

Jesus Our Great High Priest Serves at a Great Altar

Hebrews 13:10-16 (NIV)

¹⁰ We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat. ¹¹ The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. ¹² And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. ¹³ Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. ¹⁴ For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. ¹⁵ Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. ¹⁶ And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

Our reading tonight is again taken from the letter written to Hebrew Christians. Its first readers were Jews who had been brought by the Spirit of God to see that the Old Testament prophecies and ritual sacrifices had all been fulfilled in Christ. They had severed their connection with the Old Testament ceremonies and regulations and had begun to worship Christ in the full enjoyment of Christian freedom, no longer clinging to the rites and rituals of the past. As you can imagine, those Jews who rejected Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies and continued to cling to the ceremonial laws and rites of the Old Covenant opposed those Jews who had turned to Jesus to worship him as the promised Messiah. Those who still held to the Old Testament ceremonies would undoubtedly argue with these new Christians and try to bring them back to the old ways. And one of their arguments appears to have been that Christians had no altar for burnt offerings. Every Jew knew that atonement was made for sin at that altar by the shedding of blood, and they knew that without the shedding of blood, there could be no atonement for sin. Thus the argument was this: you Christians have no altar. And to that, the writer of Hebrews responded with this: You are wrong, we do have an altar; that altar is the cross. Tonight, let us look at the cross in the light that shines from the Old Testament altar of burnt offering and see that **our Great High Priest serves at a great altar**. Tonight let us go to the altar of our Great High Priest and believe the message of that altar, bear the reproach of that altar, and bring our sacrifices to that altar.

I. Believe the message of his altar.

If we had lived nine hundred or so years before Christ was born and had been able to walk up to the temple in Jerusalem—or even earlier and had been able to see the tabernacle at which Israel worshiped before the temple was built—the first thing that would have captured our attention would have been the altar of burnt offering. That altar was built according to God’s own specifications at the time the tabernacle was erected in the wilderness. It was about the size of our altar, though not exactly the same shape. It was about 7.5 feet square and about 4.5 feet high. It was much like a big grill, in which a fire was kept burning continuously and on which the parts of the sacrificial animals were burned up and devoted to the Lord. The altar was the focal point of Israel’s worship since, for the most part, the worship was conducted not in the temple and tabernacle but out in front with the assembly standing in the courtyard. For over a thousand years, Israel’s worship had centered on that altar in front of the temple and tabernacle. The people watched as animals were slaughtered and the blood of those animals was used to make atonement for sin and the meat was burned up on the altar. The ritual at the altar proclaimed a powerful message to the people of Israel. It proclaimed their sins and the fact that the wages of sin is death and that without the shedding of blood there can be no forgiveness. That is the message of the law and God’s anger with sin. But that altar ritual had another message: the message of God’s love that spared the people from dying because a substitute died for them. Those animal substitutes pointed God’s people ahead to Christ and the sacrifice Christ offered when he offered himself on the altar of the cross.

However, the ritual for sacrifices was not the same in every case. In the case of most sacrifices, after the animal was slaughtered, part of the meat was offered to God by burning and part was given to the priests to eat. One sacrifice was different. On the Day of Atonement, the priests did not eat any of the meat of the sacrificed animals. On that day, after the high priest made atonement through the blood of a bull for his own sins and those of his family and then for the people using the blood of a goat, the carcasses of those animals were carried outside the camp of Israel and burned. This was to symbolize the removal of the sins of the people. The priests were not permitted to eat the meat of those offerings. The writer of Hebrews refers to those offerings when he says, “We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat. The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp.”

When the writer of Hebrews says, “We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat,” he is pointing us to the cross where that Old Testament Day of Atonement was brought to complete fulfillment. And he reminds us of the ritual involved with the animals that were offered on the Day of Atonement when he says, “Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood.” Our reading of the Passion History tonight showed us Jesus carrying his cross out

of the city of Jerusalem, where the place called Golgotha was located. Just as the bodies of the animals were carried outside the camp and burned, so the cross of our Savior stood outside Jerusalem—and it proclaims to us that our sins are washed away and forgiven by the blood of Christ. As we come to that cross, let us come with believing hearts. Let us believe first that we deserved to die so shamefully for our sins, but that Jesus took our place on the cross under God’s wrath. It was no accident that Jesus was put to death outside of Jerusalem and that his cross stands outside the city wall—it was God’s way of assuring us that our sins have been removed from us as far as east is from west. Yes, we have an altar: the true altar, not one where animals are slain and consumed day after day, but where the true Lamb of God was sacrificed for the sins of the world. Let us go to that altar and see the true sacrifice for sin and then as we go, let us

II. Bear all disgrace for his altar.

The writer of Hebrews again points us to the cross that stands outside the city and says, “Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore.” There is a second message in the truth that Jesus’ cross stood outside the city of Jerusalem—not only does it testify to the removal of sin, but it shows the attitude the Jewish people held toward Christ. It shows how he was despised and rejected by his own people. St. Peter, in his first letter, refers to Jesus as the stone the builders rejected (2:7). Jesus was led out of Jerusalem and nailed to a shameful tree. Death on the cross was reserved for the most hated and reviled of criminals. For the Jews to insist that Jesus be crucified was their way of showing how thoroughly they despised him. And now, the author of Hebrews urges us to go out to Jesus outside the camp.

