

A Communion Message by Jay Wegter

We have an Altar, Hebrews 13:10

Christ our ‘Altar’ is our meeting place with God.

The title of this message: “We Have an Altar,” is taken from Hebrews 13:10, “We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat.” What the author of Hebrews is saying is that the Lord Jesus Christ is our altar, our meeting place with God. He is our place of acceptance, our place of communion. ‘Communion’ meaning intimate fellowship, interchange, giving and receiving, agreement, concord.ⁱ John Owen states, “The altar which we now have is Christ alone and His sacrifice, for He was priest, altar, and sacrifice, all in Himself.” “[What the writer of Hebrews] intends by the altar which we have, namely, that it is Jesus, who to sanctify His people with His blood, which was to be done at or on the altar, ‘suffered outside the gate’” (vs. 12).ⁱⁱ

We bring nothing to this altar but faith, adoration, love, a needy heart, the need for cleansing, and comfort. God’s promises and assurances are freshly testified to us as we partake of the elements of communion. God manifests Himself there to our consciences, to our minds, and hearts. This present author often tells his students at The Master’s University, “when you partake of the Lord’s table, you ought to be thinking along these lines, ‘Heavenly Father, I am so grateful that real objective justice has been done regarding my personal sins. For you have dealt with my transgressions by the sacrifice of your Son that I might have an endless love relationship with you.’” This theme ought to be one of the meditations when you take communion, for the giving of Christ is the entire basis of our fellowship with the Father and the Son and with believers:

What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life—and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us—what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ (1 Jn 1:1-3).

Cain’s altar of smoldering vegetables is a type of man’s self-righteousness.

We still carry a lower nature, the remnants of an Adamic nature. The apostle Paul says about that Adamic nature, “no good thing dwells in my flesh” (Rom 7:18). But there’s something surprising about that Adamic nature, it possesses a religious element. It is not irreligious. This religious element is drawn to legal working. Thus, there is an aspect of our lower nature that is antagonistic to the grace of God. We could say that our flesh is ‘religiously attracted’ to Cain’s altar (Cain’s offering is described in Genesis 4:2-5). That altar is one of self-effort, fleshly merit, and “will worship.” Will worship meaning, “This is what I’m going to do for God in order to have His favor.” (See Jude 11).

The altar of Cain embraces the ‘narcissistic dream’ born of self-love that the natural man by his pursuit of excellence can generate acceptance with God. But fallen man cannot commend himself to God. He is defiled clay. He cannot produce a sweet aroma unto God. He is unable to do

anything of himself to bring honor to God's Name and Kingdom, and there's an important reason why. Because we are totally depraved (every faculty of body and soul being tainted by sin), for our works to be acceptable, they must be *in Christ*, must be *of Him* (Jn 15:4-5), and must be *cleansed by Him*, even *ordained by Him*. As it says in Ephesians Chapter two, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them" (Eph 2:10). Due to the pull of our old man, our lower nature, we are reluctant to thoroughly learn that lesson. Our new man is the man that has been made alive by Christ's death and resurrection (Col 3:9-11). Our new man is to sweetly recline in holy resignation, resting in the gospel of peace, upon the Lord Jesus Christ as our entire righteousness and source of every blessing, including sonship, fruitfulness, and the sealing of the Spirit (Eph 2:13-14). The Lord's Table is to be a continuous reminder that by our Savior and His perfect work alone are we commended to God.

Favor and contact with God are not found in a man's religious ambitions.

We frequently need to hear this taught, as well as meditate upon it, that we as defiled clay, no matter how noble in form, cannot produce a spark of glory to God. Internally that message is resisted. We put expectations upon ourselves of fruitfulness and ministry success but may be looking more at our own talents and ambitions than at Christ Himself. This effort to become more acceptable to God is an attempt to make our meeting place with God the altar of Cain. How opposite is the cross of Christ from this sentiment. For gospel truth proclaims that all love from God, all communion with Him, must take place at the altar of His sacrificed Son. By this is not meant that the highest fellowship with God takes place at the Lord's table. What is being asserted is that all contact with God is mediated by the Lord Jesus Christ, our Mediator, as He is set forth in the gospel (1 Tim 2:5-6).

