

The Bronze Altar and “the Way of Worship”

Exodus 27

Exodus 27 - *“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. ² 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. ³ Also you shall make its pans to receive its ashes, and its shovels and its basins and its forks and its firepans; you shall make all its utensils of bronze. ⁴ 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. ⁵ You shall put it under the rim of the altar beneath, that the network may be midway up the altar. ⁶ And you shall make poles for the altar, poles of acacia wood, and overlay them with bronze. ⁷ The poles shall be put in the rings, and the poles shall be on the two sides of the altar to bear it. ⁸ You shall make it hollow with boards; as it was shown you on the mountain, so shall they make it.*

⁹ “You shall also make the court of the tabernacle. For the south side there shall be hangings for the court made of fine woven linen, one hundred cubits long for one side. ¹⁰ And its twenty pillars and their twenty sockets shall be bronze. The hooks of the pillars and their bands shall be silver. ¹¹ Likewise along the length of the north side there shall be hangings one hundred cubits long, with its twenty pillars and their twenty sockets of bronze, and the hooks of the pillars and their bands of silver.

¹² “And along the width of the court on the west side shall be hangings of fifty cubits, with their ten pillars and their ten sockets. ¹³ The width of the court on the east side shall be fifty cubits. ¹⁴ The hangings on one side of the gate shall be fifteen cubits, with their three pillars and their three sockets. ¹⁵ And on the other side shall be hangings of fifteen cubits, with their three pillars and their three sockets.

¹⁶ “For the gate of the court there shall be a screen twenty cubits long, woven of blue, purple, and scarlet thread, and fine woven linen, made by a weaver. It shall have four pillars and four sockets. ¹⁷ All the pillars around the court shall have bands of silver; their hooks shall be of silver and their sockets of bronze. ¹⁸ The length of the court shall be one hundred cubits, the width fifty throughout, and the height five cubits, made of fine woven linen, and its sockets of bronze. ¹⁹ All the utensils of the tabernacle for all its service, all its pegs, and all the pegs of the court, shall be of bronze.

²⁰ “And you shall command the children of Israel that they bring you pure oil of pressed olives for the light, to cause the lamp to burn continually. ²¹ In the tabernacle of meeting, outside the veil which is before the Testimony, Aaron and his sons shall tend it from evening until morning before the Lord. It shall be a statute forever to their generations on behalf of the children of Israel.”

Background Notes:

In Exodus 24, Moses went up Mount Sinai to receive from the Lord the stone tablets on which were written the Ten Commandments. He also received instructions and plans for the Tabernacle. Moses was there on the mountain for 40 days and 40 nights. Exodus 24:18 – *“Then Moses entered the cloud as he went up on the mountain. And he stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights.”*

So for 40 days and 40 nights, Moses was on Mount Sinai receiving directly from the Lord the stone tablets on which were written the Ten Commandments and the detailed plans for the construction of the Tabernacle and its furnishings. The Lord started with instructions for the Tabernacle's furnishings, working from the inside out (Exodus 25). First came the Ark of the Covenant with its Mercy Seat that would go into the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctuary room of the Tabernacle. Then came the instructions for the Table of Bread and the Lamp Stand that would occupy the Holy Place or outer sanctuary room of the Tabernacle. In chapter 26 the Lord gave Moses instructions for the construction of the Tabernacle itself – the curtains, and the gold-covered boards with their fittings and sockets, and the “veils” or curtains that covered the entrance to the Tabernacle and the entrance to the Holy of Holies. In addition, the Lord gave Moses directions as to where the furnishings were to be placed in the Tabernacle. Exodus 26:33-35 – *“Hang the curtain from the clasps and place the Ark of the Testimony behind the curtain. The curtain will separate the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. Put the atonement cover on the Ark of the Testimony in the Most Holy Place. Place the Table outside the curtain on the north side of the Tabernacle and put the Lamp Stand opposite to it on the south side. For the entrance to the tent make a curtain of blue, purple and scarlet yarn and finely twisted linen – the work of an embroiderer.”*

Now in Exodus 27 the Lord gave Moses instructions for the courtyard surrounding the Tabernacle. The Bronze Altar of sacrifice was to be placed near the one (and only) entrance into the Tabernacle courtyard. One of my students made a model of the Tabernacle for me as a project, and it helps to visualize the way of approaching God that is pictured in the Tabernacle. I wish I could show it to you -- but, unfortunately, it is now in one of the many basement storage rooms at Emmaus Bible College!

Doctrinal Points

1. The Bronze Altar pictures the Cross of Christ.

Some translations say *brass* as the metal for this altar, and some say *bronze*. What's the difference? Brass and bronze are two different alloys, composed mostly of copper. Most likely bronze was used, as it would be more appropriate for an altar that had a continual hot fire. Because this altar had to be carried when the children of Israel traveled, it was not made of solid bronze, but of acacia wood overlaid with bronze. This made it lighter for carrying. However, the grating for the altar and the pails and shovels and other items associated with this altar were made of solid bronze.

