

Approaching God Through Christ (Part 2)

The Brazen Altar

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Let us imagine for a moment that we lived in the days of Merriweather Lewis and William Clark—leaders of the expedition sent out across these United States of America by Thomas Jefferson to explore the newly purchased Louisiana Territory—and we wanted to explore or discover with Lewis and Clark whether there was a direct and practicable water passage to the Pacific Ocean. Quite an arduous journey that would be. But, being young and adventurous, we decided we wanted to go on this journey (joining this company) and head west. Think about that. What skills and qualities would we need, not only to make such a hazardous trek, but to be useful in it (to fit in and to work well with the rest of the expedition so that it would ultimately be successful)? What qualities would we need? What traits? What skills?

We could probably think of a lot of them that we would need or would be very useful. First of all, it would be a very good idea that we would be healthy, because who knows how long we will be away—perhaps two years. So we would want to start out healthy.

It would also be a good idea to be strong, because there would be a lot of hard heavy work to be done, certainly a lot of traveling—water courses, mountains, hidden dangers, and so forth.

It would also be a good idea to be a good shot with a gun; also to be a good trapper of game—that would be helpful. You might want the ability to be able to live off the land on your way across. It would be a pretty good idea to be able to ride a horse and be skillful with a horse, and maybe even know how to shoe them or repair the tack, and whatnot.

It would be a good idea to know how to paddle a canoe. Maybe even to repair one or to make one from scratch. You will certainly need to know how to use an axe, as it turned out that they needed to build a fort or two along the way.

We should not at all be averse to camping. If you are the kind that likes to go to a motel rather than camping, well you probably should not volunteer for this job.

Of course, this being a military expedition—actually it was scientific, but it was being headed by military men—we would need to be willing to take orders.

Well, we would also need to be courageous, optimistic (that there would be something

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over the next hill, or around the next bend), observant (because it was a scientific expedition, and President Jefferson wanted as much information as possible), motivated (as we might get bogged down in this adventure, which was not always an adventure, as there was a lot of slogging and boring traveling), understanding of our fellows, to not be easily alarmed, not easily discouraged, able to suffer occasional privation, patience, endurance (because they suffered a lot of hardships along the way, both with their food and weather, hostile Indians and whatnot), and probably a boatload of other traits and skills I have not mentioned yet.

I think that perhaps being young and ignorant would be tops of the list, for wanting to go on an adventure like this.

But in principle, is our expedition to the Kingdom of God any different? Some of these same qualities—in fact, many of them—are also required of us as we go toward the Kingdom of God.

The Leader of our expedition, who is named the Captain of our Salvation, knows what qualities that we need for this journey, and it is indeed an arduous journey that we are on. Actually, I would put it right up there with Lewis and Clark's adventure anytime! And, while He, the Captain of our Salvation, may choose some of us for traits that we already have, He knows full well that He can teach us most of what we need to know along the way.

Now, we know, and we have known this for a long time, that He does not lead us to the Kingdom of God in a "take me as I am" manner. No, but rather, He expects a great deal from us. He is actually a pretty demanding boss, when it all comes down to it. He demands that we change, grow, overcome, and produce fruit. None of these things are easy.

John 12 is the scenario within the last week of His earthly life, just after the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. And, some Greek men asked to meet with Him.

John 12:20-26 Now there were certain Greeks among those who came up to worship at the feast [Jewish proselytes]. Then they came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida of Galilee [quite cosmopolitan], and asked him, saying, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip came and told Andrew, and in turn Andrew and Philip told Jesus. But Jesus answered them, saying, "The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified. Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain. He who loves his life will lose it, and he

who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also. If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honor.

Now, we must assume, as we go into this, and think about what just went on here, that these Greeks were pretty serious about joining with Him as His disciples. Apparently, they picked a bad time to do it, because this was in the week that He was going to be crucified, and He had a lot to do yet. But, when they came up to Him, and asked Him, "We want to be your disciples, and join you," it immediately made Him think, "Yes, this is the time I'm to be glorified."

Why is that? That was the first thing out of His mouth. We do not actually see a question here. In effect, they do not ask a thing. But as soon as Philip and Andrew say that there are Greeks wishing to see Him, He says, "It is time! I'm going to be glorified!" Why is that? Why did He do this?