All week long, the true believer enjoys bold and confident access to God through Christ (Eph 3:11-12; Heb 4:16; 10:19, 35). But, on the Lord's Day during communion, that divinely bestowed access to God is 'punctuated' with an exclamation mark. For at the Lord's Table, believers are celebrating and commemorating their Savior's death. As in Romans chapter five of Christ's sacrifice, "through His one act of obedience there resulted justification of life." Believing sinners have been brought into fellowship with God (Rom 5:18-19). Christ alone is our 'meeting place' with the Triune God. Communion is not found at the 'Cain altar' of our works. *Our pride must be regularly struck down by the cross (Gal 5:24). We must be willing to lie down at the base of it under this gospel truth that Christ alone is our meeting place. And, in doing so, we find that the rest, peace, and belonging that we seek is found in Christ abundantly (Jn 10:10).*

The way in which God saves sinners imparts the knowledge of Himself (Jn 17:3).

There's a great exhortation in Hebrews chapter four concerning the believer's Sabbath rest in Christ. "For we who have believed enter that rest, just as He has said, 'as I swore in My wrath, they shall not enter My rest,' although His works were finished from the foundation of the world. So there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His. Therefore, let us be diligent to enter that rest, so that no

one will fall, through *following* the same example of disobedience” (Heb 4:3, 9-11). This imperative is paradoxical at first blush because we do not normally associate the decision to enter a state of rest with the decision to exert diligent labor.

Nevertheless, the apostle states, “. . .let us be diligent to enter that rest” (Heb 4:11). The comments of John Owen are helpful at this juncture. The exhortation in this verse is to ‘*enter into the whole rest of God in the gospel*’. The Apostle exhorts them to labor, to diligently study, to endeavor to enter that rest. Says Owen, we may observe from this exhortation the following: **1)** Great oppositions will and do arise against men in the work of entering into God’s rest, that is into gospel faith and obedience. But, notwithstanding all these difficulties, the promise of God being ‘mixed with faith’ (Heb 4:2) will carry us safely through them all. **2)** The utmost of our endeavor and labors are required in obtaining an entrance into the rest of Christ. Consider that men are content to lay themselves out to the utmost and spend their strength for “the bread that perishes,” yes for “that which is not bread” (Is 55:2). This is their folly. But gospel rest deserves our utmost diligence and endeavor. To convince men thereof is one of the chief ends of the preaching of the gospel. **3)** There is a present excellency in and a present reward attending gospel faith and obedience. They give us present entrance into the rest of Christ and are the means of entering into the future eternal rest with God.ⁱⁱⁱ

We are to feed on the gospel and view Christ as the meeting place, the place of complete acceptance and favor, the place where we are clothed with the righteousness of our Savior. As Owen stated, this mindset does not come easily. For our default mechanism is to return to self-trust—thus the necessity of the injunction *to labor* (4:11). The believer can testify from experience that our wandering truant hearts tend to resist gospel rest. But we are to labor by Scripture meditation, by prayer, by study, and by spiritual fellowship that Christ may become to us the ‘Sabbath rest’ of the soul. We need to meditate upon these gospel truths and mortify our narcissistic optimism that we can be accepted by something coming from our own persons.

It is breathtaking that the pure grace of God in the gospel is resisted by man’s efforts to add to the gospel. Paul blisters the Galatians with the following warning:

It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore, keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you. And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law. You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace” (Gal 5:1-4).

A related tendency was evident also in the problems in the church at Corinth. They sought to organize themselves around cliques, pastoral celebrities, and pecking orders. Paul condemns this as human wisdom (in the first three chapters of 1 Corinthians Paul uses the word ‘wisdom’ twelve times as he contrasts God’s wisdom with man’s wisdom). The Corinthians were attracted to fleshly scorecards—which is another way of saying, human glory, and achievement. The Lord’s table is a great rectifying corrective to this tendency to make human distinctions. For when we celebrate the work of Christ, we are extolling God’s wisdom and mercy—namely, that He has provided the perfect, all-sufficient meeting place we have with Him in Christ. As such, the cross of Christ is the great ‘leveler of men’—for it cancels our manmade distinctions and hierarchies and proclaims that our righteous status before God is carried solely by our Savior and not by ourselves (Phil 3:8-11).

