

The New Time and Place
An Exegesis of Hebrews 13:10-16

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“We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat. The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise--the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased” (Hebrews 13:10-16, NIV).

I. Introduction

The writer of Hebrews dispels any myths that may have persisted in the minds of his first readers when he presents the true nature of Christian sacrifice in this passage. Some in his audience may have thought the Christian way was impoverished; lacking the sacred sacrifices that were central acts to religion in the ancient world. Instead they are shown the sacrifice of Christ as the antitype of the sacrifice offered on the great Day of Atonement (Bruce, 378). Christ is a better sacrifice not only because the spiritual antitype is superior to the material type, but also because those who enter the now accessible heavenly sanctuary do so “by Jesus’ blood” (Hebrews 10:19). The sacrifice that became their perfect sin offering is now permanently available to each as a source of spiritual nourishment and refreshment as they feed on Him in their hearts by faith.

To this an early reader may ask if there are no further sacrifices to make or altars for Christians to serve at; certainly the old order had changed. As the skilled writer of Hebrews recapitulates his arguments and exhorts his hearers to ‘go forth and do’ in this passage, he describes the new time and place for the altar, he points to the new time and place for the atonement and a new time and place to conduct sacrifice.

Through this paper, this writer will briefly describe each of these three topics as this passage of scripture is examined. These topics will be discussed in regard to the physical and spiritual significance of time and place in the Old Testament event as well as the author's meaning of time and place as it relates to his original audience. Finally in the conclusion, parallels will be made to the present body of believers and what this text continues to say to us regarding these times and places.

II. The Time and Place of the Altar

"10 We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat. ... 15 Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise--the fruit of lips that confess his name. 16 And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased" (Hebrews 13:10, 15-16).

The act of "eating from the altar" was a figurative expression regarding those who took part in sacrificial services of this time. The act of eating from the altar in Jerusalem gave those who participated in the meal a share in what had transpired at the altar (1 Corinthians 9:13, 10:18). Therefore the opening statement "We have an altar" is a literal statement that is set in contrast with "those who minister at the tabernacle." The writer of Hebrews is displaying a difference here between 'us' and 'them' that is imperative for his hearers to comprehend. Several scholarly sources promote the phrase "We have an altar" as a creedal statement which clearly highlights its importance to the original hearer (Lane, 539 and Bruce, 379).

The altar was critically important as a place that sacrifices were brought in the tabernacle, but it was considerably more than that in the mind of this writer's original audience. As Richard Nelson explains:

Human space consisted of the land from which Israel brought offerings and the temple courts. God's sacred space consisted of the temple building itself and heaven. At the intersection of the two was the altar. The altar was thus a marginal area, an area of overlap between the sphere of the human and the sphere of the divine (Nelson, 61).

The need for his audience to turn away from a place of this significance to a new place where God meets man is of critical importance to this speaker. In fact the opening statement 'we' reflects an extending of duties past that of what was available to only the priests at the temple. The writer is clearly making a case for the consecration of a new covenant with God not through cultic meals received by only a select few at the altar, but rather through the sacrifice of Jesus. The altar is now open to all who know Him (Hebrews 9:14, 10:10, 14:13, 12). The altar that 'we' have in this context becomes the place of Jesus' sacrifice. An altar that had a visible apparatus in the form of the cross and reads consistently with the words of Jesus as found in John 12:32-33, "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die. This confirmation of Isaiah's Old Testament prophesy concerning the Messiah (Isaiah 52:13) confirms both the time and place of the altar construction to which the writer of Hebrews is directing all Christians to come to in order to accept the benefits that are now eternally acceptable to them.

To the accusation that Christians have no altar, the writer of Hebrews replies that there is an altar and it is far better than the altar the Jews possessed under the Levitical order. The Christian altar was the sacrifice of Christ which is perpetually available to all to share in Him. In much the same way that the Levitical priests were entitled to eat the "bread of presence" that had been laid out before the Lord and apportioned specifically for the priest (Leviticus 7:5-6, Numbers 18:9-20). Now Jesus as the altar was able to do something that the priest with their "Bread of Presence" could not do in the observance of the cultic, inadequate and now obsolete arrangements of the Old Testament and that was to "draw all men to myself." In this personal way the original hearers were compelled to now see Jesus as the place where the human and divine overlap.

