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Then Elijah called to the people, 'Come over here!' They all crowded around him as he repaired the altar of the Lord that had been torn down.

-1 Kings 18:30, NLT

The altar is an important symbol in the kingdom of God. It's mentioned in both the Old Testament and the New Testament—more than 380 times in the entire Bible.

The question is: How can we explain the concept of the altar to a postmodern, secular world? Recently, I spoke with a postmodern and found he had never heard the name Billy Graham, much less the term “altar.”

Let's put it in simple, basic terms. The altar symbolizes the innocent dying for the guilty. It was the place where the Israelites brought their sacrificial animals to the Lord.

When a man sinned, he was required to slay an animal on the altar. This was done to atone for, or “cover,” the sin. The animal became the substitute for the guilty person.

Throughout Scripture, we see a progression of understanding about the use of the altar. In early Old Testament days, anyone could offer a sacrifice, anywhere at anytime. As God's revelation unfolded, use of the altar became closely controlled—a governed law. Only the priests could offer sacrifices and only at designated locations.

All the regulations were physical pictures of spiritual truths. They pointed to Christ and His sacrifice on the cross.

Each meticulous act at the altar became meaningful and took on great significance, thus detailing His redemptive work at Calvary. To understand the altar is to understand redemption's story.

A stunning example would be the burnt offering. The Leviticus regulation stated that the animal was to be offered whole—with the exception of the skin. The implication: God wants all of us—our complete devotion.

The skin was peeled off, implying that God's gaze is deeper than what the eye can see. He looks inside, past the skin to the deep recesses of our hearts and minds. Many of God's people—including Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, David, Solomon and Elijah—were "altar builders." This implies that they were men and women of dedication and devotion.

Although our approach to God no longer requires a physical altar, the principle still applies. We meet with Him on the basis of Christ's sacrificing Himself on the cross for us. Let's be modern-day Elijahs and rebuild that altar for postmoderns to see!

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