Therefore, the Person and work of Christ is the only place that reveals the true knowledge of God. The Cain altar obscured the knowledge of God (Jude 11). For instead of sending the message that God is known through the satisfaction of His righteousness by the life blood of a substitute, the Cain altar implied that defiled man may be accepted by the works of his hands. Scripture states of Cain, “. . .not as Cain, *who* was of the evil one and slew his brother. And for what reason did he slay him? Because his deeds were evil, and his brother’s were righteous” (1 Jn 3:12).

Christ crucified for sinners gives the true saving knowledge of God. The Lord’s table is designed to *bring to mind the work of our Savior* by proclaiming His death until he returns (1 Cor 11:26). In so doing, the Lord’s table is also intended to manifest the knowledge of God—that He is propitious. That what He demands, in the way of perfect obedience (the satisfaction of His righteousness as well as punishment for transgressions), He Himself provides. The gospel sets forth Christ as the source of favor, and right-standing with Him. This means that what God has done to bring us near by means of His Son reveals Him, reveals who He is (Eph 2:11-16).

What an incredible testimony of God’s gracious heart that He fully satisfies on our behalf by the sacrifice of His Son, everything that was needed for this love relationship with Him. He was pleased to bruise His own Son that He might see His seed (the Church) (Is 53:10). The work and Person of Christ reveals the ‘light of God’s glory in the face of Christ’ (2 Cor 4:6). It reveals the loving heart of God (Jn 3:16). It reveals the righteousness of God (Rom 3:25-26). It reveals the grace of God (Eph 1:7-9). In fact, the cross of Christ is contemplated by angels because in the Person and work of the Son of God, the divine perfections are seen most clearly, more than any place else—so angels, it says, long to look into this work of redemption (1 Pet 1:12).

Only a perfect sacrifice could reconcile God’s justice with God’s mercy.

It also says in the Psalms that in Christ’s work and Person, righteousness and peace kissed one another (Ps 85:10). In other words, this is the only time, ever in human history, in which justice and mercy joined hands and were truly reconciled—by the blood of God’s Lamb (Jn 1:29). Normally justice and mercy are at odds, for pouring out mercy on a guilty criminal would be a severe breach of justice. But through the bloody death of the Son of God, justice and mercy joined hands. Holiness, wisdom, love, compassion, righteousness, and favor all came together at the cross to provide an eternal meeting place for us.

In the Lord’s table, we proclaim that there is no other place by which God receives sinners and meets with them in sweet fellowship. The crucified and risen Savior is the only ‘altar’ at which God meets sinful men and women. Only by trust in the gospel will they have contact and favor and acceptance from an infinitely holy God. Now lest we feel any pull toward ritualizing this ordinance as the Roman Catholic Church has done—as if taking communion makes us acceptable to God—we ***reiterate, the meeting place God has established is Christ Himself and His sacrifice.*** The communion table is not the meeting place itself, only a picture and tactile symbol of the meeting place. For, in the Lord’s table, we proclaim the Lord’s death—that He is our present, and our eternal meeting place for full fellowship with the Triune God. “This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a *hope* both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil, where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek (Heb 6:19-20).

Only at the ‘altar’ of Christ crucified do sinners find perfect favor with God.

When the angel brought glad tidings and announced these tidings to the shepherds, he said, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased” (Lu 2:14). What an interesting way to talk about the meeting place between God and men. For it is wonderful indeed that God could be pleased with someone who is born a sinner. How does that take place, how can God ‘be pleased’ with a totally depraved creature? The glorious gospel is the answer (Rom 1:16-17). This meeting place between God and sinner is found in Christ crucified (1 Cor 2:2-5). For in Him alone is found full pardon and cleansing, and the righteousness by which we must be accepted by God. The divinely appointed meeting place, ‘Christ our altar’ is the only possible place in which God meets us and can be ‘pleased with us’ (Lu 2:14). Sermon: ‘Overcoming God in His own things.’

