

International Sunday School Lesson
Study Notes
November 9, 2014

Lesson Text: Ezekiel 43:13-21
Lesson Title: The Altar, a Sign of Hope

Introduction

The young prophet-priest Ezekiel was among the second group of Israelites carried away from Jerusalem into Babylonian captivity in 597 B.C. From his captivity home in "*Telabib, that dwelt by the river of Chebar...*" (Ezekiel 3:15) Ezekiel ministered to the captive Jews in Babylon. Although Ezekiel was a priest, he was unable to perform his priestly duties since he was away from the temple and the altar. However, Ezekiel was a God-called prophet and he did perform the duties of a prophet to the people in captivity. While the false prophets were telling the people that God was going to destroy Babylon and their captivity would be short, Ezekiel told them that God was going to destroy Jerusalem and the captivity would be seventy years as Jeremiah had prophesied.

Ezekiel also prophesied that there would be a future time of restoration for the people and the return of God's glory in the temple. That restoration of the temple and the return of God's glory to the temple is the focus of Ezekiel 40-48. The prophecies given in the final eight chapters of Ezekiel was not fulfilled when the Jews returned to Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity. Therefore, the events in Ezekiel 40-48 will be fulfilled in the future when Jesus returns to earth to reign during the millennial kingdom.

In Ezekiel 40-48, the prophet gives over 300 precise measurements of the temple using over 30 unique words that are architectural terms, such as "posts of the door, the wall of the building, windows," etc. Ezekiel received this information on the millennial temple in the year 573 BC in the form of a vision where he was personally given a tour of the temple by "*a man, whose appearance was like the appearance of brass*" (Ezekiel 40:1-3). Ezekiel was to pay close attention to everything his heavenly guide told him because he would have to tell everything he saw and heard to the captives in Babylon (Ezekiel 40:4). What Ezekiel saw and heard was needed by the Jews in Ezekiel's day and by believers today if we are to understand God's plan for the future. Hope still comes by knowing and understanding God's Word.

In Ezekiel 43:1-12, the Lord gave Ezekiel God's requirements for His temple to be respected. God wanted His people to repent and separate themselves from anything and everything that would defile His holy temple. Beginning in verse 13, Ezekiel's attention is directed toward the inner court of the temple where the altar of sacrifice is placed in the center of the court. The altar was a vital

part of the Old Testament system of worship. Noah, Abraham, Jacob and many other Old Testament characters are known for building altars and sacrificing upon them. When the children of Israel were in the wilderness headed for the Promised Land, God gave specific instructions for an altar on which to offer burnt offerings to the Lord (Exodus 27:1-8). A much larger altar was built to be used in the first temple (2 Chronicles 4:1).

As you read the Old Testament there are several occasions where the altar of the Lord was desecrated, cleansed, and rebuilt and of course destroyed when Jerusalem fell in 586 B.C. According to Ezra 3:1-3, the people “*buildded the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings thereon*” when they returned from Babylonian captivity. The altar Ezekiel describes in our lesson text today is not the one rebuilt in Ezra 3, but rather a new altar that will be built in the new temple in the millennial kingdom.

When the millennial temple is discussed, especially the altar, the question is often asked, “Since Jesus has died for the sins of the world, fulfilled the law, and brought in the New Covenant, why would believing Jews want to go back under the Old Covenant of sacrifices on the altar? What need is there to go back to animal sacrifices when Jesus has made one perfect offering for all time” (Ezekiel 45:15-25; Hebrews 9:12; 10:18). That is a good question and one of the major arguments used against taking Ezekiel 40-48 literally. But if we understand the role of the sacrifices under the Old Covenant, it will help us see their significance in the millennial temple. Remember, the sacrifices under the Old Covenant on the altar were temporary and pointed to the perfect and final sacrifice to come, the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ.