Well, He knows that the time of His death and resurrection are near, because He knew that the prophecy said that the Gentiles would come to Him. But He also knew that Gentiles would not be allowed to come to Him until after His crucifixion, after He paid for all sins and rose from the grave. He knew that it would occur when He gave the Holy Spirit. Then it would then be open to them too.

And so, the calling of the Gentiles was approaching swiftly. But in a way, He has to put them off. So, what he does is immediately tell them this parable of the grain going into the ground and "dying." Now, He is telling them in a symbolic way what has to happen first before they can be accepted as His disciples. And so He says, speaking of Himself in terms of the grain, that He would have to be put into the ground and die. And then, once that happened, He would be raised up; and He could produce much fruit, like the parable says: producing much grain.

So He is saying to them, "Just wait a little while," because He was going to be killed and then resurrected in the next few days; He would be glorified, like He was before the world began. And so, in ascending to heaven, He would become the great High Priest. And just a few weeks after that would be the Day of Pentecost. Having told His disciples to stay in Jerusalem until then, they would then receive His Holy Spirit. And it is at that point that it would be open to all. But, He gives them this parable to put them off for a little while longer.

Now then, where does He go from there? He says,

John 12:25-26 "He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also."

Remember, He is putting them off for a while. So He says, "Let Me give you something to think about for these next few weeks." And so, He tells them to think about losing their lives and becoming servants of Christ. It gives them something to chew on. In effect, He tells them what would be required of them as His disciples. He says to them in essence, "I am going to die, just like this grain of wheat, for what I believe, and what I must do." And He tells them, "This is the life that you are asking to join. You are going to have to have the same way of looking at life as I do. You must be willing to lose it, to give it up, to "hate" your life, so that you can have eternal life ultimately."

So, what He does in so many words is to ask them, "Okay, so you want to join up with Me. Are you willing to change your life completely?"

That is it in a nutshell.

Are you willing to have an entirely different life than what you have now?

No tenacious holding on to those things that seem so precious to you—no holding on to those ways that we do things now—but instead humbling ourselves to the rank of a servant, of an underling, of a learner, of a follower. In other words, He essentially asked them to forsake their ambitions in this world, and be willing to live a lifetime of sacrifice and submission. "Are you willing to pay this price for the eternal life, and the honor that comes with being one of His disciples?"

Think about it for the next seven weeks or so.

Now, this was a very hard thing to ask. These Gentiles—these Greeks—were evidently well enough off to be able to make this trip to Jerusalem from wherever they came from. So, perhaps they were wealthy. Perhaps they had some sort of status in their home town. Who knows? They were certainly Greeks; perhaps they were even Roman citizens. I am just guessing. I am assuming. It might not be any of these things. But certainly they could be your average Joe Greek. But even so, your average Joe Greek was going to want to make more money, climb the social ladder, maybe even move into government somehow, or whatever it was. They had certain ambitions. And Jesus is asking them, "Are you willing to change your entire approach to the way that you look at life?" Because, the entire approach of anyone, from that time, and before, and since,

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has been to move onward and upward. And so, instead of "movin' on up", He is asking them if they were willing to volunteer for servitude.

"Are you willing to be the lowest of the low, if that is what it requires?"

He hit them right between the eyes. You do not see it that way necessarily, because we just blithely go through it. But He is making them think. He is bringing them up short. "Are you sure you want to be My disciples, because this is what it is going to take to do so. You are going to have submit, you are going to have to serve, and your whole life is going to be changed."

Now, the same thing is actually asked of each one of us at the very beginning. We also begin our approach to God through Christ in this very same manner. Right out front, if the minister counseling for baptism is doing his job, he brings out almost before anything else, the concept of sacrifice, because that is indeed what Jesus says, "If you want to be my disciple, you have to bear your cross," [Luke 14:27] and all of those other things that He says after that about counting the cost. But that sacrifice that is necessary for a true Christian is right up front. It is the first hurdle we must cross in developing our relationship with God. We have to be willing to sacrifice what we are. We have, to put it another way, forsake all and follow Him.

Now, getting into the theme of the sermon, this is the overall principle found in the brazen altar. That is the first of the tabernacle furnishings that one would see coming through the gate of the courtyard. The first thing you would see is the brazen altar. And, if you wanted to approach God, you had to get past the altar first.

We are going to get into this piece of furniture today, so if you would, turn to Exodus 25. I need to pick up one principle just before we get to the altar, because I think that it is important that we are reminded of this as we begin. This passage is a portion of the specific instructions given to Moses by God Himself. Although this is specifically about the golden lampstand, this is pertinent to all of the pieces of furniture.