The Jews at the time of Jesus and the Apostles fought against the free grace of God. They resisted the welcome invitation that Gentiles could come into the Kingdom by faith in the Son of God. The Judaizers wanted everyone to become a proselyte of Judaism before entering the church. But the meeting place that God has provided is not found in gilded temples, nor in ceremonies with ephods, altars of incense, and animal sacrifices. No, the place God meets with us is the place wherein my sin and shame and wrath were all heaped upon the holy Son of God who bore it up to that cruel cross (1 Pet 2:24).

The sacrifice that Christ made took place ‘outside the gates of Jerusalem’ (Heb 13:12), outside of the confines of man’s religious institutions, outside of the sacred places, the traditions and honors of men. It took place in a ceremonially unclean place, at a place of reproach where criminals met their agonizing end—their doom sealed in their torturous deaths. That’s my meeting place with God! The spotless Son of God became the curse of God for me that I might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Cor 5:21; Gal 3:13-14). Consider that this is where the holy God of the universe is desirous and willing to meet you. For, the will of God is that we flee to the Son for refuge—where all pardon, favor, righteousness, and fellowship are found. “For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same *Lord* is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him; for ‘WHOEVER WILL CALL ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED’” (Rom 10:12-13).

The freeness of God’s grace is poured out through Christ our great High Priest.

The Jews, who were seeking another miracle from Jesus, another ‘free lunch’, postured as if they were very spiritual when they asked Jesus what great works they might do for God.

Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you, for on Him the Father, God, has set His seal. Therefore they said to Him, “What shall we do, so that we may work the works of God?” Jesus answered and said to them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent” (Jn 6:26-29).

Brethren, the central work that we are to do, and keep doing is believe on Him whom the Father has sent and has set His seal (6:27-29). For what Jesus said to them about believing anticipated what the

meeting place would be with God. When Christ completed His atoning work He said, “It is finished” (Jn 19:30). Then everything necessary for our welcome from God was in place. And, those who believe upon the Son experience cleansing, acceptance, and fellowship. This is why we sing, “Nothing in my hands I bring. Only to the cross I cling.” I bring nothing to add to such an all-sufficient and perfect sacrifice and provision. Any attempt to add to it only obscures it. It does not enhance it. My Savior is my perfect, all-sufficient Substitute, and His atoning work is finished. Therefore, the sacrifices of thanksgiving which please God are described in Hebrews chapter 13. The Lord welcomes a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving (Heb 13:15). He welcomes a grateful heart (Ps 86:5; 116:12-17). He welcomes those ‘sacrifices’ of thanksgiving because all the work is done. We can’t add to it, nor should we try, the only sacrifice that could possibly remain is one of overflowing gratitude.

At that perfect meeting place of Christ crucified and risen, I am brought to God. I’m introduced to God. I’m adopted by God (Gal 4:4-5). I’m owned by God as His treasured possession (Titus 2:14). I have been brought into a covenant with Him, all by the gracious advocacy of Christ my Mediator, who will eternally represent me as my High Priest (Ps 110:1-3). For He ever lives to make intercession for me (Heb 7:25). How marvelous it is that God has determined that believing sinners shall have perfect and endless representation by Christ, their Mediator. This was promised in Psalm 110, where the psalmist says, “Thou has sworn thou will not change thy mind. Thou art a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.”

A ‘sacrifice’ occurred when God clothed Adam and Eve.

