

We Have an Altar

Hebrews 13:10

Introduction

1. Coming out of Judaism when accepting Jesus as the Messiah is a transition that is hard for us to comprehend today. The Hebrew Christians found themselves under immense pressure during the early days of the kingdom of Christ.
 2. The epistle of Hebrews concludes with powerful remarks – **Hebrews 13:10**
 - a. The altar has rich history connecting the Israelites to the One true God.
 - b. Leaving Judaism meant leaving the temple, and the altar, and Satan was seeking to sow seeds of doubt in the minds of the brethren.
 3. The Hebrew writer reassures the Christians – **“We have an altar” (Hebrews 13:10)**
 4. What is the significance of the altar? What altar do Christians have? What is the significance of the Christian altar?
- I. The Significance of the Altar
- A. Fellowship with God and His People
 - a. Tribes of Gad, Reuben, and the half tribe of Manasseh desired to settle in land east of the Jordan after conquering Canaan (**Numbers 32**). As commanded, the tribes went over to fight with their brethren and only to return after the conquest (**Joshua 1:10-18**). After the Canaan land was apportioned according to tribal inheritance, the tribes settling east returned and built an altar (**Joshua 22**).
 - b. Joshua called them to faithfulness – **Joshua 22:5** – hold fast to YHWH.
 - c. The eastern tribes built an altar, and the news displeased the rest of the nation, awakening them to war against them – **Joshua 22:10-12**
 - d. The charge against the eastern tribes concerning the altar – **Joshua 22:16** – turning away from the Lord, rebellion.
 - i. Reasoning for charge – **Joshua 22:19** – the altar before the tabernacle is the exclusive altar of the Lord.
 - ii. Explanation of eastern tribes – **Joshua 22:21-29** – the altar was a replica to act as a witness between the western and eastern tribes that they had **“part in the Lord,”** and can come to the true altar for service to YHWH.
 - e. Concerning the altar:
 - i. The altar before the tabernacle was the exclusive place of worship to YHWH.

- ii. Fellowship with YHWH was inseparable from service at the altar before the tabernacle. (Hence, the mindset of the eastern tribes and their activity.)
- iii. Therefore, any additional altar (built for sacrifice) was tantamount to apostasy (separation from YHWH). (Hence, the mindset of the western tribes and their activity.)

B. Sanctification of Offerings

- a. The eastern tribes repudiated the idea of building a separate altar for offerings – **Joshua 22:29**
 - i. This implies that the acceptance of offerings depends on more than simply the substance and motive of the offering. (Though these are prescribed.)
 - ii. The altar itself sanctifies the offering, making it acceptable.
- b. **Matthew 23:18-20** – the Pharisees had the wrong idea. The altar before the Lord is what sanctified the offering.
 - i. I.e. all other factors remaining the same, to make an offering to God on a different altar is to do so in vain, and even in rebellion.

II. Fellowship with God is Exclusively Through Christ

A. Christ is the Altar by Which We Have Fellowship with God

- a. **Hebrews 13:10** – implications of external pressure and temptation – given the significance of the altar, we can imagine how troubling it might be for a Hebrew Christian to have the Jews say, “you have no (or the wrong) altar!” (The fear of the eastern tribes.)
- b. A call to remember and remain – **Hebrews 13:7-9**
 - i. **Remember prior leaders** (elders, **v. 17**) – (**v. 7**)
 - 1. **The word** – **Hebrews 2:3-4** – the salvation foreshadowed in the Old Testament fulfilled in Christ.
 - 2. **Their faith** – **Hebrews 4:14** – holding fast their confession and confidence in Christ.
 - 3. **Their outcome** – *ekbasis* – *ek*, “out,” *baino*, “to go” (VINE) – i.e. the end of their life, but in faith with hope – cf. **Hebrews 11:13**
 - ii. **Remember that Jesus remains the same** – (**v. 8**) – what led you to accept Him as the fulfillment at the beginning is the same today and always will be.
 - 1. The only thing that should cause us to alter our conduct or belief is the truth.
 - 2. If the truth leads us to alter, then we were not in the truth.