Exodus 25:40 "And see to it that you make them according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain.

This was very important. God wanted to make sure that the instructions He gave about each one of these pieces of furniture, and the tabernacle itself, and all the accoutrements that went with it, were exactly like He specified. And so, He was very explicit and detailed in His instructions to Moses—how to make every part. I mean

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everything! Everything in that tabernacle was very finely explained to Moses so that he could pass on the instruction to Bezalel and Aholiab, the artisans. I mean, this goes all the way down to the loops, and the clasps on the curtains as they are described, as well as the mortises and tenons on the boards. Everything was very specifically described so that this tabernacle and all its furnishings and all the utensils would be exact replicas of what exists in heaven.

God wanted the physical temple/tabernacle to mimic the spiritual reality as completely and accurately as physically possible, because He wanted them to be there for us to learn from. Each one of these things has some kind of spiritual significance for us. We do not yet know what they all are. Our understanding of it is fairly finite, but there are things there that we can learn spiritual truths from. That is why Jesus told Satan during the temptation that man has to live by every word of God. There is instruction in everything. The whole book is full of instruction.

Nevertheless, because of a lack of time, and frankly a lack of understanding on my part, I will not be able to cover every aspect of each of these furnishings. I mean, I would be here giving countless sermons to be able to cover every detail.

But, my goal is to take the most obvious lessons from each of these pieces, and then find the practical application of it as we struggle through this Christian life. So, what I am trying to say here is that I will give you some of this. Please go on and study more on your own. It would be at least an interesting study and probably quite helpful too.

Overall, my goal is to enhance our relationship with both the Father, and the Son. That is why I have called this sermon series, "Approaching God through Christ." That is the whole idea here. God wants us to have a close relationship with Him, and He has put these pieces in the tabernacle to show us the things that are required of us—the things that we must do, and the things that are helpful. So, that is the way that I am looking at this sermon series.

What we are going to be doing is seeing the path that God has laid out in the tabernacle from the gate of the courtyard all the way into the Holy of Holies—from being totally cut off in the world, to living in His presence.

Please turn to Exodus 27. By the way, this is repeated in Exodus 38, where it shows where Bezalel and Aholiab did exactly as God directed them to do. It shows that Bezalel fashioned everything exactly as God commanded.

Exodus 27:1-8 "You shall make an altar of acacia wood, five cubits long and

five cubits wide—the altar shall be square—and its height shall be three cubits. You shall make its horns on its four corners; its horns shall be of one piece with it. And you shall overlay it with bronze. Also you shall make its pans to receive its ashes, and its shovels and its basins and its forks and its fire-pans; you shall make all its utensils of bronze. You shall make a grate for it, a network of bronze; and on the network you shall make four bronze rings at its four corners. You shall put it under the rim of the altar beneath, that the network may be midway up the altar. And you shall make poles for the altar, poles of acacia wood, and overlay them with bronze. The poles shall be put in the rings, and the poles shall be on the two sides of the altar to bear it. You shall make it hollow with boards; as it was shown you on the mountain, so shall they make it.

So, what we have here in the altar is a square, roughly 7 ½ or 8 feet on each side. (If the cubit is either 18 or 22 inches, it converts to 7 ½ or 8 feet.) For those of you here with me in the church hall, that is about the width of this front step here. It was about 4 ½ to 5 feet high. This was a substantial piece of furniture.

Now, most of it was made of boards of acacia wood and it was hollow. The boards were overlaid with bronze to protect them a bit from the heat of the fire. Even though it was so large, it was not all that heavy. Now, 8 foot boards, square, and 5 feet high is heavy enough with the bronze overlay on it.

Now this grate, mentioned in verse 4, has made some people scratch their heads. But what it appears to be, to me, is literally a network—appearing like a bronze net—a grate; a bronze mesh. And it was a couple of feet wide, going all the way round the altar. So, the altar is not just 8 feet wide, but maybe more like 12 feet (about 2 feet on all sides). What this grate was, was a walkway or ledge that went all the way round the altar made of this mesh so that something could be laid on it or a priest could stand on it. But if there were ash or other things that came over the side, it could fall through the mesh. So, evidently the four rings were placed on the corners of these things, the poles were put through them, and they carried the altar as one whole piece.

So we have 8 feet square, a 2 foot ledge starting about half way up, and all of this was overlaid with bronze.

