

Exodus 27:1–8 and 38:1–7

Introduction

If God is to dwell among us, and if we are to *enjoy* fellowship with Him, a sacred space is required – a space (or a *place*) where a holy God and sinful man can somehow come together in relationship and fellowship. This space is to be what the Bible calls the tabernacle. Over the last three weeks we’ve seen most of the furniture within the tabernacle – the Ark of the Covenant with the Atonement Plate on top, overshadowed by the wings of the two Cherubim; the table always set with food and drink, and the lampstand made like a flowering tree whose fruit is light. We’ve also seen how the Tabernacle itself is to be a tent divided into two rooms: God’s throne room (the Most Holy Place), and God’s guest room (the Holy Place). This morning, we continue our journey outward – from the furniture within, to the tent that houses the furniture, and now to the “furniture” that sits outside, in the courtyard of Yahweh’s dwelling—of Yahweh’s “tent” in the midst of our tents.

I. Exodus 27:1–8 – You shall make the altar of acacia wood, five cubits long [7 ft. 6. in.] and five cubits broad. The altar shall be square, and its height shall be three cubits [4 ft. 6 in.]. And you shall make horns for it on its four corners; its horns shall be of one piece with it, and you shall overlay it with bronze.

You shall make pots for it to receive its ashes, and shovels and basins and forks and fire pans. You shall make all its utensils of bronze.

You shall also make for it a grating, a network of bronze, and on the net you shall make four bronze rings at its four corners. And you shall set it under the ledge of the altar so that the net extends halfway down the altar.

And you shall make poles for the altar, poles of acacia wood, and overlay them with bronze. And the poles shall be put through the rings, so that the poles are on the two sides of the altar when it is carried. You shall make it hollow, with boards.

As it has been shown you on the mountain, so shall it be made.

[See Illustrations on page 9]

So what, really, *is* an altar? What is it **for**? What is its **meaning**? What does it have to do with God’s dwelling in our midst, and our fellowship and relationship with Him? As usual with questions like this, the answer is *everything*.

What are some things with which we might normally associate the word “altar”? We probably think of things like “animals,” and “blood,” and perhaps also “fire,” and “smoke.” *Animals* and *blood* clearly go together, and so do *fire* and *smoke*. The question is, what do the animals and especially the blood have to do with the fire and the rising smoke? What does the blood on the altar have to do with the fire on the altar? To get a picture of what actually happened at the altar, I want to read a passage from Leviticus chapter one.

II. Leviticus 1:2–9 — When any one of you brings an offering to the LORD, you shall bring your offering of livestock from the herd or from the flock. If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall offer a male without blemish. He shall bring it to the entrance of the tent of

meeting, that he may be accepted before the LORD. He shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him. Then he shall kill the bull before the LORD, and **Aaron's sons the priests shall bring the blood and throw the blood against the sides of the ALTAR that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting.**

THEN he shall flay the burnt offering and cut it into pieces, and **the sons of Aaron the priest shall put fire on the ALTAR and arrange wood on the fire. And Aaron's sons the priests shall arrange the pieces, the head, and the fat, on the wood that is on the fire on the ALTAR;** but its entrails and its legs he shall wash with water. And **the priest shall burn all of it on the ALTAR, as a burnt offering, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the LORD** [symbolized by the rising smoke].

So, we see that there seem to be two stages, or two parts to this ritual. **First**, *the "man"* himself **kills** the animal that he's brought and *the priest* then takes the **blood** of that animal and throws it against the sides of the altar. After this, or **second**, *the "man"* himself **skins** the animal and **divides it into smaller pieces** and *the priest* then starts a **fire** and **burns** up the animal on top of the altar.*

Now we asked a minute ago, "What does the blood on the altar have to do with the fire on the altar?" We've already learned that the blood has been given by God to the people to make atonement for them on the altar.

- Leviticus 17:11 — The life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life.

The blood is God's gift to us and His provision for us. When the priest throws the blood of the sacrificial animal—the animal that I've just killed—against the sides of the altar, I'm not offering anything up to God. Instead, this blood on the sides of the altar is meant to be the outward sign of my faith and my trust in *God's provision for me*. If the blood on the altar is God's gift to me, then what is the food on the altar? The food on the altar is my gift **to God**. If the blood on the altar is what God freely *offers to me*, then the food on the altar is my humble **offering to God**.

