



## Studies in the Book of Exodus

Text  
Exodus 20:22-26

Topic  
Before giving them the Law,  
God instructs the Israelites on the building of an altar

Title  
*“Altar Joys”*

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Here are five sports clichés I never want to hear again:

- “We gave 110%.”
- “We brought our ‘A’ game.”
- “They just wanted it more.”
- “He came to play.”
- “There’s no ‘I’ in team.”

Then there are these dumb quotes from sports figures:

- Six-Time Pro Bowl Wide Receiver Chad Ochocinco once said, “I’m traveling to all 51 states to see who can stop #85.”
- Australian Golfer Greg Norman: “I owe a lot to my parents, especially my mother and father.”

- Five-Time NBA Champion Dennis Rodman: "Chemistry is a class you take in high school or college, where you figure out two plus two is 10, or something."
- Former NBA Center Chuck Nevitt: "My sister's expecting a baby, and I don't know if I'm going to be an uncle or an aunt."
- 10-Time NBA All-Star Jason Kidd: "We're going to turn this team around 360 degrees."

No list like this would be complete without a quote from Yogi Berra. When asked by his wife where he wanted to be buried, he said, "Surprise me."

Even though I hate sports clichés, because of their overuse, I often find my mind drifting to them. For example, in our verses today we get instruction about the altar of sacrifice. I caught myself thinking, "*We need to leave it all on the altar.*"

As it turns out, "Leave it all on the altar" isn't so cliché after all. We're told in the New Testament to present our bodies a living sacrifice..." (Romans 12:1). The scholars at Dallas Theological Seminary comment on this, saying, "The word "bodies," mindful of the Old Testament sacrifices, **represents the totality of one's life and activities**, of which his body is the vehicle of expression."

Totality; that sounds a lot like "all" to me.

The word *altar* is first used when Noah built an altar to the Lord after leaving the ark. Altars are implied prior to that; and we see men build altars after that. But as far as I can tell, our verses in Exodus are the first time God gives instructions about building an altar.

If we're going to "leave it all on the altar," we need to hear what God had to say. I'll organize my comments about the altar around two points: #1 To Worship God, You Need An Altar, and #2 To Worship God, You Have An Altar.

## #1 To Worship God, You Need An Altar

Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, informs us that the syrian Governor Cestius Gallus requested the high priest to take a census of Jerusalem to convince Nero of the importance of the city and of the Jewish nation. The method used by the high priest was to count the number of lambs slain annually at Passover. The figure they reported was 256,500.

It's likely an exaggeration; but a lot of lambs were slain - and that doesn't take into consideration every other sacrifice throughout a year, and through the centuries.

For all the slaughter committed there, God's altar communicates that salvation is by grace. It really does.

In the Garden of Eden, after Adam and Eve sinned, God said to Satan, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel" (Genesis 3:15).

Scholars have labeled these words the *protoevangelium*. That translates to *the first Gospel*. It is the Gospel being preached for the first time in the Bible.

Adam, Eve, and Satan may not have fully understood what God meant; but we do. He meant that, as the Seed of the woman, He was coming Himself as a man - coming as God in human flesh - to defeat the devil by paying the penalty for sin.

God immediately showed Adam and Eve and Satan what that payment would involve. As God in human flesh, He would die to pay the penalty.

His death was prefigured by the killing of animals in order to provide Adam and Eve with proper clothing.

It was probably lambskin, and it symbolized a more spiritual reality. God was clothing them spiritually with His robe of righteousness.

They were naked and ashamed sinners, but God would die in order to clothe them with His righteousness.

It was a gift; it was all by God's grace. Adam and Eve were required only to believe God.

The Genesis account and the *protoevangelium* had been passed down through the generations. The Israelites in the exodus knew it well. Thus an altar upon which animals were sacrificed would remind the Israelites of God's promise to come, and to die, as their Substitute and Savior from sin.

It was the place that reminded them salvation was God's gift - that they were saved by grace, through faith.

Previous to our verses, God had spoken the Ten Commandments. After our verses, beginning in chapter twenty-one and continuing through chapter twenty-four, God's laws will be further expounded.

The altar is strategically placed *before* the further instruction in the Law. It was a reminder that they were made right with God not by keeping the Law, but by God's grace in making the way of salvation by the redemption of His blood. The Law followed redemption by blood as the means of enjoying relationship with God and with others.

Exo 20:22 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the children of Israel: 'You have seen that I have talked with you from heaven.

This should arrest our attention. They had been addressed personally by the Living God in real time and space.

You've heard it said, and have probably yourself said of your believing in Jesus, that, "It's not religion; *it's a relationship.*"

That has always been true for those in any era who believed God. God and Israel were in a personal, living relationship. The laws that follow were not meant to be a religion so much as they were the prescription for how to best enjoy their relationship with God.