What he means is that those who bear the name of Christ, as we do, and who profess Christ as the Savior of our souls must also be ready to be despised and rejected by the unbelieving world. Think of the Jews to whom this letter was written. To confess Christ meant to be ostracized from the Jewish community. It meant being put out of the community, just like Jesus was put out of Jerusalem by his own people. And so it still is today. To confess Christ openly means to risk the hatred of the world. For the cross proclaims the same message as that of the Old Testament altar of burnt offering. It proclaims the holiness of God, who having not changed one bit over the years, still says, “The wages of sin is death” (Ro 6:23), and who still says, “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Heb 9:22). But that is a message that many people do not want to hear. Many have created for themselves a god in their image, one who does not care about sin and who condones any and every lifestyle. The idea of a God passing judgment on sinners and condemning them to die flies in the face of their own pet notions about God, and for that reason, they reject those ideas and those who hold them. The cross also crushes any hope of our gaining salvation by our own works. For if sin is so serious to God that payment for it required the blood of his own Son, then our own paltry efforts are rejected as worthless. That is a humbling message; therefore, many reject it and despise those who hold it. Maybe you’ve gotten the look of disbelief that comes with telling someone you believe in a God who demands perfection and threatens to punish anything less with death and the only way to avoid that death sentence is through faith in Christ, who endured it for us. It is this scorn that the writer urges us to endure when he says, “Let us, then, go to him” and face rejection for Christ. But who wants to be ostracized and looked down upon by others? Why would we subject ourselves to that?

The writer of Hebrews answers, “Here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.” Do you get his point? His point is this: So what if coming to the altar of the cross and clinging to Christ for our salvation means rejection by the unbelieving world? This world is passing away. If we are kicked out of this world’s club and excluded from the elite of society because we proclaim Christ crucified, so be it. This city won’t endure; this world is passing away. But through Christ, we have access to heaven; yes, we have a place in a city that endures forever. Christ’s journey to the cross and grave opened the door to heaven for us that sin had closed and locked. He prepared a place in heaven for all who come to him in faith and cling to him, despite the scorn of the world. So let us see that we have an altar—the cross of Christ—and believe the message of that altar that our sins are removed, bear the disgrace of that altar by going to Christ outside the city, and finally, let us

III. Bring a sacrifice to his altar.

In the days of the Old Testament, a person who wished to express his or her thanks to God for blessings received could bring an animal for sacrifice. Now, since Christ suffered once for all on the altar of the cross, there is clearly no need to bring animal sacrifices and animal offerings to offer on an altar. And yet that doesn’t mean that sacrifices and offerings have no place in the life of a Christian. Rather, the writer tells us that God is pleased with the sacrifice of praise that his people bring to the altar of the cross. The writer says, “Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.” So then as we come to the altar of the cross, let us bring our sacrifice of praise—praise to God who gave his one and only Son to be our Savior, to deliver us from the dominion of darkness and death for a place in the kingdom of the Son he loves. Let us sing with joy: “Glory be to Jesus, who in bitter pains poured for me the life-blood from his sacred veins” (CW 103:1).

But then let’s make sure that our sacrifice of praise does not begin and end with our lips. Let’s remember that Christ redeemed us for himself so that we would be his people, eager to do what is good. Let’s remember that “he died for all, that those who live

should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again” (2 Co 5:15). Let our hands also bring our sacrifice of praise as we serve God in all that we do. The Christians in Philippi provide a wonderful example of what it means to “do good and to share with others.” Remember that not only did they provide a warm welcome for Paul when he came to Europe on his second mission journey, but they continued to support his gospel work even after he moved on to other places. Even when he was far from them being held as a prisoner in Rome, the church in Philippi sent him a gift made by the hand of man named Epaphroditus. In response, Paul wrote these words to the Christians in Philippi: “I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God” (Php 4:18). Let us continue to give generously to support Paul’s work of proclaiming Christ’s sacrifice to the world and devote ourselves to living to the glory of him who died for us and rose again to assure us of a blessed death and victorious resurrection to life everlasting.

Yes, we have an altar, the altar of the cross. Let us go to that altar, believing the message of that altar, bearing the disgrace of that altar, and then bring our sacrifice—of praise, the fruit of our lips, and the service of our hands. Amen.

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