Can you see the picture here? I only, ever, have something to offer to God (the food on the altar) **because** of what He has first of all so freely and mercifully given to me (the blood on the altar). I couldn't even offer to God my own life if God had not first of all redeemed my life and bought my life for Himself. As Paul says so simply in 1 Corinthians:

- 1 Corinthians 4:7 — What do you have that you did not receive?

Therefore, what happens at the altar is a picture not only of God's mercy so freely given, but also of my obligation to respond to His mercy in true and genuine **worship**. Worship is the only thing we have to offer to God, and worship is ultimately the only thing God is ever pleased to receive from us. If the blood on the altar represents God's gracious gift to me of ransom, and atonement and forgiveness, then the food on the altar represents *my* required "gift" to God of **worship**.

* It's this same basic procedure that's followed for all of the various animal sacrifices – whether burnt offerings, or peace offerings, or sin offerings, etc.

III. The Burnt Offering

In the Old Testament, there were different kinds of offerings. First, there was the “burnt offering” which we just read about in Leviticus chapter one.[†] Notice what the Lord said at the very beginning:

- Leviticus 1:2–3 — When any one of you brings an offering to the LORD, you shall bring your offering of livestock from the herd or from the flock. If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall offer a male without blemish.

The point, here, is the **costliness** of the offering. It can’t be an animal taken in the hunt, because that would *cost* nothing. Instead, the animal must be taken from the most valuable of his own livestock – an unblemished male from the herd or from the flock. In that day, this would have been a *very* costly offering – especially when you consider that the animal was to go up in its entirety in smoke on the altar! God did make provision for a burnt offering of birds (Lev. 1:14-17) because His desire isn’t to impoverish the poor among His people; but this still only emphasizes the principle of costliness. Only the poorest of the land were to bring an offering of turtledoves or pigeons – only if this was all they could afford. (cf. Lev. 5:7, 11; 12:8)

- 2 Samuel 24:24 — [David said,] I will not offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God that **cost** me nothing.

So, the costliness of the burnt offering, and the fact that this was the only offering entirely burned up on the altar makes it a powerful symbol of a commitment to obedience and total surrender and devotion to the Lord. The prophet Samuel said to King Saul:

- 1 Samuel 15:22 (cf. Ps. 40:6-8) — Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams.

The point isn’t that burnt offerings aren’t necessary. The point is just this: What’s the good of the gift on the altar if it isn’t a sign of an entire *life* offered up to God? What’s the meaning of the smoke rising from the altar if it isn’t a sign of a whole life spent and lived in obedience to God?

IV. The Grain Offering

Another offering that was very often connected with the burnt offering (though not always; Lev. 2:14-16; Deut. 26) was the grain offering. (cf. Lev. 2) It’s called a “grain” offering because it’s the *only* offering that’s not of an animal, but of food that grows from the *ground*.[‡] But in other

[†] The burnt offering was the most common of all the offerings. It was often given in connection with other kinds of offerings because its meaning and significance really encompassed everything else. (cf. Num. 6:13-15; Ps. 66:13-15)

[‡] So, the only connection of the grain offering with the atonement of blood was if it was offered with another animal sacrifice. Otherwise, the connection is only in the fact that it was offered on the altar where the blood of all the other sacrifices was applied.

places in Scripture, the Hebrew word for “grain” simply refers to a “present” or a “payment” from an inferior to a superior. So Jacob prepared a “present” to be sent ahead to his brother Esau (Gen. 32:13), and when he and his brother met, he said:

- Genesis 33:10 (cf. 43:11-26) — Please, if I have found favor in your sight, then accept my **present** from my hand. For I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God, and you have accepted me.

In other places, the Hebrew word for “grain offering” refers to tribute paid by a subject nation to its overlord.

- 1 Kings 4:21 (cf. 2 Sam. 8:2; Judg. 3:15-18) — Solomon ruled over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines and to the border of Egypt. They brought **tribute** and served Solomon all the days of his life.

So while the grain offering could be offered on all sorts of different occasions, what it seems to represent at its heart is just the payment of tribute to the great **King** who is over all other kings.

- Deuteronomy 26:1–2, 4-5, 8-11 — When you come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance... you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from your land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket, and you shall go to the place that the LORD your God will choose, to make his name to dwell there... Then the priest shall take the basket from your hand and set it down before the altar of the LORD your God. And you shall make response before the LORD your God... “The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm... And he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. **And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which you, O LORD, have given me.**’ And you shall set it down before the LORD your God and **worship before the LORD your God.** And you shall rejoice in all the good that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.

