

A Covenant of Blood and the Fire of God

by G.W. North

G.W. North's sermon explores the profound significance of the blood covenant and the role of altars in the relationship between God and His people.

Scripture: Exodus 24:6

Topics: "Covenant", "Sacrifice"

Description

G.W. North emphasizes the significance of the blood covenant established by God with His people in Canaan, highlighting Moses' role as mediator who sprinkled blood on the altar and the people, symbolizing their acceptance of God's covenant. The sermon illustrates how the brazen altar was uniquely designed for atonement, marking a shift in the sacrificial system, and how the altar served as a testimony of unity among the Israelites, even when misunderstood by some. North draws parallels between the altars built by Abraham and the two and a half tribes of Israel, underscoring the importance of the altar as a symbol of God's presence and the people's identity as His chosen ones. He concludes by reflecting on the deeper spiritual truths revealed through the act of sacrifice and the necessity of obedience to God's will.

Transcript

In Canaan the Lord was going to dwell among His people upon the ground of a blood covenant and upon no other. Since the days of Abraham and Isaac at Moriah not a word about sacrificial blood in connection with altars has been mentioned in holy writ, but now Moses sends young men to the altar with offerings and sacrifices to burn for acceptance and peace. The gathered people standing around the stone symbols of the nation, facing the altar, watch him as he catches half the blood of the animals in basins and sprinkles the other half upon the altar. This done, he read to the people all the words written in the book. Again receiving their affirmation of obedience, he sprinkled the book and all the people with the other half of the blood, saying to them, 'Behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord hath made with you concerning all these words'. The same blood was both God's and the people's, though neither had shed it. Moses, the man of God, the mediator between God and man, had provided it, saying, 'this is the blood of the covenant which God hath enjoined unto you'.

Having accomplished his immediate task, from the ground of the blood-sealed covenant Moses again ascends into Sinai, accompanied this time by Aaron and seventy of the elders of Israel. The blood-sprinkled people standing around the smouldering altar watched them go, but did not know for what reason they went nor what the future held for them all. They knew that they were heading for the promised

land, but they had yet to discover that they were to be the host nation to God -- that He was planning to come and live among them.

When Moses finally reached the Lord at the top of Sinai he was given instructions to make Him a house and how to assemble and distribute the furniture. The altar of burnt offering was to be placed at His gates. It was not to be built of stone or made of earth as formerly, but of metal. It was to be different because it was to have a different function from any which preceded it; it was to be the altar of the blood of atonements. No previous altar had been built for that purpose; hitherto the idea of sin had not been introduced at any altar, but this one was deliberately ordered by God that it should be used for sacrifices for the coverage of the sins of Israel committed within the covenant. It was to be a kind of means for the continuation of the passover, the logical conclusion of it under that covenant. Obedience to the Lord in the matter of remission of sins by means of the brazen altar resulted in entire forgiveness -- the Lord regarded their sins as covered by sacrifice and would pass over them because they were covered by the blood.

This altar was the seventh since Abraham's on Moriah, but it was not to be the last one made in Israel. This may seem strange, for with the making and positioning of the brazen altar God had finalised all His demands concerning it and therefore would not accept any other. Notwithstanding this, the final altar made in Israel at that time was the one erected entirely without instruction, simply for the purpose of witness. Existing jointly with the brazen altar, this one was never used for sacrifice; it simply bore testimony to the unity of the nation and of their total acceptance by the Lord. The Lord fully accepted this uncommissioned altar. Standing there in all its unused glory, it existed solely as a symbol and confession of man's understanding of the principle of eternal life.

There is no clearer testimony to man's firm belief of this than the great altar which the two and a half tribes of Israel built upon the borders of their inheritance. The motive behind their action was completely misunderstood and misinterpreted by the many and caused so much alarm to the greater part of Israel that they were prepared to go and destroy both the altar and those who built it. However, the retributive action was averted because upon arbitration they learned that, although the altar was built, it was never to be used. Their brethren had erected it purposely to let everyone know that, although they were not living in the mainland of the inheritance of the Lord, they were still God's people.

Perhaps they may have chosen any one of a half dozen other things to set up as their particular emblem of unity, but they built an altar. There can scarcely be clearer evidence than this that they understood the significance of it, though to what measure who can say? To be cut off from God's altar was the worst punishment which could be inflicted on anybody in Israel; it meant that God had completely rejected that person and had cut him off from His inheritance and all hope of salvation.

It is significant that those men did not attempt to erect another tabernacle. If they had been guided by purely human, aesthetic desires they might have done so, but they knew that in that event both it and they would have been entirely unacceptable to God and their brethren. The altar was a different proposition however, it was theirs, it belonged to all the people, it was as necessary to their life as it was to God's. When it was erected no-one but they who built it seemed to appreciate it and perhaps even they did not understand the deepest significance of the gesture. They sought for some symbol of the unity they felt with their brethren and their God, a real testimony to the corporate life of the nation, and without division decided upon the idea of the altar. To the majority of Israel it seemed blasphemous and divisive, portending disinheritance and destruction, and who can blame them? No-one, not even Joshua, had been given any instructions about it, but the minority built it and God accepted it. The thought that had inspired

their action was God-given, the expression of their desire was perfect; that small group had arrived at truth, they were right. The altar must remain.

Once again as it had been at the very beginning with Abel, without divine instructions, though not without divine aid, men had arrived at divine truth. In them also we see repeated the same kind of thing that Abraham did in his day. With united voice these all say that the first and most important thing to discover is the meaning of the altar, not the sacrifice laid upon it. They were confessing that Abraham, who left his bare and unused altars all over the land, was their father.

It was as though with this man God began all over again. Abel, who had made the original discovery, lost his life in doing so, but not in vain. The truth for which he was martyred, though lost sight of for centuries, was preserved through those years, reappearing on the purged earth following the deluge. But as time progressed and men continued to degenerate and turn from God it is lost sight of again and again; Babel is an example of this. By that time men had completely forsaken the earthly symbol of heavenly life; endeavouring to reach heaven by their own powers they started to build their own tower brick by brick. To frustrate their efforts God confounded their language and curtailed their labours; He also scattered abroad those men who tried to substitute a tower for an altar, but the judgement never cured their hearts of waywardness nor turned them back to God.

For this reason God chose Abraham, a descendant of Abel's brother Seth through Noah and Shem, and started again. By Abraham God restored the altar to the permanent place it must hold in a man's life and what it should symbolise to his heart. It is not surprising then to discover that the only blood to stain any of Abraham's altars was the lamb's which was shed on the holy mount. There is no record that the patriarch ever shed another's, though he built altar upon altar. It is remarkable how purposefully and completely God took hold of this man. Undoubtedly He did so that through him, who was the 'father' of the Seed, He should reveal the needful truth.

As we have already seen God had something greater to show us than the doctrine of atonement for sin. This He unfolded later to the fullest detail through Moses; but by this man Abraham, the father of the race, He revealed the deeper secret of the life principle of God. Because this man refrained from offering to God that for which He had not asked, and refused to act in presumption to give the impression that he already knew what God desired, he was granted at last the revelation of what God actually wanted. How great was Abraham's patience that he never once asked God what he should offer Him, and how much greater is God's wisdom that during this whole period He never once told His chosen one what it was He wanted of him as sacrifice. So Abraham continued faithful in obedience to his inward knowledge, firm in his convictions about the altar, yet fully content to rest in his ignorance of God's mind.

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