- iii. **Remain devoted to Christ** – (v. 9) – the Jewish dietary laws, etc., pointed to God's grace in Christ – **cf. Hebrews 9:10** – don't be led away from the truth now.
 - c. A bold reminder – **Hebrews 13:10** – we have an altar!
 - i. The implied assertion that we do not – estranged from the true God, no legitimate religious service.
 - ii. Not only do we have an altar, but it is better, and one that the Jews (even the priests) have no right to!
 - d. A powerful explanation – **Hebrews 13:11-12**
 - i. Eating from the altar – (v. 10) – **cf. 1 Corinthians 9:13** – sustenance, but intimate fellowship with God – what God receives, they receive too.
 - 1. Not the sin offering on the Day of Atonement whose blood was brought into the sanctuary (**cf. Hebrews 9:7**) – (v. 11)
 - a. The explanation of **verse 10**.
 - ii. Christ, the fulfillment of the OT offerings, is only accessed outside the gate – (v. 12) – following **verse 10**, HE IS THE ALTAR – metonymy for sacrifice.
 - 1. **"the camp"** – the Jewish community and economy.
 - 2. Jesus' blood fulfilling the true sanctification is accessed outside **"the gate"** (of Jerusalem), **"the camp"** of Judaism.
 - 3. As long as they remain, they have no right to eat of that altar (v. 10) – to benefit by His sacrifice.
 - a. As long as they hold on to their altar, they separate themselves from the true altar, thus from God.
 - ii. Christ, the fulfillment of the OT offerings, is only accessed outside the gate – (v. 12) – following **verse 10**, HE IS THE ALTAR – metonymy for sacrifice.
 - e. An exhortation – **Hebrews 13:13-14** – separate yourself from what is obsolete (**cf. Hebrews 8:13**) and be willing to bear the reproach of what is true – the true altar/sacrifice (Christ), true city to which it leads.
- B. This Altar Excludes All Others
- a. Jesus claims to be the exclusive way to the Father – **John 14:6**
 - i. This statement must be fully understood and applied.
 - ii. Many claim Jesus, but do not have Him – **"have we not...in Your name...I never knew you" (Matthew 7:22-23)**.
 - b. The benefits of His sacrifice (what the altar stands for in part) are exclusively accessed – **Ephesians 1:3; Galatians 3:26-29**
 - i. **Hebrews 13:13-14** – must leave all others to go to Him.
 - c. Jesus is the exclusive way, but He Himself is exclusive – **Matthew 16:13-17**

- i. Doctrine – **Hebrews 13:7-9** – remember the word of God, Jesus is the same, don't be misled by strange doctrines.
 - 1. The altar cannot be accessed once and then left behind – **Hebrews 2:1-4** – must be diligent to hold on.
 - ii. Practice – **Ephesians 4:20-24** – you have not so learned Christ.
 - 1. The altar cannot be accessed once and then left behind – **Hebrews 3:12-14** – must be diligent to hold on.
- III. Acceptable Spiritual Offerings are Exclusively Through Christ
 - A. Christ is the Altar by Which We Offer Acceptable Spiritual Sacrifices to God
 - a. The altar is where offerings are made by priests – **Hebrews 7:13**
 - b. We, Christians, the people of God in Christ, have an altar – **Hebrews 13:10**
 - i. (**vv. 12-13**) – Jesus is that altar which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to, and we must go forth to Him.
 - ii. (**vv. 15-16**) – Going forth to Him is with purpose, namely, to offer spiritual sacrifices **"by Him."**
 - c. No matter the intentions, if the offering is not made on the correct altar, it is not accepted, and is an act of rebellion – **Joshua 22:29; Matthew 23:19** – the altar sanctifies the gift.
 - d. Christ is the cornerstone on which the spiritual priesthood is built to offer sacrifices accepted by God through Him – **1 Peter 2:4-5**
 - i. They are accepted because they are established on the cornerstone.
 - ii. In Hebrews, they are accepted because they are offered on the altar, or **"by Him"** (Christ).
 - B. This Altar Excludes All Others
 - a. As the altar is that which sanctifies the gift, acceptable spiritual service/offerings are only sanctified **"by Him" (Hebrews 13:15).**
 - b. Acceptable worship and service cannot be found outside of Christ – **Ephesians 1:22-23; 3:21** – the church is His body, and in the church, God is glorified **"by Christ Jesus."**
 - i. Location – in the church, the body of Christ – **"There is one body" (Ephesians 4:4).**
 - ii. Form and Substance – **Ephesians 1:22-23** – the head directs the body, doing all in His name.
 - c. Offerings on a different altar – **Matthew 7:21-23** – I never knew you, lawlessness.

- d. Unauthorized offerings on the altar – **Colossians 2:20-3:1, 17** – earthly wisdom, self-imposed religion, not accepted, if you are with Christ, offer what He prescribes.

Conclusion

1. From the earliest days of history, fellowship with God included the staple of the altar and sacrifices.
2. Jesus is the fulfillment of both, but there is service and offerings at the true altar of the Lord.
3. Jesus is our altar, and by Him and Him alone we may have fellowship with God, and offer acceptable spiritual sacrifices to God.