Now, to get up on that ledge, it is thought that they had made a sloped ramp of earth.

Another thing to consider is the horns on the altar. This is always interesting to think

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about. We do not know how big these horns actually were. It just says that they were one piece with the altar. So, they could have gone up 6 inches or maybe a couple of feet. It is hard to know. It does not say that the horns were such and such. But they were attached at the corners of the altar, itself, at the top.

Now horns, as found in the Bible, are common symbols of strength. Think of the animals that have horns: particularly the ox, antelope, goats, and moose (antlers are the same thing). These horns are often their source of power. That is how they defend themselves. So, it was obvious since the beginning that horns symbolized power and strength.

Turn to Deuteronomy 33 and the blessing of the children of Israel by Moses just before he died. And he made a comment about Joseph in terms of horns, and we will see just how this developed a little bit.

Deuteronomy 33:17 "His glory is like a firstborn bull, and his horns like the horns of the wild ox; together with them He shall push the peoples to the ends of the earth; they are the ten thousands of Ephraim, and they are the thousands of Manasseh."

He is talking about a war-making ability—strength, power—the ability to push people around the globe just by their own strength. Ephraim and Manasseh have certainly been able to do that for the past 200 years quite easily.

When the British ruled the seas, that is what they did—they went, they colonized, and they moved people. And when their power waned, who picked up the slack, but the United States of America—the strongest military in the world.

It is showing all this in the horns, like the horns of a bull.

Let us go further. Turn to I Samuel 2 and the prayer of Hannah.

I Samuel 2:1 And Hannah prayed and said: "My heart rejoices in the LORD; my horn is exalted in the LORD."

She is talking about her strength being glorified or exalted because of His choice of Samuel: that He had given her strength to bear Samuel.

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I Samuel 2:10 The adversaries of the LOORD shall be broken in pieces; from heaven He will thunder against them. The LOORD will judge the ends of the earth. "He will give strength to His king, and exalt the horn of His anointed."

This may also be a Messianic prophecy here, because there are several places in the Bible where "the horn" that God talks about is the Messiah. So, there is a tie in with Christ here already with the horns of the altar.

Turn to II Samuel 22, and a psalm of David repeated in Psalm 18. We sing this one quite often.

II Samuel 22:2-3 And he said: "The LOORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer; the God of my strength, in whom I will trust; my shield and the horn of my salvation [another Messianic prophecy], my stronghold and my refuge; my Savior, You save me from violence.

It is very interesting that the word "horn" is associated with the Savior.

In Psalm 75, we will see that this one can apply to us as well.

Psalm 75:10 "All the horns of the wicked I will also cut off, but the horns of the righteous shall be exalted."

So now, you have horns too. These are not bad things! They are your strength.

Here we see that they are symbols of God's strength; and in terms of the altar, they are the power to overcome sin. It takes a lot of strength and power to overcome sin. We should all know that by trying to overcome it by ourselves. It takes a great deal of strength to do this, and you cannot do it on your own. You need the supernatural power to do that. And so, it is seen in the actual altar itself in the horns.

Also, these horns have a relationship with justice, because a man in trouble with the king, or the law, or whatever could grasp hold of the horns of the altar and claim sanctuary. And essentially what this means is that he was going to God and asking for justice—asking God to judge the situation.

Now, only God has the power to dispatch true justice, because only He knows the truth

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of the matter—all the correct information that is necessary to make a righteous, fair, and impartial judgment. So, He is the author of true justice. And in the same way, God is just to demand a blood sacrifice in payment for sin [Romans 6:23]. So, these two ideas are coming together—justice and salvation. He has to be the One to decide whether the payment is enough to wipe away the death penalty.

You know, if it is true justice, we die. But, the other half of justice is mercy. He then allows a substitute to pay that penalty with.

While holding on to these bits and pieces of things, let us go on to something else. Turn to Exodus 27. We saw that the whole altar including the ledge, as well as the horns, and the all the utensils—pans for the ashes, shovels, basins for the blood, the forks, and the fire-pans—everything was made of bronze.

What is so significant about bronze?

Bronze is an alloy. It is not a pure metal, but is made from two pure metals. Today the best bronze is made by combining about 88% copper and 12% tin. This would be the same material you would find in artwork, and such. In ancient times, they did not always have access to tin. Sometimes they might substitute lead with the copper. Evidently the differences are subtle. The tin alloy is a better one, but it is not remarkable for us now. This is just to let you know that bronze is not quite always what we think of in today's terms.