In one aspect, the place of the altar is important to the writer of Hebrews as he communicates the expansion of its benefits as being available to all Christians. In a second and equally important aspect, time plays a role as well in the development of this expansion. While others must go before a physical altar to receive benefit, this new altar is one that is accessible at any time intercession is needed. Verses 15 and 16 further contribute to the value of the readily available altar that resides through faith in the work of Christ on the cross. As discussed earlier, the altar was a place to bring sacrifice before God and the author of Hebrews makes it plain that it is still important that sacrifices are made and are brought to this new altar. While continuing sacrifice will be covered in greater detail later in this paper, it is vital to note the writer's initial thrust in widening the availability of the altar to all people at all times. This becomes crucial to his explanation of the benefits that can be received from such an "open door" policy regarding ready access to the altar that resides in the church of the new covenant.

III. The Time and Place of Atonement

“The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood” (Hebrews 13:11-12).

The Day of Atonement under the old covenant served as a reminder that the daily, weekly and monthly sacrifices made at the altar of burnt offering were not sufficient to atone for sin. Even at the altar of burnt offering, the worshipper stood off at a distance not able to approach the holy presence of God who was present in the space between the cherubim in the holy of holies. On this day once a year, atoning blood was brought into the holy of holies by the high priest who acted as representative of the people. This annual repetition of sacrifices served as a reminder that perfect atonement had not yet been provided.

Jesus, previously described in Hebrews as “the great high priest” (Hebrews 9-10), utilized His own blood to provide eternal redemption for His people (9:12). He, in fact, has now entered heaven through a “new and living way” (9:7) where He now makes intercession for His people. These thoughts of time and place could have been fresh in the minds of the original recipients of this letter as they felt the impact of Hebrews 13:11-12. They would have been fully aware of the flesh burnt outside the camp of Israel on the 10th day of the 7th month each year on the Day of Atonement. In fact, Hebrews 13:11 re-contextualize Leviticus 16:27 in the majority of its content and syntax (DeSilva, Perseverance, 500). If there were Jews, Christian Jews or Christian Gentiles familiar with this Old Testament text they would certainly have been brought to attention as verse 12 described the new covenant time and place for this event to occur.

In the eyes of the author of Hebrews, “the execution of Jesus outside the city gate represents the definitive sin of offering of the Day of Atonement” (Lane, 542). In the Greek context, the phrases “outside the gate” and “he suffered death” would have highlighted an element of shame that is not found in the verb itself. The fact that Jesus offered Himself as a sacrifice after being rejected and cast out of the city by His people adds weight to His status as the Lamb of God and fulfills prophetic traditions that Judaism believed regarding work of the Messiah. Consider this section of Isaiah 53:

“He was assigned a grave with the wicked and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand. After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors” (Isaiah 53:9-12).

The writer of Hebrews encapsulates the theology of his earlier writing (8-10) in verse 12 by describing Jesus as both the high priest and the sacrifice. Certainly the Jewish high priest could have never managed such a feat on behalf of the people; he would have had neither the time nor the place to complete any of these acts in the way that Jesus was able to fulfill them. In these two verses, the original reader was able to reflect on the old time and place of the Day of Atonement and share with his reader the new time and new place of atonement as it has been delivered by the new and now only high priest, sacrifice and mediator, Jesus the Christ.

The limiting of the time and place of atonement to a one time occurrence outside of the city becomes an expansion of the freedom of the believer and should result in great joy. The freedom experienced by the community to be released from the daily, weekly, monthly and yearly burden that the sacrificial system placed on them was only a fraction of the burden that was lifted. Now that the act of atonement had been completed, the people had been made “holy through His own blood” (Hebrews 13:12). The Greek word used here for Holy (Hagiazo) means to sanctify, to set apart for God and also has a connotation of active dedication and service to God or the act of regarding or honoring as holy (Brown, 225).

This is an important connotation to keep in mind as the writer of Hebrews now begins to turn his discussion to elicit the response of the listeners who now have been instructed in the benefits of what God has done for them. Through the expansion of the availability of the altar which is now available to all who know Jesus and is available at anytime it is needed, the completion of atonement for God’s people in a once for all event that purifies and readies them for the service that is now due a God who would be so loyal and faithful to His people. Certainly the favor of God has come at a great cost to Him and to show an appropriate response of

gratitude was something that was necessary in the culture of the first readers of this letter or hearers of this sermon. It is to this task that the writer of Hebrews now turns.