The Bronze Altar was 7½ feet square, and 4½ feet high, with bronze horns on the four corners of the top. All the animal sacrifices were made on the Bronze Altar. Psalm 118:27 – *“...with boughs in hand, join in the festal procession up to the horns of the altar.”* Chapter 29 says that when the priests were consecrated, some blood from the sacrifice was sprinkled on the four horns of the altar. The Bronze Altar in the courtyard was used for sacrifice; the other altar, the gold Altar of Incense, was inside the Tabernacle, and was used only for burning incense (Exodus 30).

The Bronze Altar was a large altar, but it had to be large because some of the sacrificial animals were large in size -- an ox, for example. The bronze horns on the four corners of the altar were probably used for tying the large sacrifices on the altar. This does not mean that they were sacrificed or burned alive -- no, just that they were large and unwieldy. This was likely one use of the horns of the altar.

We know that all the Old Testament sacrifices pointed forward to Jesus Christ, the one Great Sacrifice who was to come. Remember what John the Baptist said when he saw the Lord Jesus: *"Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"* (John 1:29). The book of Leviticus shows us that the sacrifices not only pointed forward toward Christ, but they all typified in some way the person and work of Christ. That's one reason why there were different kinds of offerings -- to portray the various aspects of the wonderful Person and work of the one Great Sacrifice to come. The burnt offerings, the grain offerings, the peace offerings, the sin offerings and the trespass offerings all took place at the Bronze Altar, and all of them illustrated and pictured some aspect of the coming sacrifice of Christ. The Bronze Altar pictures the Cross of Christ.

2. The Tabernacle Courtyard pictures "the Way of Worship."

The courtyard of the Tabernacle was 150 feet long (that's half the length of a football field) and 75 feet wide, and was surrounded by a fence of woven linen hangings. The fence was 7 ½ feet high -- too high for a person to jump over, or climb over, or even see over. There was only one opening, or gate area, by which to approach the Tabernacle.

I think you can already see that the layout of the Tabernacle and courtyard pictures the way we must approach to God in order to worship Him. No one just walked straight into the Holy of Holies! Everyone had to enter the Tabernacle area in the divinely appointed way. First, they had to enter through the only gate, which pictures Jesus Christ (John 14:6). Notice that the "natural man" could not even **see** over the high 7½-foot barrier. Everyone had to come through the gate. The colors of the gate were blue, purple and scarlet. These colors picture Jesus Christ's heavenly and royal character and His sacrificial work on the Cross.

The first item that was encountered in the courtyard was the Bronze Altar, the altar of sacrifice, which pictures Christ's work on the Cross. No one can come into God's presence or worship Him unless they have been to the Cross of Christ for salvation.

After the Bronze Altar came the Bronze Laver (Exodus 30). The priests had to wash their hands and feet with the water from the Laver before entering the Tabernacle. The Laver speaks of the daily cleansing from the defiling effects of sin that each one of us needs. I John 1:9 -- *"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins, and purify us from all unrighteousness."* As the priests' hands and feet were washed with the pure water from the Laver, so we as worshipers need to have that daily washing by the pure water of God's Word upon our lives. It should be applied to what we do (hands), and applied to where we go (feet).

Only after coming to the sacrificial Bronze Altar and washing at the Laver could the priest enter the Holy Place of the Tabernacle to eat the bread, or walk in the light of the Lamp Stand, or burn incense at the Golden Altar at the entrance to the Holy of Holies. The offerings of sweet-smelling incense speak of our prayers and praises ascending before God.

Do you see the spiritual picture of “the Way of Worship”? Do you want to worship the Lord? The way into the Holy of Holies and God’s presence is open today through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, but we must follow the divine pattern of approach to God (Hebrews 10:19-22). Everyone must come through Christ, the only Doorway, and come to the Bronze Altar of the Cross of Christ. Then God expects us to move beyond the Bronze Altar and the Laver, and enter through the Holy Place and into the Holy of Holies. Entrance into God’s presence is now open to all believers! The Tabernacle Courtyard pictures “the Way of Worship.”

Practical Application

Let’s keep our lamps trimmed!

Verse 20-21: *“Command the Israelites to bring you clear oil of pressed olives for the light so that the lamps may be kept burning.... Aaron and his sons are to keep the lamps burning before the LORD from evening till morning....”* The priests had to continually fill and trim the lamps of the Lamp Stand in the Tabernacle. Good, pure olive oil was supplied, but the priests had to trim the wicks on a regular basis. They had to cut away excess and extraneous matter so that the lamps would burn brightly.

Do you see the spiritual lesson and application? We, too, must keep the lamps of our lives trimmed! The oil of the Holy Spirit is good and pure, and it is supplied continuously, but we must continually trim our wicks by cutting out of our lives whatever would dim the flame of our lights. *“...let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles us....”* (Hebrews 12:1). Our lives should shine brightly for Jesus! Let’s keep our lamps trimmed!