Bronze is a very sturdy metal. It is very easily worked. It is less brittle (softer) than iron, and it also resists metal fatigue better than iron. One excellent trait bronze was chosen by God for was its durability outside in the elements—oxidation. Bronze only oxidizes on the surface. It does not go all the way through like when iron rusts. It has a very low corrosion factor. And, it conducts heat better than iron, which made it ideal for the altar.

Now, the symbolism of bronze connotes strength, firmness, and endurance. We will see this in Scripture where it is used in this fashion.

Job 6:11-12 "What strength do I have, that I should hope? And what is my end, that I should prolong my life? Is my strength the strength of stones? Or is my flesh bronze?"

In speaking of himself, he says, "Do I have the strength of bronze? No. I'm just a man."

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Psalms 107:15-16 Oh, that men would give thanks to the LORD for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men! For He has broken the gates of bronze, and cut the bars of iron in two.

This is God using His power and strength to break down strongholds on our behalf.

Turn to Jeremiah 1 where God speaks to Jeremiah. Remember, He had made him His prophet, and Jeremiah complained that he was only a youth, and how could he approach the men of Judah. God responds:

Jeremiah 1:18-19 For behold, I have made you this day a fortified city and an iron pillar, and bronze walls against the whole land—against the kings of Judah, against its princes, against its priests, and against the people of the land. They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you. For I am with you," says the LORD, "to deliver you."

So, God is saying here that Jeremiah is going to be as strong as bronze in order to withstand all the things that the people of Judah would throw against him—yet it would be by the strength of God.

Jeremiah 15:20 And I will make you to this people a fortified bronze wall; and they will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you; for I am with you to save you and deliver you," says the LORD.

God repeats this to him because Jeremiah needed to be reminded. He was known as the wailing prophet. "Look, I've made you as strong as bronze against these people." It helped to encourage him.

Daniel 2:31-33, 39 "You, O king, were watching; and behold, a great image! This great image, whose splendor was excellent, stood before you; and its form was awesome. This image's head was of fine gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay". . . "But after you shall arise another kingdom inferior to yours; then another, a third kingdom of bronze, which shall rule over all the earth.

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Now, remember the silver kingdom was the Medo-Persian empire that followed Babylon; then came the Macedonian Greek empire of Alexander. They marched clear across to India from Greece. What is interesting to me is that the Greeks were known for their bronze armor. It just fits so well with this prophecy. Not only bronze armor, but bronze weapons too. Homer in the Iliad calls them, "Brazen coated Greeks." And, if you were to go back to the account of David and Goliath, you will find that Goliath, a Philistine, who came from the Greek islands, had bronze armor and weapons already too. This is another indication just how strong Goliath was.

Finally in this section, turn to Micah 4.

Micah 4:13 "Arise and thresh, O daughter of Zion; for I will make your horn iron, and I will make your hooves bronze; you shall beat in pieces many peoples; I will consecrate their gain to the LORD, and their substance to the Lord of the whole earth."

He is talking about Zion here. But, there is probably some spiritual connotation with us as well. He says he makes our horn iron, and our hooves (feet) bronze—very strong, beating down their enemies.

The altar with its horns is intended to strike the observer coming into the tabernacle as formidable and powerful. That is what bronze would convey to the observer—the mind of a Hebrew. And especially with the bulk of it—the size of it—as well as the fact that these horns were up there. They are all symbols of strength and power. And it would hit them like a ton of bricks. So, if you understand what was happening with the altar of sacrifice, you would know, being a faithful Israelite, that the altar is up to the difficult task of making atonement and reconciliation with God through sacrifice. This was a very powerful symbolic piece of furniture. There was enough power to effect reconciliation, because ultimately these things represent God Himself.

However, bronze also has negative attributes. And it all comes together in this altar. Now, if you take these positive attributes—strength, firmness, and endurance—and flip them over, what do you have? They become hardness, obstinacy, and presumption.

Isaiah 48:4 Because I [God] knew that you were obstinate, and your neck was an iron sinew, and your brow bronze. . . .

We see God looking at Israel and saying, "You guys are a tough nut to crack. You're

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being so obstinate, you have a hardness of heart that I have to work to get through to."

Jeremiah 6:27-28 [speaking to Jeremiah] "I have set you as an assayer and a fortress among My people, that you may know and test their way. They are all stubborn rebels, walking as slanderers. They are bronze and iron, they are all corrupters.