III. The Time and Place of Sacrifice

“Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise--the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased” (Hebrews 13:13-16).

The appeal for the original readers to “go to him outside the camp” of Judaism is clear here and the original reader is encouraged to seek Christ where he is, even if this means facing disapproval from others. The Jews held that the way Christ died proved Him to be accursed (Deuteronomy 21:23, Galatians 3:13). The writer of Hebrews is then encouraging his readers they must be ready to stand with Christ who bore that curse for them.

Verse 14 reinforces the appeal to go to Jesus through the letting go of earthly concerns such as the faulty security that is set forth in an earthly city as compared to the great promise of an abiding city that is yet to come. The sacrifice found here is one of ‘temporal security’ or seeking ‘earthly comfort.’ The time and place to find Christ is now and the time and place that we are to be in the city is clearly ‘yet to come.’

Next we turn to verses 15 and 16 that make plain to the original listener the rhetorical thunder clap that this discussion has been leading them to. There are further needs for sacrifices to be made. The altar that is now present at all times in all places to all who know Jesus is intended to be utilized to offer sacrifices to Him. In fact, we have been made pure and holy through the blood of our high priest, just so that we can make such sacrificial offerings in the presence of God. The emphatic “through Him” that verse 15 begins with reminds the original reader it is through Jesus and not the Jewish priests That people “offer” to God acceptable sacrifices. The writer chose the Greek word *anaphero* here for “offer;” this is a technical term

that related to the offering of animals for sacrifice (Goodrick, 375). It is of interest that this author uses this term to promote the offering of spiritual sacrifices. Such a relationship is necessary to see this writer's intention for his audience to value these spiritual sacrifices as an important response to any concern they had for repaying their debt of gratitude to God.

The offering of continual praise would also have stood out to the original audience as the Jewish sacrifices were made only at specific times. For Christians, however, praise was to go up all the time. This encouragement is also bolstered in this verse through the use of a quote from Hosea 14:2, "the fruit of the lips that confess His name." This demonstrated to the original readers that this writer was not without knowledge of Jewish custom or of God's word.

In the concluding verse of this study, the author contributes two final examples of sacrifices that Christians can offer. "To do good" is general in nature, but it was understood in Jewish custom to mean general acts of 'good deeds' in the community. And secondly "to share with others" which had a more specific meaning (*koinonia*) that meant sharing with each other such things as money, goods and the intangibles of "family fellowship." Even though Christians needed no animals for sacrifice, they were to respond to what Christ had done for them through offering praise, good deeds and works of love and charity. This meant the time of sacrifice was continual as others have need and the place of this sacrifice was wherever that need existed among them.

IV. Ancient Application

The writer of Hebrews is certainly guiding his readers "through a ritual transformation to a new normal state" (DeSilva, *Perseverance*, 503). This transition entails the breaking down of the person's original state and then creating a new state of being for the individual. The old covenant certainly had a time and place of importance. However, the new covenant was now at

hand and held far greater benefits for God's people to enjoy. Unlimited access to the altar, purity and honor through Jesus' atoning work and even assurance of a life to come all free to those who were willing to "leave the city" and follow Jesus.

With a God this great and giving, these readers would have desired to thank God and honor Him as their benefactor. Because of His work they could praise of their lips and use their possessions to offer sacrifices of thanksgiving at the altar in God's presence as often as they wished. This pastor was in fact "changing service times." He was letting God's people know the new times and new places they were to show up for these new services. It was a transition from the old to the new and he was assisting God's people to find their way.

V. Modern Conclusion: *Utilizing the Historical Background and Rhetorical style of Hebrews 13:10-16 in offering Biblical instruction*

On June 5, 2005, I was asked to bring a Sunday School lesson in our church (Genoa Baptist). The class members had an average age of sixty five to seventy and I was filling in for our Pastor of Pastoral Care who has been at the church for twenty five years; so I was not sure what types of responses I would get from my brief outline.

I did not know if I would be able to get input from the class or the direction this scripture study would take. My goal was to utilize the information gleaned from the 'original application' of this text from its writer to his audience as a means of opening a discussion of what this means to its modern readers, our class. Further, I hoped to stay true to the rhetorical style found within this text and see if the issues of honor, purity and patronage would be responded to as motivating factors in our present culture.

