

The Cross - God's Altar

by G.W. North

The cross is transformed into an altar, representing the self-giving and sacrifice of Jesus Christ for humanity, demonstrating God's love and provision for eternal life.

Scripture: Genesis 8:20, Isaiah 53:5, Matthew 27:33-35, John 3:16, Romans 12:1, Galatians 2:20, Ephesians 5:2, Hebrews 13:11, 1 Peter 2:24, 1 John 3:16

Topics: "Sacrifice", "The Cross as an Altar"

Description

G.W. North emphasizes the profound connection between the cross of Christ and the concept of sacrifice, illustrating how Jesus transformed the cross into an altar of self-giving love. He reflects on the significance of Christ's crucifixion as the ultimate sin-offering, fulfilling Old Testament prophecies and establishing a new understanding of sacrifice. North highlights the importance of recognizing the cross not just as a place of death, but as a means of life and reconciliation with God. He draws parallels between the sacrifices of Noah and the eternal principles of self-sacrifice inherent in God's creation. Ultimately, the sermon calls believers to grasp the deeper truths of the cross as an altar of love and life.

Transcript

It is difficult for men of evangelical persuasion who love the cross of Christ to dissociate that cross from the human sacrifice and blood-offering He made there. They rightly see them as one. That is to say they see Him as God made man to accomplish human sacrifice for human sin. This is spoken of in numerous scriptures and specifically stated in words like those in Hebrews 13.11 -- 'the bodies of those beasts whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin are burned without the camp'. Because the Lord fulfilled this scripture and died without the city, they see Him crucified and sacrificed upon the cross as the sin-offering. Such realisation causes them to hymn their thanks to His name with undying gratitude, and rightly so, for the knowledge of their own sin and utter inability to change themselves fills them with self-loathing. Thus Calvary is their constant theme, and because they do not normally go beyond the simple and vitally necessary understanding of the Lord's human, sacrificial death, the greater truth of eternal sacrifice from which it came is lost to them. Despite the fact that God so specifically ordained and carefully fixed this truth as a constant factor of life in Israel, it is all too frequently unseen. Yet the series of invisible miracles accomplished by Christ on the cross was unspeakably marvellous and not the least of these was the way He changed His cross into an altar.

How gracious is the Lord who suffered for us without the gate in the place of a skull. Calvary was the mound of execution where criminals were hanged on trees and left to die; it was outlaws' territory where outcasts, lepers, thieves and wild beasts lived and fought and suffered and died. What compassions He felt, what love He showed, how wonderful He is that He should go there and suffer so for us! It is certain that the worshipping heart shall enter into no height except that height be equalled in experience, if not excelled in understanding, by the depth it has first plumbed. Yet how slowly we understand the mystery of God. It must be a real sorrow to Him that, although He has sought to reveal these things to us in so many ways, so few have grasped His secrets. All the Lord Jesus accomplished on the cross by paying the penalty for sin and bearing away its mass from us would have been to no avail if He had not at last turned the tree of curse and punishment and shame into an altar unto the Lord.

Only to the understanding heart does the cross become the altar of God. No other eyes but the eyes of our understanding can or may see the transformation. The high priest of Israel dealt in many parts and divers manner with strictly limited means and repetitious ceremonies. His ministry was only with woefully inadequate substitutes and signs, but our glorious Melchizedek did all at once. Moving in the eternal realities of His own life, He accomplished at the same time and place, in one act, everything that was required by God of Him, for God and man. Crucified, made sin, shamed, outcast, He contrived by His virtues to use the cross for His purposes, converting it to an altar whereon, by the eternal Spirit, He offered Himself without spot to God.

The word 'altar' first appears in scripture in connection with NOAH following the flood. When he came out of the Ark and entered upon the purged earth as a new man, the first thing he did was to build an altar unto the Lord, and offer sacrifices to God. If he had ever done such things before we are not told of them; he may have done and perhaps it is right to assume that by building an altar and sacrificing to God he was following the habit of a lifetime, but we do not know. What we do know is that, on leaving the Ark, the first significant work this new man wrought upon the renewed earth was to build an altar, take of the life within the Ark and sacrifice it to God. God then smelled a sweet smell.

All was at rest in heaven and on the new earth; though in a way different from how it was in the beginning, man was at one with God. It was as paradise regained, or the commencement of a new age; except for the presence of sin, because of the sacrifice all was as it was in the beginning. But even so, despite sin, perhaps because of it, through this man Noah God had established on earth an everlasting principle.

Almost certainly Noah was ignorant of the significance and function of the three persons in the being of God, and the principal manifestation of the love which is the most basic factor of eternal Being, namely self-sacrifice. God had not been able to reveal this in quite the same way before, so Noah was not following a precedent. Nevertheless the idea of self-sacrifice is easily discoverable in His method of creation. It is obviously incorporated into His plan of life for mankind, for the way He built woman from man reveals it for all to see. First of all He caused ADAM to pass into a deep sleep and then extracted from him a rib; closing up the man's flesh again the Lord then made the woman and presented her to the man. The parallel between this operation and the principle underlying the altar and sacrifice lies here: the deep sleep represents death and the woman the life which could come into being only because of it. In this manner the eternal principle which was later developed and demonstrated as altar and sacrifice was woven into the creation of the woman; it really could have been done no other way.

It is highly unlikely that Adam was taken into the counsels of God about this, or that he consented to and volunteered for the operation. No man has been God's counsellor and there is no record that the first man

was consulted as to its alleged benefit to him, or whether he even wanted a companion. It is probable that the Lord told him about it afterwards, for he said, 'this is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh'. But whatever may have been God's procedure in the matter, we now know what happened. The truth implicit in God's creation of Eve is that Adam had to lay down his life and sacrifice a part of himself in order that she might live unto him. That is how truth eternal in God was adapted by Him to the art and science of creation. Long before it was manifest to man as a principle of life in God, it existed in him as a basis of life union and duplication and was eventually demonstrated to him by the compulsory altar.

The altar is as much a symbol to mankind as it was a necessity to Israel. Its chiefest function and greatest glory is humble, voluntary self-giving for the promotion of another's life; this is perhaps the most vital of the many characteristics of true love. Certainly without it eternal life cannot possibly be. That it involves and implies death is inevitable, indeed altars demand it and only exist for it.

In man's thinking the altar is generally associated with the ideas of placation, propitiation, substitutionary giving and atonement by sacrifice. He seldom thinks of it as God does, therefore much of its basic meaning, the glory of self-giving has been lost. Often because of the death involved in sacrifice it is only with difficulty that the altar can be thought of as a revelation of a principle of life. This is simply because we do not view death aright; we do not understand what it means. Death as men know it is horrible, dark, dreadful and mysterious, something to be feared and evaded as much as possible. That is because death came to man by sin. All too often it comes finally as a result of disease or accident or war or some kind of tragedy attended by pain. However, what is known to man as death is really nothing other than a principle of life in God, and for that reason was originally very good.

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