So here is bronze being used in terms of obstinacy—hardness of heart and presumption.

And finally in Ezekiel 22.

Ezekiel 22:18 "Son of man, the house of Israel has become dross [baser metals removed from a more precious metal] to Me; they are all bronze, tin, iron, and lead, in the midst of a furnace; they have become dross from silver.

They have become the dross removed from the precious things. So you can see the same imagery of being a negative thing—their hardness of heart.

Also, the effects of sin are seen as hard or unyielding, and difficult to overcome. It is not just the people who are obstinate, but the effects of their sins also produce things that are hard and difficult. This is found in the "Blessing and Cursing" chapter of Leviticus.

Leviticus 26:19 I will break the pride of your power; I will make your heavens like iron and your earth like bronze.

The reason is because they will not obey Him, so He has to fight fire with fire, as it were, and give them hardness of heavens and earth [drought] in order to wake them up. And then the opposite is shown in Deuteronomy 28.

Deuteronomy 28:23 And your heavens which are over your head shall be bronze, and the earth which is under you shall be iron.

God flips them over, but the effects are the same—the very same idea—hardness not allowing the blessing to come through, because God had to fight against them because of their sins.

God opposes the stubborn strength and hardness of sin, and habitual ungodliness, with the equally strong and firm altar of sacrifice—just as it symbolized to any Israelite who would have seen it—this large bronze horned altar speaking strength to them.

There is some question as to whether the altar was overlaid with bronze on the inside of the boards. Normally, when the instructions say to overlay completely, it says, "overlay inside and out" with whatever metal. But here in Exodus 27, all it said was, "overlay with bronze." So, the idea is that it was only overlaid with bronze on the outside while the inside portion of the boards was not overlaid with bronze.

How so? You have a raging fire to consume these whole burnt offerings; you will need a long burning hot fire to do this. Well, the solution most likely is that to protect the wood from the fire, it was filled with fresh earth to the rim. And then, the firewood was placed on top of that earth. So the flames and heat would go up, not terribly affecting the wood or the bronze. Of course, it still did get hot being that close to the fire, but not as bad as if the boards were completely overlaid, and the fire was inside the altar, since bronze is such a good conductor of heat.

Also, by filling it with earth, it would make placing the firewood and the sacrifice up above and visible to all, allowing all to see that it was indeed consumed.

Now, there is one element of the brazen altar that is unmentioned. Want to make a guess? The fire. The fire is not mentioned at all in this description. But, it is absolutely necessary. Please turn to Leviticus 9 where the offerings were just being instituted.

Leviticus 9:23-24 And Moses and Aaron went into the tabernacle of meeting, and came out and blessed the people. Then the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people, and fire came out from before the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the fat on the altar. When all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces.

So, the fire was provided by God Himself. And thus, it was holy fire.

Leviticus 6:12-13 "And the fire on the altar shall be kept burning on it; it shall not be put out. And the priest shall burn wood on it every morning, and lay the burnt offering in order on it; and he shall burn on it the fat of the peace offerings. A [perpetual] fire shall always be burning on the altar; it shall never go out."

There had to be people serving the altar all the time to make sure that the fire never went out at all—ever. When they were going from place to place, they had to carry the fire in the fire-pans to make sure that it was fed constantly—so that the fire would never go out, because this fire was holy. It was from God. He had started it burning, and so it was holy fire.

Later in Leviticus 10:1-3 is the story of Nadab and Abihu, Aaron's sons. It appears in the context that maybe they had a bit too much to drink, letting that fire go out. And in order to cover themselves, they took from a common fire nearby and tried to use that to offer the sacrifices. But God said no and incinerated them on the spot. That is how important this holy fire was to God.

Why is this?

You must remember that just as Hebrews 13:10 says that the altar is a symbol of God's table, the burning of the sacrifices represented God consuming these offerings as a meal. The fire, then, was the visible element that represented the personal action of God Himself. It was how people could see that God had accepted their sacrifice. The fire, then, had to originate from God to be truly meaningful because, if it was just like any common fire started by men, it would be tainted. It would be tainted, because men are sinful. It would be like men consuming the offering, not God. It would be totally ineffective. God had to be the One to consume the offering. And He did it with holy fire.

