

Our Altar

Many use the word altar today to denote a place that serves as a focal point for religion or ritual. The saying, "She left him at the altar," is understood as "she called off the wedding at the last moment." There may not be a structure present for the reference to have meaning. A song from a few years ago "Going to the Altar" just meant they were going to get married. However, the dictionary definition may state: "An altar is a structure upon which offerings such as sacrifices are made for religious purposes" and is often used figuratively. [Another definition](#) is "A tablelike construction used in the Christian church in celebrating the Eucharist (Communion)." Most of these definitions are found in Catholic or Lutheran rituals. Turning to the scriptures for a description, we learn that in Hebrews, the word is not used for a physical altar or as a metaphor, but as a metonymy. A metonymy is a figure of speech that replaces the name of a thing with the name of something else with which it is closely associated.

As we study the Old Testament, we find an altar or altars mentioned quite often. The patriarchs made altars of unworked stone and placed their sacrifices upon it as a burnt offering to God. The Law given to Moses included two altars, one of bronze and one of gold. The bronze altar for burnt offerings and the gold altar for burning incense. Jesus Christ ended the need for sacrificial altars with His death on the cross. The symbolism of incense ended when the risen savior and mediator took His place on the throne with the Father. In the New Testament church, there is no record of, nor need for, a physical altar as previously used by God's people.

In the New Testament, the word "altar" appears many times but only one time concerning the church. After presenting the superiority of Christ Jesus in 12 chapters, the Hebrew writer points out some things to remember and summarizes in chapter 13. He states, "**We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat**" (Hebrews 13:10). The lessons and explanations in the Hebrew letter are drawn from the ceremonial portion of the Law. They describe how Christ and the church are superior to things that were done in the temple by the Levitical Priesthood. The use of "altar" here must be understood as a metonymy to represent something much greater as well.

The grain offering and the peace offering were the only two from which the priest consumed a portion and are described in Leviticus chapters two and three. Therefore, it must be these offerings passing through the bronze altar, by the hands of a mediator, to which the Hebrew writer refers. They demonstrate the love and covenant relation between God, the one making the offering, and the priest who mediated between man and God. Jesus performs that responsibility for us. Note Paul's statement to the Romans. "*Therefore, having been justified by faith, **we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God***" (Romans 5:1-2).

Paul also said, in writing to the Colossians, that it was "*through the blood of His cross*" that Jesus made peace "*to present you before Him holy and blameless*" (Colossians 1:19-23). Those that stuck to the sacrifices and ceremonies of The Law of Moses could not be a participant in the sacrifice, mediation, and peace enjoyed by a member of His church. Jesus told the Samaritan woman, "*Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father*" (John 4:21). He also said, "*God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.*" (John 4:24). No longer confined to a location and physical features of the temple, God's children worship

Him anywhere in the world, in a manner led by the Holy Spirit's instruction, and through our mediator, the risen Christ.

We also note that those altars authorized by the Law of Moses could only be approached by the Levitical Priesthood to offer worship (Numbers 3:10, 18:7). Likewise, only a Priest of Christ can approach God's throne through Christ. A recent blog looked at our "Royal Priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9). The Hebrew writer must have considered this. He concluded, *"Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water"* (Hebrews 10:19-22).

Let us ever remember that we are Priests of Christ and have access to our Father through our savior and brother, the High Priest, who also wears Crowns of Victory and Kingship. And it is by His authority that God hears our prayers and accepts our worship.