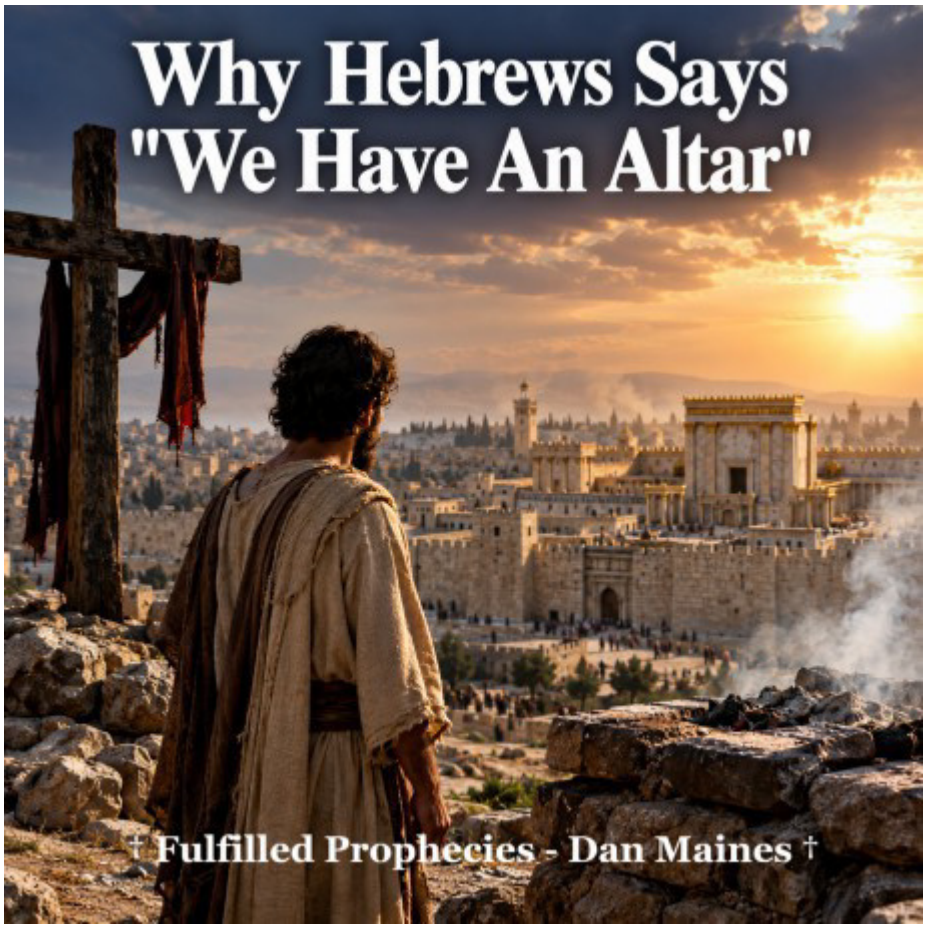
Fulfilled Prophecies

Why Hebrews Says "We Have An Altar"



By Dan Maines

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Introduction

† Hebrews closes with one of the strongest statements about the transition from the old covenant order to the new covenant reality in Christ. The writer declares, We have an altar, and immediately contrasts that altar with those who continued serving the tabernacle.

† This wasn't an invitation to discover another physical altar. It was a declaration that believers possessed in Christ what the old covenant altar, sacrifices, priesthood, and sanctuary had

only foreshadowed (Hebrews 8:5; 10:1).
† Hebrews was written to believers facing pressure to return to the old covenant system. The writer's answer was clear, don't go back. Jesus had already opened the way into God's presence, and the old system was becoming obsolete and ready to disappear (Hebrews 8:13).
† The command to go outside the camp therefore carries enormous covenant significance. They were being called away from the old covenant order centered in earthly Jerusalem and into the lasting city found in Christ.