At its most basic level,[§] it’s helpful to think of the grain offering as a payment of tribute – acknowledging my lowly and dependent position before the great King’s exalted and sovereign position over all. The grain offering is a way of acknowledging and affirming exactly “**who’s who**” in the relationship. We do need this constant reminder, don’t we? But that’s the thing, it’s not just about what we need – or even *primarily* about what we need. It’s about what the great King over all kings requires and expects from *us* – from the people that He has rescued and taken for Himself.

V. The Peace Offerings

In Leviticus, after the burnt offerings and the grain offerings, we learn about the peace offerings. (cf. Lev. 3) There were actually three different *kinds* of peace offerings. There were peace

[§] There’s a lot of overlap in the various offerings. The grain offering can also include elements of thanksgiving, and consecration, and devotion.

offerings for **confession**, but not necessarily like we think of confession.** (cf. Lev. 7:11-15) I could be *confessing* my sin and unworthiness in a time when I'm experiencing suffering and sorrow. (cf. Judges 20:16; 21:3-4; 2 Sam. 24:25) So the main focus of this confession offering is really my **petitions and pleas** to God for help. I'm confessing my need for God to help His undeserving servant.

- Psalm 5:3 — O LORD, in the morning you hear my voice; in the morning I prepare a sacrifice for you and watch.
- Psalm 141:1-2 — O LORD, I call upon you; hasten to me! Give ear to my voice when I call to you! Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice!

On the other hand, I could also be *confessing* God's undeserved goodness and kindness to me in *hearing* my pleas and *answering* my petitions for help. So the main focus of this confession offering would be turned from petition and request to, now, **gratitude and giving thanks**.

- Psalm 26:6-7 — I wash my hands in innocence and go around your altar, O LORD, proclaiming thanksgiving aloud, and telling all your wondrous deeds.
- Psalm 27:6 — My head shall be lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the LORD.

Sometimes this offering of thanksgiving would actually be the fulfillment of a vow that a person made to God when he was in distress. So the confession offering (of thanksgiving) becomes, *also*, a **vow** offering. (cf. Lev. 7:16) These vows were never meant to be bribes. They were just expressing my genuine zeal to give God all the glory in the *expectation* that He always helps and delivers those who cry to Him. So we read in the Psalms:

- Psalm 50:14-15 — Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and perform your vows to the Most High, and call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.
- Psalm 56:12-13 (cf. 66:13-15) — I must perform my vows to you, O God; I will render thank offerings to you. For you have delivered my soul from death, yes, my feet from falling, that I may walk before God in the light of life.

Besides the confession offerings for specific petitions and thanksgivings, there were also **freewill** offerings of general thanksgiving for **all God's provisions and kindnesses**. (Lev. 7:16) In other words, the freewill peace offerings weren't in response to any specific answer to prayer, but rather to God's overall generosity and goodness and blessing.

- Psalm 54:6 — With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you; I will give thanks to your name, O LORD, for it is good.
- Psalm 119:108 — Accept my freewill offerings of praise, O LORD, and teach me your rules.

** The Hebrew word normally translated "thank offerings" really has the more general idea of confession – whether of sin and unworthiness (cf. Josh. 7:19 [NCV]; Ezra 10:11), or of God's goodness and faithfulness. (cf. Wenham)

So what do we have so far?—Burnt offerings (surrender and obedience), grain offerings (honor and tribute), and peace offerings (petitions and thanksgivings).

VI. The Sin Offering

There's one more kind of offering I want to mention briefly, and that's the sin offering – or the purification offering. (cf. Lev. 4) This was the offering for *specific* sins that were committed *unintentionally*. The difference between this offering and the peace offerings of confession is that it's never connected with any *petitions* for help and deliverance, but *only* with the **confession** of sin and the need for cleansing and forgiveness.

Conclusion

Jesus asked: “Which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred?” (Mat. 23:18-19) So what is it about the altar that makes the gift, or the offering, sacred? The altar was the place, first of all, where the blood of all the sacrifices was applied, and it was this blood of atonement that made *possible* even the idea of *any kind* of gift or offering to God. Our offerings to God can only be made on the grounds of His provision for us. What do we have that we did not receive? But there's something else. As the place where the fire was kindled and where the offerings went up in smoke, the altar was located at the very entrance to God's dwelling – the closest to God's presence that any lay Israelite could go. The altar was located precisely in the place where God had come down to *receive* and to *accept* the offerings of His people.