Do you have rules in your home? Sure you do. It helps things to run smoothly to know what is expected of dad and mom and the kids. The rules don't create the relationships in the home; they simply make the relationships more enjoyable when they are followed.

God gave the Law to Israel as household rules and regulations so that their relationship with Him, and with each other, might be enjoyable.

Exo 20:23 You shall not make *anything to be* with Me - gods of silver or gods of gold you shall not make for yourselves.

We are used to thinking of 'gods' as mere inanimate idols of silver or gold. I've been pointing out that the word for 'gods' in Hebrew is the plural of *elohim*. It's important to realize that *elohim* is **not** a name of God. In the Bible, *elohim* is used of *any* being that inhabits the supernatural realm. God is an *elohim*; but so are angels and demons and the departed spirits of human beings.

One example is Psalm 8:5, which reads, "For You have made him a little lower than the angels, And You have crowned [man] with glory and honor." The word for "angels" is *elohim*.

Another example is First Samuel 28:13 where we see that the spirits of the human dead are also called *elohim*.

Why is this important? Well, first of all, it's important because it's the correct interpretation.

It's also important if you want to get a better sense of what was at stake. It seems as though idols may, in some cases, be more than mere inanimate objects of silver and gold. They may be empowered by 'gods' that we would call demons.

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul wrote,

1Co 10:20 ... the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God, and I do not want you to have fellowship with demons.

Concerning the 'gods,' one writer said,

The Biblical approach to the gods of the pagans is not as simple as mere scoffing and consigning them to the realm of fantasy. The reality was often more tragic and harmful than mere fantasy. The Scriptures hold forth the fearsome possibility (and likelihood) that many of these gods were in fact demons in disguise.

The Israelites had been in Egypt over four centuries. We know that Egypt had many idols, representing their 'gods,' and that ritual magic was performed.

By "magic," we don't mean card tricks. During the ten plagues you will recall that two Egyptian magicians, Jannes and Jambres, didn't pull rabbits out of a hat. They turned their staffs into real snakes.

They were also able to replicate a few of the plagues before having to admit Moses' God was superior to their 'gods.' This was genuine demonic power on display - the work of 'gods' being evoked through idols.

When Almighty God told the Israelites to "not make *anything to be with Me,*" it could be He was warning them not to try to evoke His presence through ritual magic.

Besides that, it just doesn't make sense to try to replicate God in an object.

A company called Terasem Movement, aims to (and I quote) "transfer human consciousness to computers and robots."

They want to replicate your dead loved ones with robot clones - complete with a digital copy of the person's brain.

The manager of the company said, "It's like when people stuff a pet cat or dog. We don't stuff humans but this is a way of 'stuffing' their information, their personality and mannerisms."

Just like you wouldn't think that a digital replica is your loved one, you can't make something and think it replicates the living God.

Exo 20:24 An altar of earth you shall make for Me, and you shall sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen. In every place where I record My name I will come to you, and I will bless you.

On a simple, earthen altar, the Israelites were to offer animal sacrifices. God specified two types of sacrifices: burnt offerings and peace offerings:

1. The Hebrew word for "burnt offering" means *to ascend*; literally it is *to go up in smoke*. The smoke from the sacrifice ascended to God. It was the complete destruction of the animal (except for the hide).
2. The "peace offering" didn't have to be an animal; it could be grain. Only a portion of it was burned. It wasn't, as we might think, something offered to make peace. It assumed the parties involved were at peace. Another name for it, a better name, is the "fellowship offering." The parts of it that were not burned were eaten as a festive meal to illustrate fellowship with one another - in this case, with the worshiper and God.



It's an over-simplification, but I think you see that the death of the Substitute in the burnt offering makes it possible to be at peace with God, and to fellowship with Him - symbolized by the festive meal.

- The burnt offering reminds you salvation is by grace through faith.
- The peace offering invites you to then have fellowship with God, and with His people.

Looking at the altar, I can't help but think of the words in the New Testament that say, "the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life..." (Romans 6:23).

- The burnt offering highlights the wages of sin. Sin required the death of an innocent substitute.
- The peace offering - that's the enjoyment of eternal life, now and forever, thanks to God's sacrifice of Himself.

"In every place where I record My name I will come to you, and I will bless you." In other words, wherever God led them, it was His intent to be present among them in order to bless them.

You've probably heard the term Deism, or Deist. It's the belief in the existence of a supreme being, specifically of a creator, but one who does not intervene in the universe. It's really very popular. If you're aware of it, you'll see it promoted in some popular TV shows and movies.

God, the God of the Bible, our God, *does* 'intervene.' History is unfolding just as He has written it in advance. We are headed toward the creation of new heavens and a new earth.

Exo 20:25 And if you make Me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stone; for if you use your tool on it, you have profaned it.

God was OK with a simple earthen altar. Sun-dried bricks or packed earth were sufficient building materials.