All the way back in Genesis, in the Garden of Eden, a redemptive revelation took place in how God clothed our first parents. Adam and Eve’s fig leaf aprons did not point ahead to anything but to man’s universal attempts to cover his own moral nakedness. Like Cain’s altar, it was man’s effort to conceal his defects in the sight of God. But the Lord had a redemptive solution. He was going to clothe our first parents in a way that pointed to the necessity of sacrifice. God slew, or killed, two perfectly white lambs, and then took their pelts to make coverings for Adam and Eve. What a picture this is of the coming redemption in Christ—that the Lamb of God should be slain that we might have a righteous covering and be accepted by God. “I will rejoice greatly in the Lord, my soul will exult in my God; for He has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels” (Is 61:10).

By providing blood-bought coverings for our first parents, the Lord is communicating, even as early as Genesis chapter 3, that he is propitious in nature. Though Adam and Eve deserved death and separation from God, He will provide the sacrifice needed for reconciliation to Him (Gen 3:15). Ever since then, ever since sin entered, contact with God has been by means of an altar of sacrifice. An altar is a meeting place where a sacrifice was offered. The sacrifice had to be slain. There was blood. There was fire. The sacrifice was consumed by the fire. And as the smoke ascended to heaven, God could say that the ascending smoke went heavenward as a fragrant, soothing aroma (Lev 1:9, 17).

Now why is that smoke a fragrant aroma to God? When we have something in our barbecue fall into the coals it makes an acrid smoke that we can’t stand—so why is the smoke of immolated flesh (burned) sweet to God? It’s fragrant to God because the sacrifice of an innocent substitute whose

life is given in place of the guilty gives the knowledge of God. It gives the saving knowledge of God that He is just and righteous, yet propitious. The life of the substitute is offered and consumed in the place of the guilty party. So as that smoke ascends, it effectively pictures the atoning substitution that God has divinely provided in Christ and has accepted on behalf of sinners. The sacrifice joins justice and mercy thereby giving the knowledge of God that He is JUST, and the JUSTIFIER of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom 3:26).

We are sinners who cannot supply what God requires nor can we amend our ways sufficiently to win His divine favor. Consider therefore that the true knowledge of God is found in how He saves the lost—through the sacrificial gift of His only begotten Son (Rom 8:32). He is willing to receive the guilty, He is ready to justify them and cleanse them. And their reception of this matchless gift glorifies God (Eph 1:5-10) and gives the saving knowledge of who He is (Jn 17:3).

Christ's atoning work cleanses hearts from their enmity and hostility toward God.

The word of the cross is so important because the shed blood of Christ alone eliminates the lie about God that our first parents believed. Consider that this lie is generational—every single child born has this lie fixed upon his little infant heart. It's a lie about God's goodness. It's a lie about God's Word. It's a lie about God's love, justice, and righteousness. This lie is only reversed by the truth of God communicated in the altar of Christ's finished work. This altar is where mercy and justice touched at the cross—it is where mercy and justice 'kissed' (Ps 85:10) to provide justifying grace for believing sinners. The salvific truth communicated by *Christ our altar* cleanses minds and hearts and consciences. It liberates, it releases us from our inherent enmity, it makes free men out of captives. Now, concerning the removal of our innate hostility toward God through Christ's reconciling work, it states in Colossians: "And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, *engaged* in evil deeds, yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach" (Col 1:21-22).

What Christ has done declares mightily who God is—so let us remember that 'Christ our altar' is the meeting place that communicates so much about God. This altar says that God is a God who wills to be known. He wills to be known by means of the full satisfaction of what He requires, by means of a Substitute whom he has appointed. Only in this way is God's holiness preserved, and His love proclaimed, His justice exalted, His mercy displayed, His compassion set forth. Only in this way is God made known savingly. Everything else in terms of man's religious aspirations are merely permutations of the altar of Cain—for all those things which comprise legal working, whether traditions, rituals, or superstitions obscure who God is. Christ alone gives the light of the knowledge of the glory of God. Second Corinthians 4:6 says, "For God who said light shall shine out of darkness is the one who has shown in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God, in the face of Christ." For God welcomes us at *Christ our altar*, the meeting place He Himself has provided.

End Notes:

ⁱ 'Communion' in Webster's 1828 Dictionary

ⁱⁱ John Owen, *Hebrews: The Epistle of Warning*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1953), p. 274

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, p. 71