The sacrifices on the altar in the millennial temple certainly raises questions, especially from those who do not take the Bible literally. Even when the Bible is interpreted literally, God still requires us to use common sense. The sacrifices that will be made upon the altar in the millennial kingdom will be for the purpose of looking back to the death of Christ on the cross just as the Lord’s Supper today looks back on the death of Christ. The restoration of the altar and the sacrifices offered will reveal again how God redeemed His people.

The Measurements of the Altar (Ezekiel 43:13-17)

Verse 13a

“And these are the measures of the altar after the cubits: The cubit is a cubit and an hand breadth; even the bottom shall be a cubit, and the breadth a cubit, and the border thereof by the edge thereof round about shall be a span.”

“And these are the measures of the altar after the cubits” means Ezekiel is giving us the dimensions or measurements of the altar. The question is, “Why?” The obvious answer is that doing things the way God wants them is extremely

important, especially in regard to access to God and sacrifice. Doing things God's way is important in everything we do. If you don't believe that, ask Noah (Genesis 6:22; 7:5). But there is something very simple in these measurements and specifications that we should not miss. All of "these measurements" when considered as a whole speaks of *strength* and *stability*. The "altar" is where access to God begins and where the weight of the sacrifice lays. So, don't allow this text to just be about feet, inches and height, although that is important. This is about an access to God that will bear the load and serve the purpose for which God intended.

The dimensions of the "altar" of burnt offering is given in "cubits" and "spans." The "cubit" is the distance between the elbow and the tip of one's middle finger, or about 18 inches. Add a "hand breadth" to that and you would add about three inches for a total of 21 inches.

The "bottom" of the altar was "a cubit" or 21 inches. The "breadth" was also "a cubit" or 21 inches. The "border by the edge" was to be a "span." A "span" is the width of an opened hand from the tip of the thumb to the tip of the little finger, or about 9 inches. The "border" was the place where the priests stood to walk around the altar. It was a "span" or about 9 inches which would be half the width of a "cubit." This width kept the priests from slipping while ministering and keep the blood from running onto the pavement below.

Verse 13b-14

"...and this shall be the higher place of the altar. And from the bottom upon the ground even to the lower settle shall be two cubits, and the breadth one cubit; and from the lesser settle even to the greater settle shall be four cubits, and the breadth one cubit."

"And this shall be the higher place of the altar" means Ezekiel is giving us the measurements for the section of the altar above the base. The "lower settle" is the section above the base. "From the bottom upon the ground even to the lower settle shall be two cubits" or about 3 feet, 6 inches. Remember, Ezekiel "cubit" (18 inches) has a "hand breadth" (3 inches) added to it. The "breadth" was "one cubit" or 21 inches, that is, two cubits high and one cubit broad.

"And from the lesser settle," or smaller ledge, "to the greater settle," or larger ledge of the altar, shall be four cubits, and, the breadth one cubit." The lowest "settle" or ledge is called the "lesser," not in quantity, but in height, it being but two cubits high from the ground. The "greater settle" or ledge was "four cubits" from that, and "one cubit" broad, for the priests to walk on round about, for a total of six cubits from the bottom.

Verse 15

“So the altar shall be four cubits; and from the altar and upward shall be four horns.”

The “altar” here is referring to the top part of the altar where the “four horns” were located. The top part of the “altar” was “four cubits.” “Four cubits” is about 84 inches or 7 feet. On top of the altar “shall be four horns.” The “four horns” were located at the four corners of the altar. It is not entirely clear what the “four horns” were for. Here are a few suggestions. First, they may have been simply for decorative purposes though that seems unlikely. Second, they may have been used for the practical purpose of tying down animals. Third, the horns may have been symbolic, representing the horns of the animals that were slain there. Fourth, since the altar was the place of salvation, the horns could represent safety and salvation. The Bible tells us that people held on to the horns of the altar for safety. When accused criminals were pursued by justice, they sometimes came to the altar and grabbed its horns for protection (1 Kings 1:50, 51; 2:28).