As an opening meditation for the class, I read Isaiah 53 and offered prayer thanking God for the provision of His Son. Then I handed out the following outline to the class.

Hebrews 13:10-16

A. Do we have an altar?

10 We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat.

B. What sets us apart; makes us special?

11 The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp.

12 And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood.

C. What is our response?

13 Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore.

14 For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.

15 Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise--the fruit of lips that confess his name.

16 And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

I began by explaining the importance of the altar as it stood in the Jewish temple; the ancient understanding of altars as being places of sacrifice to God as in the binding of Isaac. I then asked the class if we have an altar in the church. I was overjoyed that one man spoke up and said that the altar is “anywhere that we come to Jesus.” I assured him this was a tremendous answer and asked others to share where their altar is. One man said his was in his sunroom, a woman said in her car before she goes into work and another lady shared she likes to pray looking up through her skylight or walking on a beach in the evening. I was ecstatic; “yes” I replied “these are all different places and different times, now imagine what it would be like to be unable to go before the altar. In fact, even the high priest could only go at specific times on specific days.” Heads nodded; my joy continued.

I began the discussion of the second point by explaining what the Day of Atonement meant to the Jewish people and how it signified the limited nature of all the other sacrifices that were made for sin. It was a big industry that offered only temporary and limited help. A very

eager woman spoke up and also pointed out how disengaged the process became from the actual people or their sins. “There was no relationship between the animal and the person like we have with Jesus.” I agreed, yes it was impersonal and ineffective much the same way some in our society feel that works can save them. In this way I explained that those that had studied the Torah must have been amazed to hear all of this work had been done for them and they had no need to work to be “holy” any longer. Jesus accomplished this work once and for all, setting us forever free from necessitating any work on our part to make us holy or set us apart as God’s people. All we need to do is accept the work of our high priest, Jesus.

Finally I asked what our response is to these gifts that God has poured out for us. He has given us unlimited availability to His presence at anytime and any place through the gift of His Son and through this gift He has provided us with purity and honor that are not tied to our own timely acts, but rather the continuing work of our Savior, Jesus.

At this point things were going well enough that I decided to “kick up the Rhetorical style” of my presentation to match that of what I feel the spirit of the passage to be. I continued something like this. The writer of Hebrews sends us out away from the “city” as we leave the limited altars and inability of our own works to bring us to God and rely on His gift alone, His Son. There is even more for us, another city which we will live in. I asked, “Does anyone know about this city?” A man spoke up, “yes, we will be with Jesus in the place He is preparing for us.” Oh boy was this exciting.

I recapitulated the benefits thus far of God’s promises in these verses. Our constant ability to come to God, being clothed in his righteousness and glory and further being promised an enduring city that is to come, if we only go to Jesus “outside the city.” I was asked about works in the last two verses; I considered some words recently read from a book on evangelism,

“like many of the unchurched Patty did not see salvation as a free gift from God and had a human centered works response” (Rainer, 130). I knew the writer of Hebrews was not saying this and this was an important teaching moment. I said a quick prayer and God brought the following story to me; it made the rhetorical argument complete.

My grandfather always taught me to repay my debts, to be truly thankful to those that assist you in life and I have always tried to do this. Last week my boss at work did something very nice for me, something that I cannot think of a way to repay him for. In fact over the last two years as I have been in school, he has been an encouragement to me and has provided ongoing support to me, my studies and my family. I looked at him last week and said, “Sean, you have done so much for me, I am afraid I could never repay you.” He looked at me and said, “Chris, you are a good worker and employee and that’s enough; I am just glad you are happy.”

This is the sacrifice of praise and doing good to others. We can never be more than God’s workers, we can never match God’s gifts in size and scope, we can only let Him know we appreciate him by saying “thank you” and these two sacrifices are our way of doing that.

I saw some tears as I made this closing statement and we went to a short time of prayer. I was overjoyed at the feedback I received regarding this endeavor. I was internally reminded of a quote from Dr. George Hunter’s book in a chapter titled *Apostolic ministry through an empowered laity*, “The obligation of spreading the faith is imposed on every disciple of Christ, according to his ability” (Hunter, 114). Certainly the laity has been empowered by the work of Christ.

Much like the original readers, there is still an understanding of purity, honor and patronage that compel people to respond to everything that God has done for us. Certainly now is the time and place to be truly thankful for all that our God has done.

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