Hebrews 13:10-14
We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat. 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. For here we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking the city which is to come.
† The contrast couldn't be stronger. We have an altar, but those continuing to serve the tabernacle had no right to eat from it. The writer was distinguishing the new covenant reality in Christ from the old covenant worship system (Hebrews 9:11-12).
† The altar isn't presented as another physical structure in Jerusalem. Christ Himself is the fulfillment of the sacrificial system. His sacrifice was offered once for all, something the repeated sacrifices of the old covenant could never accomplish (Hebrews 10:10-12).
† Going outside the camp meant identifying with Jesus rather than returning to the covenant order that rejected Him. The readers were being called to leave behind dependence upon the earthly sanctuary, priesthood, sacrifices, and city (Philippians 3:3).
† The statement that they didn't have an abiding city points directly at the temporary nature of earthly Jerusalem. They were seeking the city that was coming, the heavenly Jerusalem

identified elsewhere in Hebrews as the city of the living God (Hebrews 12:22).

Leviticus 16:27
But the bull of the sin offering and the goat of the sin offering, whose blood was brought in to make atonement in the Holy Place, shall be taken outside the camp, and they shall burn their hides, their flesh, and their refuse in the fire.
† Hebrews deliberately draws from the Day of Atonement pattern. The bodies of the sin offerings were taken outside the camp after their blood had been carried into the sanctuary (Hebrews 13:11).
† Jesus fulfilled the pattern. He suffered outside Jerusalem's gate, showing that redemption wasn't found by remaining attached to the old covenant camp (Hebrews 9:13-14).
† The shadow pointed beyond itself. The animal sacrifices could never perfect the worshiper, but Christ's sacrifice accomplished what those repeated offerings couldn't accomplish (Hebrews 10:1-4).

John 19:20
Therefore many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, Latin, and in Greek.
† Jesus was crucified outside the city. Hebrews takes that geographical fact and gives it covenant significance, He suffered outside the gate so that He might sanctify the people through His own blood (Hebrews 13:12).
† The rejected Messiah became the meeting place between God and His people. Access to God would no longer depend upon approaching an earthly temple in Jerusalem (John 4:21-24).
† What appeared to be rejection and shame outside Jerusalem became the place where the old sacrificial shadows reached their fulfillment in Christ (Colossians 2:16-17).

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, access to the Most Holy Place was restricted. Under the new covenant, believers were given confidence to draw near through the blood of Jesus (Hebrews 9:7-8).
† The way into God's presence wasn't through continued animal sacrifice or service at the earthly temple. Jesus opened the new and living way.
† This explains why returning to the old system was so serious. Going back to the shadows after the reality had come would mean abandoning the superior access provided through Christ (Hebrews 7:19, 25).

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.
† Notice the writer says they had come to Mount Zion and the heavenly Jerusalem. Their covenant identity had already shifted away from earthly Jerusalem toward the heavenly city.
† This is the city that explains the city to come later in Hebrews. The first-century believers were living during the transition in which the old covenant order was becoming obsolete while the new covenant reality was being established openly and completely (Hebrews 8:13).
† Jesus is identified as the mediator of the new covenant.

Therefore the city, the covenant, the blood, the assembly, and access to God all center in Him, not in the earthly temple system (Hebrews 9:15).

Galatians 4:25-26
Now this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is enslaved with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother.
† Paul makes the same covenant distinction. The Jerusalem existing in his day corresponded to Sinai and slavery, while the Jerusalem above represented freedom.
† This helps explain the command to leave the camp. The issue wasn't merely geography. It was covenant allegiance. Believers weren't to seek their identity in the Jerusalem associated with the old covenant (Galatians 4:30-31).
† The Jerusalem above wasn't a future physical city descending onto the planet. It was the covenant community belonging to Christ, the reality believers were already entering through Him (Ephesians 2:19-22).

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.
† When Hebrews was written, the old covenant had been made obsolete, yet its temple system was still standing. That explains the transitional language throughout the book.
† The old covenant order was near its disappearance. The writer wasn't describing something thousands of years away. He told his original audience that the obsolete covenant system was ready to disappear.
† In AD 70 the temple was destroyed, the sacrificial system ceased, and the earthly priesthood could no longer perform its temple service. The visible structure of the old covenant world was removed just as Jesus had foretold concerning the temple (Matthew 24:1-2).

