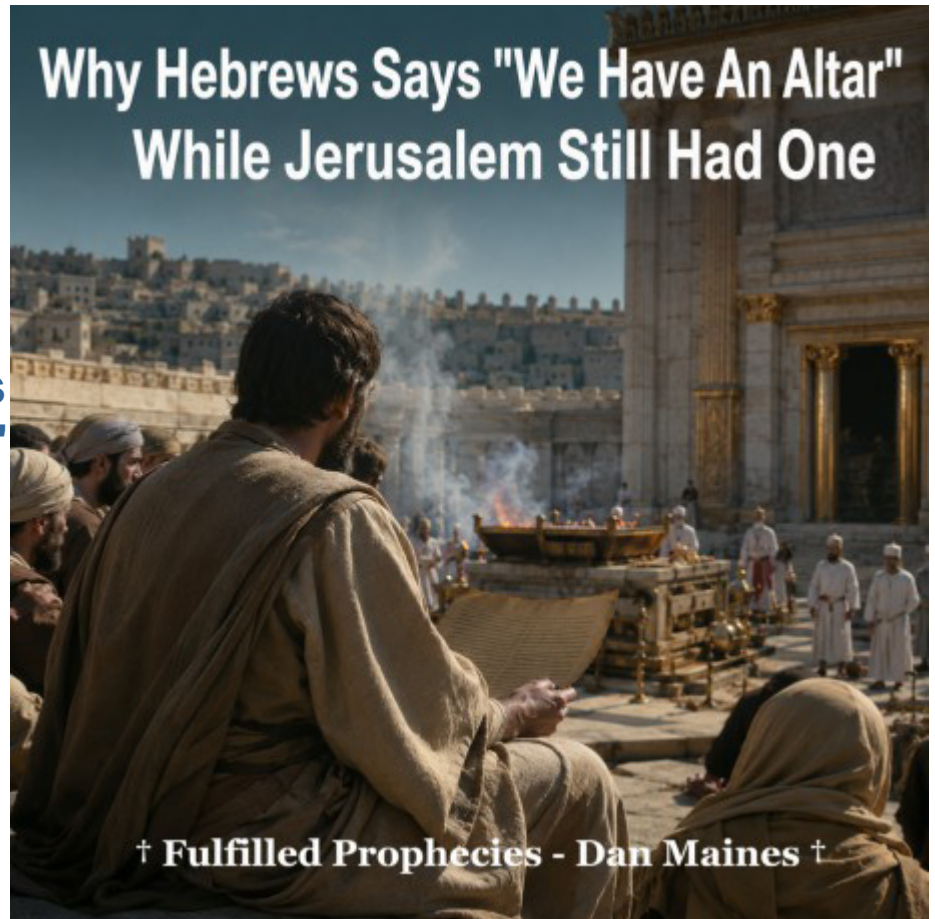


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Why Hebrews Says
"We Have An Altar"
While Jerusalem
Still Had One



By Dan Maines

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Introduction

† When Hebrews was written, the temple in Jerusalem was still standing, the priests were still serving, sacrifices were still being offered, and the altar of the old covenant was still operating. Yet Hebrews makes the remarkable statement, We have an altar. The writer wasn't pointing Christians back to Jerusalem. He was declaring that believers already possessed the reality to which Israel's altar had pointed.

† This is one of the clearest pictures of the first-century covenant transition. For a time, two covenant systems could be seen operating side by side. One was old, growing obsolete, and ready to disappear. The other had been established through Christ and was bringing believers into direct access to God (Hebrews 8:13; 10:19-22).

† The physical temple hadn't yet been destroyed, but its covenant authority had already been surpassed by Christ. Jerusalem still had priests, sacrifices, an altar, and a sanctuary, but believers had the better priesthood, the better sacrifice, the better covenant, and access to the true heavenly sanctuary (Hebrews 7:22-25; 8:1-6; 9:11-12).

† Hebrews 13:10 therefore isn't a casual statement about Christian worship. It's a declaration that the center of covenant life had shifted from the earthly system to Christ.

Hebrews 13:10

We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat.

† Notice the contrast. We have an altar, but those who continued serving the tabernacle had no right to eat from it. The writer placed believers and the old covenant worshipers on opposite sides of a covenant boundary.

† The point isn't that Christians had constructed another physical altar. Christ Himself, His sacrifice, and the benefits of His finished work are the reality represented by the altar. Believers weren't being called back to animal sacrifices, they had something infinitely greater (Hebrews 9:11-14; 10:10-14).