[See Illustration on page 10]

So what does this altar—and all the gifts and offerings connected with it—what does all this have to do with God's dwelling in our midst, and our fellowship and relationship with Him? Have you noticed that for every different aspect of life in relationship with God—submission and obedience, honor and reverence, request and petition, praise and thanksgiving, penitence and confession—for every different aspect of life in relationship with God, there's an offering? And so what are these offerings telling us? They're telling us that all true relationship with God is, at its heart, our **offering of worship** to God as His redeemed people (cf. Ps. 96:7-9; Rev. 11:1; 2 Kings 18:22; Acts 17:23; Isa. 43:22-24), and God, in turn, being pleased and delighted to **accept and receive our worship**. (cf. Ps. 51:18-19; 119:108; Ezek. 20:40-41; Isa. 56:6-7; 60:6-7) That's the point of this phrase that's repeated over and over again in Leviticus: “a food **offering** with a **pleasing aroma to the Lord**.” (Lev. 1:9, 13, 17; cf. 4:31)

What does this mean? It means that every single aspect of our life in relationship with God is to be a real and tangible expression of **worship**. There's the **worship** expressed in willing obedience and surrender; there's the **worship** expressed in the payment of honor and tribute; there's the **worship** expressed in desperate prayer and petition; there's the **worship** expressed in joyful praise and thanksgiving; and there's the **worship** expressed in humble penitence and confession. In every single one of these very different expressions of worship what we're doing is acknowledging that Yahweh is the only true and living God. He's the only one **worthy to receive** our full obedience and submission, our tribute and honor, our prayers and petitions, our praises and thanksgivings, and our penitence and confession. What we need to see is that when

we render *any* of these things to God *it is*, at its heart, **worship**, and this offering of worship and His receiving of worship—*this* is, in turn, at the heart of all our *relationship* with Him.

And so part of worship—part of this miracle of relationship with God—is the offering up to him on the altar of that which is **costly** to us. Do you think the true believer in Israel ever saw the altar as a burden? No! as the place of worship, the altar symbolized for him the heart of His relationship with God. How often are we willing to obey and surrender, to pay honor and tribute, to pray and petition, to praise and thank, and to confess— just so long as there’s no real *cost* to us? We think of the costs of time or comfort; costs of money or possessions; costs of opportunity or advancement; costs of relaxation or recreation. (Sunday Church; prayer meeting; fellowship group // tithe/giving // sports; music; job // Vacation, etc.) God does care how *much* we give, but He measures how *much* we give by a standard different than ours (cf. the widow’s offering; Luke 21:1-4). God measures how much we give not simply by percentages or amounts, but rather by how costly it is to us and so by what it says about how convinced we are of His true worthiness.

➤ Malachi 1:6–14 — A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? ... When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not evil? ... With such a gift from your hand, will he show favor to any of you? says the LORD of hosts. Oh that there were one among you who would shut the doors, that you might not kindle fire on my altar in vain! ... **For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the LORD of hosts...** You bring what has been taken by violence or is lame or sick, and this you bring as your offering! Shall I accept that from your hand? says the LORD. Cursed be the cheat who has a male in his flock, and vows it, and yet sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished. **For I am a great King, says the LORD of hosts, and my name will be feared among the nations.**

An essential part of genuine worship is diligently seeking out ways to give to God that which “costs” us, and then delighting to do so. What is worship, after all, if it never costs us anything? How is this an acknowledgment of His worthiness as the only true and living God? None of us minds a high cost to us if we’re getting something equal to the cost in return. But in the case of worship, the cost to us is simply and only about His worthiness, and so it can never, ever, be too high.

Is there, then, nothing that we “gain” in worship? Yes, there is. It’s **in worship**—in all of its expressions, encompassing all of life—that we come to experience true communion and relationship with God – that we come to experience the feast at His table and bask in the light of His presence.^{††} Would you know God better? Would you live in more intimate relationship with Him? Then you and I must learn better what it is to worship.

^{††} The Westminster Confession famously says that the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. It’s only as we engage in the lavish costliness of worship that we come to know the delights and pleasures of relationship.