Whatever the horns symbolized, they must have been important, because the priests sprinkled the blood of their sacrifices on them (Exodus 29:12). Furthermore, the height of the altar and the horns standing taller only magnified the *strength* and *stability* of the altar.

Verse 16

“And the altar shall be twelve cubits long, twelve broad, square in the four squares thereof.”

The length of “the altar,” which ran from east to west, was “twelve cubits” or 21 feet. The breadth, which ran from north to south, was the same, “twelve cubits” or 21 feet. That means it was foursquare, 21 x 21 for a total of 441 square feet.

While we must be careful not to spiritualize measurements, here we can safely say that the foursquare altar speaks of Christ our altar, our sacrifice. This foursquare altar speaks of the largeness of Christ's sacrifice, the perfection of it, and its stability and permanency, to take away the sin, of his people.

Verse 17

“And the settle shall be fourteen cubits long and fourteen broad in the four squares thereof; and the border about it shall be half a cubit; and the bottom thereof shall be a cubit about; and his stairs shall look toward the east.”

It is clear from verse 14 that the altar consisted of a “bottom” section on the “ground” and an “upper” section that rested on the “bottom” section. These were called the “lower settle” and the “greater settle.” Because of the height of the altar, 19 feet, 3 inches, there will need to be “stairs” or steps for the priest

to walk up and minister at the altar. These “stairs” or steps are different from the tabernacle in the wilderness and the first temple. According to Exodus 20:4-6, steps were prohibited at the altar for prevention of indecent exposure. Later in Exodus 28:42-43, the priests were required to wear undergarments which would eliminate this problem. Also, the “stairs” at Ezekiel’s new altar were to face “east.” That means the priests would be facing west as they walk up to minister. While these differences may or may not have significance, they are different with Ezekiel’s measurements.

The Ordinances of the Altar (Ezekiel 43:18-21)

Verse 18

“And he said unto me, Son of man, thus saith the Lord GOD; These are the ordinances of the altar in the day when they shall make it, to offer burnt offerings thereon, and to sprinkle blood thereon.”

“And he said unto me” means the voice of God is still speaking to Ezekiel. The title, “Lord GOD” speaks of God’s sovereignty and authority in what is being said. The Lord calls Ezekiel “Son of man.” It was the name by which the Lord called Ezekiel throughout this prophesy. Having given Ezekiel the measurements of the altar, the Lord GOD now gives him the “ordinances” or the regulations concerning the use of the altar.

“To offer burnt offerings thereon, and to sprinkle blood thereon” indicates the directions God is now giving to Ezekiel does not concern measurements, but rather the sacrifices to be offered upon the altar. “Burnt offerings” were to be offered upon the altar in the millennial temple.

The Hebrew word for “burnt offering” actually means to “ascend.” It literally means to “go up in smoke.” The smoke from the sacrifice ascended to God, “a sweet savour unto to the LORD” (Leviticus 1:9). Technically, any offering burned over an altar was a “burnt offering,” but in more specific terms, a “burnt offering” was the complete destruction of the animal (except for the hide) in an effort to renew the relationship between Holy God and sinful man. With the development of the law, God gave the Israelites specific instructions as to the types of burnt offerings and what they symbolized.

The fulfillment of the “burnt offering” is in Jesus’ sacrifice of himself on the cross. His physical life was completely consumed, He ascended to God, and His covering (that is, His garment) was distributed to those who officiated over His sacrifice (Matthew 27:35). But most importantly, His sacrifice, once for all time, atoned for our sins and restored our relationship with God.

“And to sprinkle blood thereon” again indicates the purpose for which the altar was to be used. God always required a “blood” sacrifice (Leviticus 17:11). In

other words, it is only the shedding of blood that set sinners free from the consequences of sin. While the blood of animal sacrifices were temporary and only atoned for sin for a short time, the blood of Jesus Christ atoned for sin once for all (Hebrews 9:11-18). Of course, the Israelites in Ezekiel's day did not know of Jesus, or how He would bleed and die for their sins, but they did know that a Messiah was coming and the words spoken by Ezekiel here would one day point back to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Verse 19

“And thou shalt give to the priests the Levites that be of the seed of Zadok, which approach unto me, to minister unto me, saith the Lord GOD, a young bullock for a sin offering.”