If the Israelites chose to use stone instead, it must not be hewn, or engraved, in any way.

That goes against our grain. We automatically think we must do more for God. While that can be the case in some things, it was definitely not the case regarding the altar.

If we remember that the altar is a place of grace, it's easy to understand why God gave this prohibition. Any craftsmanship on the part of the offerer would take away from the altar communicating grace.

Using hewn stones, then carving on them, would add human work to God's grace. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Exo 20:26 Nor shall you go up by steps to My altar, that your nakedness may not be exposed on it.'

As one commentator put it: "Man could contribute nothing... either by the tools of personal effort or the steps of human achievement."

Another wrote: "[The use of tools] would corrupt the whole plan of redemption by blood."

Pagan worshippers built their altars very high, partly through pride and partly in the belief that their gods might hear them better. Many such altars had gods engraved on them.

The Israelite altar would look puny and pathetic compared to the altars of the other 'gods.' That was part of what God was revealing about Himself. He would come as a servant, humble, born in a manger, not having anything outwardly that would commend us to Him. He would die on the Cross as if He were a heinous criminal, then be buried in a borrowed tomb. It all lacked grandeur; but it preaches grace.

“That your nakedness may not be exposed” excluded plumbers from going up the steps. (Just kidding!).

Nakedness, or near-nakedness, were common in Egypt. According to one researcher, “The ancient Egyptians wore [a] minimum of clothing.”

Apparently, underwear was not a popular item. Later in Exodus we'll see the garments of the priests will include a type of underwear to cover their nakedness.

The mention of nakedness takes our minds back to the Garden of Eden. Before they sinned, Adam and Eve were naked and unashamed before each other and in the sight of God.

After they sinned - they were naked and ashamed. As we said earlier, God covered their nakedness with animal skins.

The altar was the place that reminded the Israelites of original sin and the coming of God to be their Substitute and Savior.

It was the place that represented them being graciously clothed in God's righteous robe.

It would therefore ruin the illustration to show any nakedness at the altar.

If you are counting on being a good person, having done more good than bad, in order to be admitted into Heaven when you die - take a long look at the altar. Men and women are redeemed by blood. Not by the blood of lambs, but by the blood of the Lamb of God - Jesus. All the animal sacrifices until His death on the Cross were pointing to Him dying once-for-all to pay in full the penalty we owed for sin. As evangelists say, "He came to pay a debt He did not owe, because we owed a debt we could not pay."

Salvation is being offered to you; it's a gift. But you must receive it by faith, calling upon the Lord and turning from your sin.

## #2 If You Want To Worship God, You Have An Altar

The New Testament Book of Hebrews was written to Hebrew Christians suffering persecution for their faith in Jesus. All they had to do to avoid persecution was return to the rites and rituals of the Temple; rituals like bringing burnt offerings and peace offerings to the altar of the Temple in Jerusalem.

The writer essentially told them, "No can do." By His life, death, and resurrection, Jesus has fulfilled and ended those things. They were a shadow pointing to His coming. To return to them is to deny or despise what Jesus has done.

With regard to the altar, the writer proclaims, “We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat” (Hebrews 13:10).

The writer was using the “altar” to represent the whole Jewish system of worship, centered at the Temple. “We” - meaning Christians - have an “altar” that is not the one in the Temple.

We have a superior, spiritual altar in the Person and work of Jesus.

“Those who serve the Tabernacle” were those urging, even persecuting, the Hebrew Christians to return to things like animal sacrifices. In Jesus, we have spiritual blessings and benefits that far surpass the “eat[ing]” of peace offerings made on the altar.

Outwardly it seems we have no altar. We have no material altar, that is. The Jewish Temple in Jerusalem was the place God “record[ed] His name and [came] to us.” It was His prescribed place of worship.

It hasn’t existed since it was destroyed in 70AD by Titus and the Roman Legions.

But we do have an altar - a far superior spiritual altar - and it’s Jesus.

Our altar isn’t just the Cross on which Jesus died. It’s *everything* about Him - His life, His Cross, His death and burial, His resurrection, His ascension, His Second Coming, etc., etc.

You might say that the entire New Covenant is our altar.

Alexander MacLaren said: “[the writer] exalts the purely spiritual worship of Christianity as not only possessed of all which the rituals round about it presented, but as being high above them even in regard to that which seemed their special prerogative.”

We no longer come to the altar with burnt offerings and peace offerings. But as I mentioned earlier, we do present ourselves living sacrifices.

- Just as the burnt offering was totally consumed, we can ask ourselves if we are totally consumed with the pursuit of God in our lives.
- Just as the fellowship offering was shared, we can be encouraged to share more of our time, talents, and treasure with God, and among His people in the church, and out among nonbelievers by sharing the Gospel as we have opportunity.

Let’s “leave it all on the altar...” “Give 110%...” “And bring our Jesus-game.”