So now, let us bring this all together in terms of what it means to us. Please turn to John 1, even though we could have gone to Matthew 1:21. This is the passage at the beginning of Jesus' ministry and John the Baptist baptizes Him, and

John 1:29 The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

This was a major over-arching purpose of His incarnation. John the Baptist recognizes Him immediately and states what His purpose is. He is the Lamb of God to take away the sins of the world. Now, we could have gone back to Matthew 1 where the angel tells Joseph and Mary to name Him Jesus, because "Jesus" means "Savior." And it also says there, "Because He will save His people from their sins."

So, from the very earliest time in Jesus' life and in His ministry, it is proclaimed to anyone who has ears to hear that this Jesus Christ came to take away sin. This was

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one of His main jobs. He would give the ultimate sacrifice that would pay for the sins of the entire world for all time. There would only need to be one. Only the lifeblood of the very Creator God would be so powerful and effective in blotting out all the sin of the corrupt race of humanity—it is the only way that it could have been done. The One who created us would be the One to pay the price for us.

Now, He not only died in sacrifice for this reason, but He also lived His life in perpetual sacrifice, because He was fighting the whole time to make sure that He was that perfect sacrifice. So He had to constantly fight the pulls of His flesh and human nature, and He was being buffeted constantly by Satan the Devil, who was trying to derail Him and get Him off track to try to make sure that the sacrifice would not be perfect and thus ineffective. But Christ was willing to sacrifice and submit to God in everything all the time.

So, His death was merely the culmination of a life of continuous sacrifice. Everything that we allow ourselves to do, He did not do. He did not give in. He caught Himself and said, "No, I am the sacrifice. I must do the will of my Father."

We see in Isaiah 53 what He went through. We read this every year before Passover, and I want to read it to you again.

Isaiah 53:1-12 Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the LOORD been revealed? For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, and as a root out of dry ground. He has no form or comeliness; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him. He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.

Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded **for our** transgressions, He was bruised **for our** iniquities; the chastisement **for our** peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed.

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the LOORD has **laid on Him** the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth.

He was taken from prison and from judgment, and who will declare His generation? For He was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgressions of My people He was stricken. And they made His grave with the wicked—and with the rich at His death, because He had done no violence, nor was any deceit in His mouth.

Yet it pleased the LOORD to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief. When You make His soul an offering for sin, He shall see His seed, He shall prolong His days, and the pleasure of the LOORD shall prosper in His hand. He shall see the labor [travail] of His soul, and be satisfied [with justice]. By His knowledge My righteous Servant shall justify many, for He shall bear their iniquities.

Therefore I will divide Him a portion with the great, and He shall divide the spoil with [notice this] **the strong**, because He poured out His soul unto death, and He was numbered with the transgressors, and He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

So, this in the prophetic picture of the great sacrifice that Jesus made on our behalf. And He showed how our sins caused Him to suffer inhuman torments. Yet He bore them without complaint in love for us, to justify us before God, and to make our reconciliation with God possible. All that was done through sacrifice.

Hebrews 10 passage says much the same thing, but Paul has a different object in mind.

Hebrews 10:5-13 Therefore, when He came into the world, He said: "Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, but a body You have prepared for Me. In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin You had no pleasure. Then I said, 'Behold, I have come (in the volume of the book it is written of Me) to do Your will, O God.'" Previously saying, "Sacrifice and offering, burnt offerings, and offerings for sin You did not desire, nor had pleasure in them" (which are offered according to the law), then He said, "Behold, I have come to do Your will, O God." He takes away the first that He may establish the second. By that will, we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God, from that time waiting till His enemies are made His footstool.

Paul is showing here how the sacrifice of Christ fulfilled all the types of those sacrifices and offerings burned on the brazen altar under the Old Covenant. And what we see here: it was always the plan of God and the will of God to do it this way. The first covenant—the Old Covenant—was only temporary and symbolic—preparatory for the reality of the new and better covenant sanctified by the blood of Christ. Remember the first covenant was sanctified with the blood of bulls and goats. But the second was sanctified by the blood of Jesus Christ.

Christ now sits in power and majesty at God's right hand awaiting His command to return to defeat all the enemies and to establish the Kingdom of God on this earth. But, all of that turned on the fulcrum of the amazing selfless powerful sacrifice. If that did not happen, what would have happened? There would be no hope at all.

Now it is interesting to note here, in verse 10, that Paul uses the word "sanctified" rather than "justified" for the effect of Christ's sacrifice. He said that Christ's sacrifice sanctifies us. And it does. And the implication here is not to make holy, necessarily, in terms of accumulating righteous character, but rather he means to be set apart.

