

Hebrews 13:10-16 Jesus Our Great High Priest Serves at the Altar. March 14, 2018

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God's grace and peace are yours at the altar of the cross through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

We hear another reading from Hebrews 13:10-16

These are Your Words, heavenly Father to remind us of Christ's ultimate sacrifice for us. Amen.

Dear Christians before the cross,

Jewish teachers were constantly trying to win back Christian Jewish converts to Judaism. One argument they used was that Christians had no altar for offerings. Every Jew knew that a payment had to be made for sin at an altar by the shedding of blood. Thus the argument was: you Christians have no altar and no forgiveness. But Christians do have an altar. It is the cross. Today, we'll view through the Old Testament

Jesus, our Great High Priest, serves at the altar

First, believe the message of the altar. If we had lived before Christ and had been able to see the temple in Jerusalem—or even earlier at the tabernacle (tent) where Israel worshiped, the structure before us would have been the altar of burnt offering. God designed it to be about 7½ feet square and about 5 feet tall. It was like a big grill, with a fire burning continuously under it and animal sacrifices being laid on top. The altar was the central point of Israel's worship. Other events happened inside the temple where only the priest could be. But, for over a thousand years, daily sacrifices were laid on the outside altar in front of the people. The ritual at the altar gave a powerful message: that sins always led to death and that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. But that altar also had another message: God, in His love, spared people from death because a substitute died for them. Those animal substitutes were a shadow of Christ's saving work for us.

Hebrews states, "*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.*" (v. 10) On the Day of Atonement, the high priest killed a bull for his own sins and for the sins of his family and then a goat for the sins of all the people. A portion of the blood was taken into the Most Holy Place to put on top of the Ark of the Covenant. What happened to the meat? For other sacrifices, some of the meat was burned on the altar in the temple courtyard and a portion of meat went to the priests or people. But on the Day of Atonement the meat or skins were not burned on the altar. The whole carcasses were taken outside the camp and burned. This pictured God removing people's sins.

When Hebrews states, "*We have an altar...*," it is describing the cross, where Jesus was sacrificed outside the city. Verse 12 states, "*Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood.*" He died on a cross at Golgotha for all to see that He would take away their sins. We have forgiveness by His blood. As we view His cross, let us believe first that we deserve to die for our sins, but that Jesus took our place and our punishment. His death outside of Jerusalem was God's way of assuring us that our sins have been completely removed from His sight. We have an altar: not one where animals are slain and burned day after day, but where the true Lamb of God was sacrificed for the sins of the world.

Second, the altar of the cross makes us living sacrifices to the Lord. Hebrews states, "*Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore.*" (v.13) The fact that Jesus' cross stood outside Jerusalem symbolized the attitude of the Jews against Christ. He was despised and rejected by his own people. Peter stated that Jesus was "*the stone the builders rejected.*" (1 Peter 2:7) The cross was reserved for the most hated criminals. For the Jews to insist that Jesus be crucified was their way of saying how they despised him. So what does it mean for us to be with Jesus outside the camp (or city)?

It means that when we confess Christ is our Savior, we should be ready to be despised or rejected. Think of the Jews who believed in Jesus. They were excluded from their families and not allowed to worship at the temple. So we should not be surprised at rejection. To confess Christ proclaims the standards of God. God has not changed. *“The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23)*, and He still says, *“Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Hebrews 9:22)*. That is a message that many people don’t want to hear. They have created in their minds a god of their image, who doesn’t care about sin and who condones any lifestyle. The idea of a God passing judgment on sinners and condemning them to die flies in the face of their own notions, and so they reject the truth. The cross crushes any hope of our gaining salvation by our own works. If sin is so serious to God that payment for it required the blood of his Son, then our efforts are useless. Many people reject and despise this message and those who believe it. Maybe we’ve gotten questioning looks when we tell someone that we believe in Jesus as our only Savior from sin and death. The rich man, Joseph of Arimathea, and Nicodemus were both members of the powerful Jewish Sanhedrin. But, once they went out to the cross and took Jesus’ body down to bury Him; they could kiss their positions goodbye. None of their former Jewish acquaintances would speak to them again.

Was it worth it to them? Hebrews answers, *“Here we do not have an enduring city (like Jerusalem), but we are looking for the city that is to come.” (v.14)* His point is this: So what if coming to the altar of the cross and clinging to Christ for our salvation means rejection by unbelievers? This world is passing away. If we are excluded by co-workers or friends because we believe in Christ, so be it! Through Christ we have access to heaven that endures forever. Christ prepared a place in heaven! Let us go to Him through faith. So, we have an altar, the cross of Christ. We believe the message of that altar that our sins are removed so that we may follow Christ.

In the Old Testament, if people wished to express their thanks to God for blessings received, they could bring an extra offering. Now, since Christ died once for all on the altar of the cross, there is clearly no need for us to bring any sacrifices for sin to an altar. Yet Hebrews states, *“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.”(v.15-16)* Now you know why we have an altar in church. It is not used to win God’s favor, but as a place to give our thanks to God who gave His only Son to be our Savior.

Christ redeemed us so that we would be God’s people, eager to do what is good. *“He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them....” (2 Corinthians 5:15)* The Christians in Philippi are a wonderful example of what it means to *“do good and to share with others.” (v.16)* Not only did they welcome Paul while he was on his missionary journey; they continued to support his work after he moved on. In response, Paul wrote the Philippians: *“I am amply supplied, now that I have received ... the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.” (Philippians 4:18)* Let us continue to thank our God by supporting the work that proclaims to the world Christ’s sacrifice and devote ourselves to honoring Christ as our Savior. He died for us and rose to give us of a blessed death and a victorious resurrection to eternal life.

Yes, we have an altar: the cross. Let us go to that cross, believing the message that Christ has paid for our sins in full so we may honor Him no matter what the cost with our sacrifices of praise. Amen.