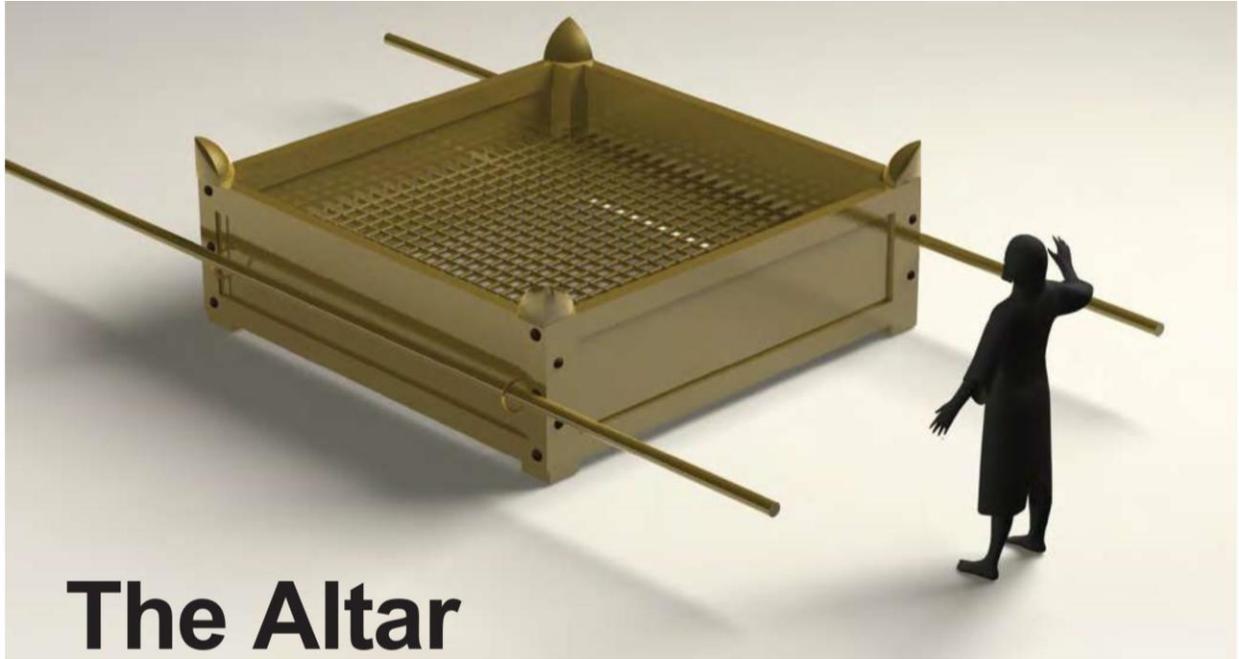
Maybe, now, we could start thinking to ourselves, “I wish the altar was still there, standing before the entrance of God’s tent. But once again, we’re reminded that everything about the tabernacle “only”(!) a copy of something in the heavens – of something to be fulfilled in the coming of Christ. The Lord said to Moses: “As [the altar] has been shown you on the mountain, so shall it be made.” (27:8) And so the writer of the book of Hebrews tells us:

- Hebrews 13:10–16 — **We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat.** For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood... *Through him then [because of His shed blood already applied to the altar] let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.*
- Romans 12:1 — I appeal to you therefore, brothers, *by the mercies of God*, to **present your bodies as a living sacrifice [since the blood of Christ has already been applied to the altar], holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.**
- 1 Peter 2:5 (cf. Phil. 2:17; 4:18) — You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, **to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.**

Would we know Him better? Would we live in more intimate relationship with Him? Then we must spend our lives learning better what it is to be His worshipers. At its heart, all true relationship with God is our offering of worship to Him as His redeemed people, and He, in turn, being pleased and delighted to accept and receive our worship.

So skipping ahead, now, to Exodus 38, maybe we can read now with growing delight and joy:

VII. Exodus 38:1–7 — [Bezalel] made the altar of burnt offering of acacia wood. Five cubits was its length, and five cubits its breadth. It was square, and three cubits was its height. He made horns for it on its four corners. Its horns were of one piece with it, and he overlaid it with bronze. And he made all the utensils of the altar, the pots, the shovels, the basins, the forks, and the fire pans. He made all its utensils of bronze. And he made for the altar a grating, a network of bronze, under its ledge, extending halfway down. He cast four rings on the four corners of the bronze grating as holders for the poles. He made the poles of acacia wood and overlaid them with bronze. And he put the poles through the rings on the sides of the altar to carry it with them. He made it hollow, with boards.



The Altar