Each of the next three verses begin with “thou shalt.” This means that Ezekiel is to take part in the consecration ceremony. Those who would assist Ezekiel in the altar consecration were “the Levites,” more specifically, those who were “of the seed of Zadok.” “It was this ‘Zadok’ that was put in the place of Abiathar, by Solomon in 1 Kings 2:35, in whose family the priesthood had continued ever since.” (Adam Clarke's Commentary.) “Zadok,” who had passed away long before Ezekiel's day was a descendant of Aaron and served as a priest under King David (2 Samuel 8:17).

The importance of the past priests being connected to Ezekiel's vision of a new temple, altar, and a sin offering being offered is that there is hope for the future for Israel. Everything did not end in Babylon! There will be sacrifice for sin! This “young bullock” that Ezekiel is told to offer is symbolic of Christ our sacrifice. Christ, like the “young bullock” is strong and able to bear the load of man's sin. Just as the “young bullock” became a sin offering for the altar in Ezekiel's day, the Lord Jesus became our sin offering and the offering for the world.

Remember, Ezekiel is a prophet-priest but his priestly duties were thought to be gone forever when he was deported to Babylonian captivity. What a joy it must have been to this young prophet-priest to fulfill priestly duties in a much greater temple.

Verse 20

“And thou shalt take of the blood thereof, and put it on the four horns of it, and on the four corners of the settle, and upon the border round about: thus shalt thou cleanse and purge it.”

The “blood” from the young bullock is to be taken and placed “on the four horns” of altar and “on the four corners of the settle” (ledge) and “upon the border round about.” The “blood” placed on these areas symbolize cleansing

and purification for the area where the priests walked and performed their ministry. Placing the blood on these different areas, represents the nature of the saving ministry of Jesus Christ and the commission of spreading the message of Christ for every believer. Believers are to hold forth the blood of Christ, and the blessings of grace through it, as redemption, peace, pardon, righteousness, and life.

“Thus shalt thou cleanse and purge it” is speaking of the altar. Thus, Christ, though without sin, and needed no cleansing and purging for himself, yet was sanctified by his own blood; that he might sanctify his people, and perfect by his sacrifice them that were sanctified. Christ said, *“And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth”* (John 17:19).

Verse 21

“Thou shalt take the bullock also of the sin offering, and he shall burn it in the appointed place of the house, without the sanctuary.”

Here, God instructs Ezekiel to take “the bullock” that is being offered for “the sin offering” and “he” (the sons of Zadok) should take it from Ezekiel and “burn it in the appointed place of the house, without the sanctuary.” This “offering” was to be burnt in the proper place. The priests would know exactly where to burn this offering (Exodus 29:14).

As we read these instructions to Ezekiel for the consecration of the altar, we think of our sacrifice for sin, the Lord Jesus Christ. The Hebrew writer said, “For the bodies of those beasts, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned without the camp. Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate. Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach” (Hebrews 13:11-13).

Conclusion

As we read and study this lesson we must keep in mind that this was all a vision to Ezekiel. He did not actually do all the measuring and offering of sacrifice written in the text. But what he saw in vision and the words spoken to him by the Lord will literally come to pass in the future millennial kingdom.

All these “cubits” and “spans” and “lower settle” and “greater settle” may be a bit challenging for us today. But for Ezekiel, the details and instructions given to him by God brought renewed hope. To know that there would one day in the future again be a temple and a place to offer sacrifice for sin was the greatest and most encouraging news Ezekiel and the captives could hear.

But what about us? Well, we have good news also. The Bible says, “*We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle*” (Hebrews 13:10). Our “altar” is the sacrifice of Jesus Christ Himself, our sign of hope both now and forever more!

Amen.