

The Bible is 66 individual books of stories that sometimes seemingly have no continuity. But there is a single thread that links them all as one story - one central theme - from Genesis to Revelation - the beginning and ending relate and all in the middle. A major truth connects the Old Testament that we are studying today with the New Testament. All that happens in the Old Testament are shadows of the reality of Jesus Christ.

God was always pointing toward the redemption of Israel and all man - men and women. Redemption is a buying back of those who were captive and freeing them. Redemption is about us being set free.

Hebrews 4:12 *For the word of God is living and active, and sharper than any two-edged sword, even penetrating as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.*

How? It happens because the Holy Spirit of God speaks the Word of God, which is the first step in transforming our lives to live out the will of God. It comes and stays alive in our lives. The Word, the breath of God, begins to change our lives. This Word taken in transforms us. Let the Holy Spirit speak into our lives.

Today, we look at the Word from Ezra and its part of the thread.

Ezra 3:2-3 *Then Jeshua the son of Jozadak and his brothers the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and his brothers, rose up and built the altar of the God of Israel to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the Law of Moses, the man of God. So they set up the altar on its foundation, because they were terrified of the peoples of the lands; and they offered burnt offerings on it to the Lord, burnt offerings morning and evening.*

The altar of bronze had the design and instructions given to Moses by God. Ezra knows that it is time to build this altar - a brazen altar - as God describes. It was 8' x 8' x 4', and it was the first thing as you entered into the temple. Bronze is often associated with judgment in the Bible. It is hard and has the ability to endure. Before one could approach the Holy Place, one had to confront the altar to atone for sins.

This thread will clearly display the purpose, the intent, the plan, and the promise of God. In Genesis, we learn of Adam's sin and death of God's original plan. But God gives a temporary plan - sacrifices. The temple was a slaughterhouse and all offered was a sacrifice for their sin. A sacrifice was all that God would accept. Sin is serious.

Hebrews 9:12-14 *And not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all time, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled, sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?*

Every year, each family had to find the perfect lamb for sacrifice. All this points to the true Lamb of God, Jesus. Our sin cannot be cleansed by our own actions. Our sin can only be changed by the sacrifice of Jesus. Jesus brings freedom - redemption. The thread continues with Jesus as fully man and fully God - He was sinless and had the same temptations as man. When it came time for Jesus to give His own blood, it was the reality of God's plan of sacrifice -

- One ultimate sacrifice to cleanse all mankind. **Hebrews 9:22** *And according to the Law, one may almost say, all things are cleansed with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.*

The scarlet thread from Ezra and the picture of the great altar greeted everyone who came to see God. Only by the blood sacrifice was sin paid for. We cannot approach the Holy presence of the Lord without first making sacrifice - atonement for our sin. This first altar represents coming to God, dealing with our sin, before coming into the presence of God. The Hebrews faced this. This bronze altar... was always open, was the place of atonement, where sin was judged, the penalty was paid. Access to God is ours only when we come to Him through the perfect sacrifice of the shed blood of Jesus Christ.

This altar, the place of atonement, was the place where the holiness and righteousness of God was displayed. It was the place where sin was judged and its penalty paid. It opened the way to approach God and find His mercy. Everything that touched the brazen altar was made holy. But this altar was only a shadow of good things to come. There is only one way to get to the Holy of Holies, the presence of God, and that was to first confront the altar of sacrifice. God is offering a place for forgiveness. There is only one entrance to the Holy of Holies and first seen was the altar.

Likewise, there is only one entrance to God. **John 14:6** *Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.*

- The gate is Jesus Christ.
- The sacrifice is the spotless Lamb of God.
- The cross is the altar of sacrifice.
- The blood of Jesus is the atonement, the payment for all our sins.

Jesus is the final and complete sacrifice for sin. The sacrifice has been paid. Jesus Christ willingly and joyfully suffered in order that through His perfect sacrifice, the total, complete and permanent forgiveness of sin could be given! Once and for all! No altar remains.

As one makes the way around the Old Testament altar, one starts to smell incense from the golden altar of incense. Priests would bring incense in and the temple would be filled with the prayers and worship of God's people. The Holy of Holies was the place of God's presence. The temple would be filled with the glory of God.

When we confess our sins (altar) and accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior and His gift of being the spotless Lamb (sacrifice), it's not over. Then we get to go on the other side with the people of God and worship (the golden altar) - the place of prayer. **Revelation 8:3** *Another angel came and stood at the altar, holding a golden censer; and much incense was given to him, so that he might add it to the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar which was before the throne.*

Which side of the altar are you on? Need forgiveness?

Take time to explain the idea of the "Thread" throughout the Bible.

How would you explain the relationship of the Old Testament altar and the New Testament altar?