle courtyard, so too these spiritual offerings make us righteous, and able to enter God's spiritual courtyard, that is, his kingdom. The altar represents the way to righteousness: first, by Christ's atoning sacrifice, by his blood covering our sins; second, by laying down our fleshly desires and living by the desires of God's spirit; and third, by doing the righteous things that God wants us to do. These are the basic components of righteousness, and they are all found symbolized in the altar of sacrifice.

There is one more feature of the altar that we want to highlight, and that is the fire that was on the altar. This fire was always kept burning:

Leviticus 6:8-13

The LORD [YHWH] spoke to Moses, saying, "Command Aaron and his sons, saying, This is the law of the burnt offering. The burnt offering shall be on the hearth on the altar all night until the morning, and **the fire of the altar shall be kept burning on it**. And the priest shall put on his linen garment and put his linen undergarment on his body, and he shall take up the ashes to which the fire has reduced the burnt offering on the altar and put them beside the altar. Then he shall take off his garments and put on other garments and carry the ashes outside the camp to a clean place. **The fire on the altar shall be kept burning on it; it shall not go out**. The priest shall burn wood on it every morning, and he shall arrange the burnt offering on it and shall burn on it the fat of the peace offerings. **Fire shall be kept burning on the altar continually; it shall not go out**.

The fire on God's altar was always kept burning. Spiritually, this tells us that God is always ready to accept our offerings. If we are willing to repent and have our sins forgiven, to bring a "sin offering" so to speak, then God is ready to forgive us. If we are willing to lay our lives down and receive God's spirit, to bring a spiritual "burnt offering," then God is ready to receive us. And, if we are ready to do good works in service to him, to give spiritual sacrifices that he finds pleasing, then God is ready for that too. The fire on his altar is always burning. He is always ready for us to come before him. As he says in Malachi:

Malachi 3:7

From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD [YHWH] of hosts...

So, let us return to him, give YHWH his portion upon the altar, live in righteousness, and dwell in his courts. He is ready for us. We'll leave you with one final scripture:

Psalms 84:1-4

How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD [YHWH] of hosts! My soul longs, yes, faints for

the courts of the LORD [YHWH]; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God. Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O LORD [YHWH] of hosts, my King and my God. Blessed are those who dwell in your house, ever singing your praise!

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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