† This becomes especially important because the Jerusalem temple was still functioning. The old altar could still be seen, touched, and used, but outward visibility didn't equal continuing covenant authority. The true access to God was now found through Christ (Hebrews 10:19-22).

† Those who remained attached to the old system couldn't obtain the benefits of Christ while rejecting the covenant He established. The issue wasn't geography, ethnicity, or

architecture. The issue was covenant access.

Hebrews 8:13

When He said, "A new covenant," He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is about to disappear.

† This verse explains why both systems could still be visibly present. The new covenant had been established, while the old covenant was becoming obsolete and approaching its complete disappearance.

† Hebrews doesn't describe the old covenant as waiting thousands of years to disappear. The writer told his first-century readers that it was aging and near its end.

† This explains the transition period between the cross and AD 70. Christ had established the new covenant, but the physical structures associated with the old covenant remained until Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed.

† The destruction of the temple didn't make Christ's sacrifice effective. His sacrifice was already effective. AD 70 publicly and historically removed the old covenant system that had continued operating after its covenant purpose had been fulfilled.

Hebrews 9:8

The Holy Spirit is signifying this, that the way into the holy place has not yet been disclosed while the outer tabernacle is still standing,

† Hebrews connects the standing first tabernacle with the old covenant arrangement. The earthly sanctuary represented a system of restricted access, priests entered where ordinary Israelites couldn't go, and only the high priest entered the Most Holy Place, once each year (Hebrews 9:6-7).

† Christ changed that reality. Through Him, believers received access that the old covenant worshiper never possessed. The veil and sanctuary system had illustrated separation, but Christ opened the way into God's presence (Hebrews 10:19-20).

† This is why the continued existence of the Jerusalem temple

during the transition period matters. It stood as the visible structure of a covenant order that was passing away while Christ's people were already entering the reality to which that structure had pointed.

† When the temple fell in AD 70, the earthly system that symbolized restricted covenant access disappeared. God's people weren't left without a sanctuary or altar. They already had the greater reality in Christ.

Hebrews 10:19-22

Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, through His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let's approach God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

† Under the old covenant, the people couldn't simply enter the Most Holy Place. Access was restricted. Under Christ, believers were told to draw near with confidence because His blood had opened the new and living way.

† This is the contrast behind We have an altar. Christians didn't need the Jerusalem altar because they had access through the sacrifice of Christ.

† The old system continually reminded Israel of separation. Christ provided reconciliation and access. The old priesthood stood between the people and the sanctuary, but Jesus brought His people into God's presence (Hebrews 7:24-25).

† The temple could remain standing physically without remaining the covenantal doorway to God. The doorway was now Christ.

Hebrews 13:11-13

For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the Holy Place by the high priest as an offering for sin are burned outside the camp. Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the gate, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood.

So then, let us go out to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach.

† The writer immediately explains the altar statement through the Day of Atonement pattern. The bodies of the sacrificial animals were taken outside the camp, and Jesus likewise suffered outside the gate.

† Then comes the command to go out to Him outside the camp. The readers weren't merely being taught where Jesus died. They were being told where their covenant allegiance belonged.

† Jerusalem still possessed the visible temple system, but believers were being called away from dependence upon that system and toward Christ. They weren't to retreat into the old covenant because persecution made Christianity difficult (Hebrews 10:32-39).

† Going outside the camp meant identifying with the rejected Messiah rather than seeking security in the covenant order that was approaching judgment.

Hebrews 13:14

For here we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking the city which is to come.

† The context makes this statement powerful. The readers had just been told to go outside the camp. Then they were reminded that they didn't have an enduring city there.

† Earthly Jerusalem wasn't their permanent covenant city. Hebrews had already directed their attention toward the heavenly Jerusalem and the city prepared by God (Hebrews 11:10, 16; 12:22-24).

† The coming city wasn't another earthly capital with another physical temple and another animal-sacrifice system. It represented the completed new covenant order centered in Christ.

† Jerusalem looked permanent because its walls, temple, priests, sacrifices, and altar were still visible. Within that generation, those visible structures would fall, exactly as Jesus had warned (Matthew 24:1-2, 34).

Hebrews 12:22-24

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel.

† The writer didn't tell these believers that someday, thousands of years later, they might come to Mount Zion. He told them they had come to Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem.

