

So I will go about Your altar

'I will wash my hands in innocence; so I will go about Your altar, O Lord, that I may proclaim with the voice of thanksgiving, and tell of all Your wondrous works'.

Psalm 26:6-7

The necessity of the laver

Whenever the priests performed their service around the altar or came to the tent of meeting to carry out their duties there, they first had to wash their hands and feet with water from the laver (Ex. 30:17-21), otherwise they would die. So great was the Lord's holiness. Another instruction was for them to enter the tent of meeting sober. Also, they should not offer profane fire before the Lord (Lev. 10).

The first time the washing of hands is mentioned in Scripture is in Deuteronomy 21:1-9, which deals with unsolved murder committed by an unknown person. The elders of the city nearest to the victim had to wash their hands above the sacrificial animal, thus affirming their innocence regarding the blood that had been shed. Besides Psalm 26, we also find the expression in Psalm 73:13, where it has a purely figurative meaning ('I have washed my hands in innocence').

Of course, Psalm 26 would remind us first of all of the laver and the altar of burnt offering, which were both situated in the outer court of God's house. As a matter of fact, we as New Testament believers have to do with the symbolical meaning of these types: we have been cleansed by the blood of the Lamb, but still need to purify our hands and feet (our walk) with the washing of water by the Word of God (Eph. 5:26). It is only in this way we can draw near to God with boldness, in order to (1) perform altar service, that is offering God our sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving by Christ, and (2) enter into the heavenly sanctuary as priests and serve there in the presence of our God and Father (Heb. 10:19-22; 13:15).

Going about the altar

After the person who brought the sacrificial animal had killed it himself, the priests, the sons of Aaron, had to take the blood of it and sprinkle it all around on the altar. When the sacrifice had to be burned as a burnt offering, its parts had to be put in order on the wood

that was on the fire upon the altar (see for example Lev. 1). When the priests were accomplishing these acts, they were going about the altar. But I assume that Psalm 26 speaks of making the sacrifice go up in smoke while the priest and the person who brought the sacrifice were admiring the scene from all sides, singing God's praises. After all, the acceptance of the person who brought the sacrifice depended on whether the sacrifice was completely consumed and nothing but ashes remained of it. When we as worshippers remember the work and the Person of our Saviour, then in a figurative sense we go about the altar. We look at His work of redemption from different points of view, and we praise and glorify Him as well as God the Father.

(1) Our 'going about the altar' starts on the *northern* side, which was the place where the sacrificial animals were killed (Lev. 1:11). More often we see in the Bible that the northern side has to do with judgment and wrath (think of the Assyrians, who were the rod of God's wrath, and of the king of the north in the book of Daniel). Therefore, this side of the altar reminds us of the judgment we had deserved, but which was borne by Christ in our place. He died for us, so that the wrath of a holy and righteous God will not come upon us anymore. God punishes sin only once. Christ is the Lamb slain for our sins. Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures (1 Cor. 15:3).

(2) From the northern side we move on to the *eastern* side of the altar, where the ash heap was (Lev. 1:16). The ashes had to be dealt with carefully (Lev. 6:10-11). This reminds us of the fact that the body of Jesus was carefully taken from the cross and buried by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus (John 19:38-42). The eastern side, near the entrance of the tabernacle, was also the place toward the rising of the sun (Num. 2:3; 3:38). This speaks of Christ's resurrection from the dead, and – in a prophetic sense – of His appearance in glory. The day will dawn, and the Sun of Righteousness shall arise (Mal. 4:2). The glory of the Lord will return through the gate that faces toward the east (Ezek. 43:4). Burial and resurrection are closely linked with each other, that is the lesson of the eastern

side of the altar. Christ was buried, and He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures (1 Cor. 15:4).

(3) Then the *southern* side follows, that is the place of blessing as a result of the accomplished work of redemption. Isaac dwelt in the south, where he was under God's blessing (Gen. 24:62; 25:11). As Christians, we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places (Eph. 1:3). However, from a practical point of view we need both the cold northerly wind of temptation and the warm southerly wind of prosperity and blessing in our lives in order for us to bear fruit for God and to spread the aroma of fragrant spices (Song 4:16).

(4) The going about the altar ends at the *western* side, the sunset side. Psalm 72 contains a few references about this. The Prince of Peace will be honoured 'as long as the sun endures' (v. 5). From a prophetic point

of view, sunset in the west signifies the end of the Kingdom of peace, when Christ will hand the Kingdom back to God the Father (cf. 1 Cor. 15:24). Also, 'the kings of Tarshish and of the isles' will come to offer their presents (v. 10). These are the nations from the West (see Gen. 10:4-5). Together with the other nations who have been spared in the end time, they will go up to Jerusalem to worship the Prince of Peace (Zech. 14:16-17).

This shows us the extent of all the consequences of the work at Calvary's cross – the blessing extends all the way until the ends of the earth, to all nations and into the far future (cf. also Ps. 22:28ff.). Standing at the western side of the altar we have ample reason to burst out in a hymn of praise and to proclaim all God's miracles.

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