Once we accept Christ's sacrifice, we are placed in a whole different category. I do not think we understand this like we should, and we certainly do not appreciate it like we should. We, by this act, have been separated from all of humanity. We, alone, are now allowed to approach God through Christ—and no one else can do that right now. That is why we are named the elect—chosen. We are unique, because we have been sanctified for this purpose, and no one else has been to this point.

I Peter 2:21-25 For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: "Who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth" [Isaiah 53]; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

Christ died for us, bearing our sins so that we could follow in His steps. That is, so we can follow His example of life. He died to sins and lived to righteousness. And how did He do that? (This is the example that we are supposed to follow.) He suffered patiently;

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He sacrificed Himself to overcome the pulls of human nature; He committed Himself to God's righteous judgment in everything.

So, Peter says here that we went our own way before being called, doing everything that was wrong. But now we have been called to follow the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls in everything. That takes sacrifice on our part. He showed us the way to do it in His own life. He is the way, the truth, and the life. And you know Romans 12:1-2 says:

Romans 12:1-2 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable [and spiritual] service [in terms of worship]. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

You see, Jesus Christ came into this world "To do Your will, O God," as it says there in Hebrews 10, and His will was having a body prepared for Him, so that He could give it in sacrifice for the sins of the world.

And what is that perfect and acceptable will of God for us? That we be living sacrifices, not conformed to this world, but transformed in our minds, growing in character, growing from carnal to godly.

So, just as it was God's will for Him to give His life in sacrifice, so it is God's will for us to do the same—to give our lives in sacrifice as we live, not as we die.

I heartily recommend that you read from Romans 12:1 to Romans 15:13 because Paul immediately launches into a series of commands that teach us what we need to do to be living sacrifices. And it is really good to be reminded of these things: how to live sacrificially and godly in this life.

Let us finish, then, in Psalm 118. This whole psalm, actually, encapsulates the meaning we can take from the altar of sacrifice, as well as the joy that we have because of what has been done for us. So, I want to read a section of it.

Psalm 118:19-29 Open to me the gates of righteousness; I will go through them, And I will praise the LORD. This is the gate of the LORD, Through which the righteous shall enter. I will praise You, For You have answered me, And have become my salvation. The stone which the builders rejected Has

become the chief cornerstone. This was the LOORD'S doing; It is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day the LOORD has made; We will rejoice and be glad in it. Save now, I pray, O LOORD; O LOORD, I pray, send now prosperity. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LOORD! We have blessed you from the house of the LOORD. God is the LOORD, And He has given us light; Bind the sacrifice with cords to the horns of the altar. You are my God, and I will praise You; You are my God, I will exalt You. Oh, give thanks to the LOORD, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever.

God has opened the gates of righteousness to us through Jesus Christ, and it is His sacrifice that pays for our sins and removes them completely. Only then, with the blood of an innocent sacrifice opening the way, can we have a relationship with God. This sacrifice leads us to understanding the symbolism that Christ is the chief cornerstone of the temple, in which we too, once we accept this sacrifice, are set so we can live in the house of the Lord for ever.

In verse 27 is an interesting phrase, "Bind the sacrifice with cords to the horns of the altar." However, this a very poorly translated phrase, because nothing was ever bound to the horns of the altar, according to Jewish sources. Their chief use was for the blood of a sacrifice to be sprinkled or smeared on to them to present the blood before God to make atonement, and for purification purposes. And as we saw later, they could be used for a person to hold on to them as a place of refuge. But the horns of the altar were not mere hooks for holding the sacrifices in place.

This has an important point. A better translation would be, "Bind the sacrifices with cords as far as the horns of the altar." Now recognize what has happened here—this person has received the blood of Jesus Christ in payment for his sins, and he now comes before God. He is now part of the temple of God. So, what is he saying here? It suggests that an overwhelming number of sacrifices are filling the courtyard of the tabernacle to be made in thanksgiving for what God has done for us in opening the way to salvation. It is not saying to bind one sacrifice to the horns of the altar, but it is saying to bind thousands of sacrifices in the courtyard, even as far as the horns of the altar, so that there is hardly any room to move. These are the sacrifices that we make in offering to God in thanksgiving and praise for what He has done for us.

What it is showing here in this phrase is the proper response to what God has done for us. We need to spend our lives making numerous sacrifices that are necessary to thank, please, and glorify God.