

Returning to the Altar in Jerusalem by Paul Sumner

The Scriptures read just now open to us a thought-world we seldom enter in the church. But it is a thought-world filled with profound insights into the mind of God and into the death of Christ. This is the thought-world of the Old Testament, specifically the Law.

As we read in the text, the Law specified that when sacrifices were offered in front of the Tabernacle a sinful person (or his representative) was to perform a most sobering act. He was to come up to the altar, claim ownership over a specific animal, place one hand on the animal's head, and with the other, kill it—in front of the House of God. The person identified himself with his sacrifice: "This should be me."

Imagine for a moment the scene. Put your hand out and lay it on the head of a living animal. Feel the warmth and strength and life. Then feel its violent death throes as you slay it with a knife. What would you feel in your heart? How would you feel when killing a creature that had no malice toward you, no awareness of your sins or awareness even of God, its Creator? How would you feel if you knew your accumulated sins could be taken away only by paying such a bloody, horrible cost?

If you were sensitive toward God, if you had a heart to change, if you knew that God wanted to restore you to fellowship with him—it would strike you very deeply. And

that was the point. In killing an innocent animal, their substitute, the believers in ancient Israel were cut to the quick.

They realized that God did not just accept people on their own terms. He welcomed them only on his. And in laying their hands on the head of the sacrifice and personally witnessing its suffering in their place, their pride was broken. They knew the consequences of human sin and they repented before the Lord. This was why God gave Israel the system of sacrifices outlined in the Law.

In the church, we long ago discarded this system, confident that we didn't need it. God, we've thought, came up with a better idea. But in our confidence we have often forgotten the rivers of spiritual truth that flow deeply through the older Scripture. And we often miss the roots of our New Covenant faith. Let me remind you . . .

Christ died symbolically as a lamb for me and you.

You and I have nothing to bring to the altar that is acceptable to God as payment for what we've done in our minds and with our bodies. We can't approach the Creator, unless we have a sacrifice he approves of. Our accomplishments and standing and talents and plans for the future are unacceptable currency.

Have you ever thought about what Jesus might have experienced on the altar—cross in Jerusalem because of you? Have you ever stood before God, as the Israelites used to do, and confessed to him that this lamb has died in your place? Have you ever put your hand on the head of Christ and stood with him in his death?

When we pass our polished communion trays to one another I don't know that we're so keenly aware of this whole transaction as were the Israelites. We should return to that altar. And we should do it periodically. Even if some of us have come before God at a particular time in the past and told him that we want Christ to be our sacrifice, it is important to renew our covenant.

In his first letter, John said, "I am writing this to you [believers in Christ] so that you may not sin; but if any one does sin, **we have an advocate with the Father**" [1 John 2:1]. He said the "blood of Jesus [God's] Son **cleanses us** from all sin" [1 John 1:7]. The present tense verbs "we have" and "cleanses us" remind us that the covenant we enter is the beginning of an on-going relationship with the Lord that always has the Altar at the center.

Daily we still sin. Daily we accumulate the grime of self-will and bitterness, indifference and arrogance. And just as

ancient Israel had to daily come before God for cleansing and forgiveness, so do we. We do not have to slay the Lord every time we sin. He does die but once. But somehow we need to go back and remember what happened. Our pride as Christians needs often to be broken.

If we, with spiritual imagination, approached Jesus, while he hung on the cross, and reached out, touched even his foot and felt his death throes, the cost of our redemption might move us, as it did his Jewish disciples that day on Golgotha.

But the altar is only the first feature of God's house.

Beyond it, through the door, inside the Tabernacle is a secluded world where there is holy light, refreshing bread, the sweet smell of frankincense, and most importantly where there is intimate fellowship with a Lord who knows us by name.

Paul Sumner
Pepperdine University, Seaver College
Chapel Sermon (delivered Spring 1990,
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hebrew-streams.org