† This reveals where the new covenant people already belonged. While earthly Jerusalem still had its temple and altar, believers had come to the heavenly Jerusalem through Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant.

† The contrast couldn't be stronger. One Jerusalem represented the covenant order that was passing away, while the heavenly Jerusalem represented the covenant reality established through Christ (Galatians 4:24-26).

† Hebrews therefore moves the believer's attention away from earthly sacred geography and places it entirely upon Christ and the heavenly reality He established.

Historical References

† Josephus describes the temple worship, priesthood, sacrifices, and altar continuing in Jerusalem during the years leading up to the Jewish war. His account confirms that the physical temple system remained active until the Roman siege brought it to an end (Josephus, Wars of the Jews, Books 5-6).

† Josephus records the devastation of Jerusalem and the burning and destruction of the temple in AD 70. What Hebrews described as growing old and approaching disappearance eventually disappeared from history as an operating temple system (Josephus, Wars of the Jews, Book 6).

† Tacitus also records the Roman war against Jerusalem and describes the temple as an immense and significant sanctuary within the fortified city. His Roman account independently

confirms the historical setting in which Jerusalem and its temple came under Roman judgment (Tacitus, Histories, Book 5).

† Eusebius later records the tradition that the believers in Jerusalem departed from the city before the war and settled at Pella. Whether every detail of that later tradition can be independently established or not, it reflects the early Christian understanding that the church's future wasn't tied to the doomed Jerusalem temple system (Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, Book 3, Chapter 5).

How It Applies To Us Today

† We don't need a physical altar because Christ is our once-for-all sacrifice and our access to God isn't dependent upon an earthly sanctuary (Hebrews 10:10-14, 19-22).

† We don't need an earthly priesthood standing between us and God because Jesus is our permanent High Priest and mediator (Hebrews 7:24-25; 9:15).

† We don't need to look toward Jerusalem as though God's covenant presence is waiting to return there. Hebrews tells believers that they've come to Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem (Hebrews 12:22-24).

† We don't need another temple, another animal sacrifice, another Levitical priesthood, or another earthly altar. Returning to those shadows would move backward from the reality that has already come in Christ (Hebrews 8:4-6; 10:1).

† Hebrews 13:10 still speaks clearly, We have an altar. Jerusalem's altar disappeared nearly two thousand years ago, but the reality believers possess in Christ remains.

† The lesson of the transition period is simple. Something can still exist physically after its covenant purpose has been fulfilled. The temple remained standing for a time, but the new and living way had already been opened through Jesus.

† That's why AD 70 matters. It wasn't the beginning of Christ's work, it was the historical removal of the old covenant structure after Christ had established the better covenant, better priesthood, better sacrifice, better sanctuary, and better access

to God.

Q & A Appendix

Q: How could Christians say We have an altar while the Jerusalem altar was still operating?

A: Because the Christian altar wasn't another physical altar competing with Jerusalem. Christ and His once-for-all sacrifice were the new covenant reality to which the old altar pointed (Hebrews 13:10; 10:10-14).

Q: Does Hebrews show that two covenant systems were visible at the same time?

A: Yes. The new covenant had been established while the old covenant was growing obsolete and approaching disappearance (Hebrews 8:13).

Q: Did the destruction of the temple in AD 70 make the new covenant begin?

A: No. Jesus established the new covenant through His blood before AD 70. The destruction of Jerusalem removed the old covenant temple system that had continued functioning during the transition period (Hebrews 9:15; 10:19-22).

Q: Why did Hebrews tell believers to go outside the camp?

A: Because their allegiance belonged with Christ rather than with the old covenant order centered in Jerusalem. Jesus suffered outside the gate, and His followers were called to identify with Him (Hebrews 13:11-13).

Q: Do Christians today need a rebuilt temple or restored animal sacrifices?

A: No. Christ offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, and believers have direct access to God through Him (Hebrews 10:12, 19-22).

Q: Where is the believer's Jerusalem now?

A: Hebrews identifies the believer's covenant city as Mount

Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem
(Hebrews 12:22-24).

† This is the fulfilled perspective we proclaim at Fulfilled Prophecies †

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Source Index

† Hebrews 13:10; Hebrews 8:13; Hebrews 9:8; Hebrews 10:19-22; Hebrews 13:11-13; Hebrews 13:14; Hebrews 12:22-24

† Josephus, Wars of the Jews, Books 5-6; Tacitus, Histories, Book 5; Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, Book 3, Chapter 5

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