Hebrews 13:15-16
Through Him then, let's continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips praising His name. And do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.
† Hebrews immediately explains the kind of sacrifices belonging to the new covenant. They're sacrifices of praise, doing good, and sharing with others.
† There is no command here to establish another animal altar or rebuild another temple. Worship has moved from the shadow to the reality found in Christ (John 4:23-24).
† Through Him we continually approach God. Christ isn't one sacrifice among many. His finished sacrifice established the basis upon which God's people worship and draw near (Hebrews 10:14).

Historical References
† Josephus described the catastrophic destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by the Romans in AD 70. His account records the burning of the sanctuary, the devastation of the city, and the collapse of the world centered around Jerusalem's temple worship.
† Josephus is especially important because he was a first-century Jewish eyewitness connected with the events of the Jewish-Roman War. His history provides an external witness to the destruction of the city and sanctuary that formed the physical center of the old covenant system.
† Eusebius later recorded the early Christian tradition that believers in Jerusalem departed from the city before the war and went to Pella. Whatever questions remain concerning the details of that tradition, it reflects an early understanding that Christians didn't regard earthly Jerusalem as the permanent center of their covenant hope.
† These historical events fit the setting of Hebrews. The readers were told that they didn't have a lasting city there, and within that generation Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed.

How It Applies To Us Today

† We don't need to return to the old covenant camp. We don't need an earthly temple, Levitical priesthood, animal sacrifices, or a physical altar in Jerusalem. Christ fulfilled what those things anticipated.

† We have access to God through Jesus Christ. Our confidence isn't based on geography, buildings, rituals, or an earthly priesthood, but upon His completed sacrifice and His continuing position as our great High Priest (Hebrews 4:14-16).

† We have come to the heavenly Jerusalem. God's people aren't waiting for another Jerusalem to become the center of redemption. Our citizenship and covenant identity are found in Christ (Philippians 3:20).

† We offer sacrifices of praise, thanksgiving, good works, generosity, and faithful confession of Christ. These are the sacrifices pleasing to God under the new covenant (Romans 12:1; 1 Peter 2:5).

† The message of Hebrews remains powerful today, don't go backward to the shadows when the reality has come. The altar, priesthood, sacrifice, sanctuary, covenant, and city all find their fulfillment in Christ.

Q & A Appendix

Q: What does Hebrews mean when it says, We have an altar?
A: It means believers possess the new covenant reality through Christ and His sacrifice. Hebrews contrasts what believers have in Christ with those continuing to serve the old tabernacle system (Hebrews 9:11-14; 10:10-14).

Q: Is Hebrews teaching that Christians need a physical altar?
A: No. The argument moves away from the physical sacrificial system and toward Christ's once-for-all sacrifice. The sacrifices believers now offer include praise, doing good, and sharing with others (Hebrews 13:15-16).

Q: What does going outside the camp mean?
A: It means joining Christ outside the old covenant order rather

than returning to the system centered in earthly Jerusalem. Jesus suffered outside the gate, and His followers were called to identify with Him (Hebrews 13:12-13).

Q: What was the city that was to come?
A: Hebrews identifies the covenant destination as Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. The believers had already come to that heavenly reality through Christ while awaiting the complete removal of the obsolete old covenant order (Hebrews 12:22-24; 8:13).

Q: Why is AD 70 important to this passage?
A: Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed in AD 70. The earthly system that was already described as obsolete and near disappearance was visibly removed. The lasting covenant reality wasn't earthly Jerusalem, but the kingdom and heavenly city established in Christ (Hebrews 12:28; 13:14).

Q: Does this mean believers today are still waiting to enter the heavenly Jerusalem?
A: No. Hebrews told first-century believers that they had come to Mount Zion and the heavenly Jerusalem. We live in the established new covenant reality that Christ brought through His finished work (Hebrews 12:22-24).

† This is the fulfilled perspective we proclaim at Fulfilled Prophecies †
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Source Index
† Hebrews 13:10-14; Leviticus 16:27; John 19:20; Hebrews 10:19-22; Hebrews 12:22-24; Galatians 4:25-26; Hebrews 8:13; Hebrews 13:15-16
† Josephus, The Wars of the Jews; Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History

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