

The Altar

How long did it take to go from Adam and Eve to the destruction of all living things on the earth except for what Noah had in the ark? Approximately 1,556 years, this equals only ten generations. Yes, they lived a long time back then. The average age when a man became a father was about 117 years old, excluding Noah who was 500 years old.

Every generation holds a different cultural perspective than their parents, particularly as change takes place. It's weird to think of someone 700 years old thinking, "What's this younger generation turning into?" It probably happened.

All throughout the recorded history of the Bible we see this cycle. People are focused on being faithful to their relationship with God, and then over time they turn away from Him again and suffer the consequences of their actions. It's a cycle that we'll look at more closely in the next chapter.

There are many things to learn from this history of broken and healed relationships with God. One is God's desire to have a perfect relationship with people and all His creation didn't change at any point, regardless of how many times His chosen people turned against Him. Another is that God never stops loving us, which is something people can have a hard time believing.

The fact that we commit sins does not impact God's eternal desire to be in a perfect relationship with us. God will never stop loving us. God's love is eternal because God is eternal, and God is Love.

God's Eternal Love for Eve and Adam did not change the fact that when they sinned Death, separation from God, was the result. This in turn caused the death of animals as God made garments from the skin of animals for them to wear. (Genesis 3:21) Who knows? Adam and Eve may have been the first people to wear buckskin garments. 😊

The point is immediately we see the result of Death coming into the world with the actual physical death of animals. Some have said this was the first sacrifice for sins, but we are not told that was the case on this occasion. It does show the tragic connection of the sins of Adam and Eve directly impacting all of creation.

We need only turn the page to chapter 4 of Genesis to read about sacrifices being made to God by Cain and Abel the sons of Adam and Eve. The first actual reference to an altar is in Genesis 8:20 where we are told that after Noah exited the ark, he built an altar and sacrificed one of each type of clean animal and bird that had been in the ark.

There is a connection between the sacrifices made by Cain and Abel, and these sacrifices made by Noah. This act acknowledged the sins that result from the power of Sin that gripped all of God's creation. It is

also an act of respect toward God, recognizing God as the Creator of all things and acknowledging that God alone is real and worthy of being worshiped.

There was a recognition that God is just to judge sins which come from Death, and thus required death as payment for humankind's sinful actions. The people making sacrifices to God would have recognized it was only by God's Grace that humankind exists when they deserved to die for their sins, so their sacrifice was an act of their trust in God to set aside their sin. It was an act of their faith in God.

It seems safe to assume the use of an altar was not unique to the experience of Noah, but it is greatly significant that after leaving the ark the first act of Noah is to acknowledge the sins of humankind, and the amazing gift of God to allow them to live. Noah's first act was to worship God by this most sacred act of sacrificing unto God. They were starting over and worshiping God by an act of faith was the only way for sinful-Dead people to seek God's Grace as they get started.

“¹¹Now the earth was corrupt in the sight of God, and the earth was filled with violence. ¹²God looked on the earth, and behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth.¹³Then God said to Noah, ‘The end of all flesh has come before Me; for the earth is filled with violence because of them; and behold, I am about to destroy them with the earth.’” (Genesis 6:11-13)

The result was a world-wide flood that covered all mountains. Think of how this changed the Earth.

“¹⁵Then God spoke to Noah, saying, ¹⁶“Go out of the ark, you and your wife and your sons and your sons’ wives with you. ¹⁷Bring out with you every living thing of all flesh that is with you, birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth, that they may breed abundantly on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth.” ...²⁰Then Noah built an altar to the LORD, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. (Genesis 8:15-17, 20)

The altar was a place of significance throughout the Old Testament. Why? For me it's because in order for a relationship between humankind and God to exist it requires judgment in accordance to God's Perfection. So, within the eternal Reality of God sins always bring Death. Rather than people having to die for their sins, God allowed the sacrifice of animals in their place.

That same perspective held that the life of an animal was in its blood. So, only by blood being shed and the animal's body being burnt up was that animal a sacrifice from people to God as they sought God's forgiveness. It was by God's Grace that people continued to exist on the earth. That was part of the message to the world through God's created nation of the Hebrew people.

By the altar the message was always extremely clear. The wages of sin is always death. Was God pleased that animals had to be sacrificed? Of course not. God wants nothing to do with death, but the sins of people caused the world to be a place dominated by the power of Sin. So, what's the alternative?

Should God have let Sin dominate forever the souls of all people in Death and Hell? How about just ending the whole business and never have any more people populate the earth? Since judgment

requires Death as the result of the power of Sin and people's individual sins is there a better way for the price to be paid in a Sin dominated world?

The answer is eternally "No". How can someone know that? Because if there was a better way God would have used it to resolve the issue of Sin and sins. It was, in fact, the best alternative given the circumstances, which Eve and Adam brought into existence within God's perfect creation, by their choice to attempt to replace God by attempting to take control of their lives.

Allow me to share this with all of us. God's judgment is the result of God's perfect Love for us.

Perfect Love demands Perfect judgment, which is judgment that allows no excuses. Death can only bring Death; it is impossible for any form of Life to come from Death.

God's judgment is, in fact, an expression of God's grace, because without His grace He would never bother to let us know what we are doing wrong. God taught people this, which is a part of His judgment, so we would clearly know that we need to be forgiven because of our sins.

We tend to consistently interpret God's Judgment and Grace from our limited perspective instead of letting Him show us His perspective. Love, Judgment, and Grace are not just characteristics, or facets of God. God is Love, God is Judgement, God is Grace in the Perfection of God.

These experiences could never exist apart from God. Neither in their perfect form, nor as we experience them within our world systems of justice. Why? Because the concepts serving as the foundation of these malignantly formed elements of our societies, which remain due to God's influence over time.

God knows we were created to be one with Him forever. He knows that without that Unity with Him we would suffer forever, and God Loves every one of us too much to let that happen. To keep that from happening there had to be a way to maintain His Perfection and set us free from Satan's Sin and Death. So, judgment is required to accomplish this miracle in both the Old and New Testaments.

Within the Old Testament we see the first best step provided by God as a way to remain in relationship with Him. That was the sacrificial system, which was formalized as recorded in Exodus, Leviticus, and other books of the Old Testament.

That's what the altar was all about. It was the way for humankind to be in a relationship with God, even though that relationship was broken by the power of Sin and Death, and the sins of the people. The altar was the place where sacrifices for those sins could be offered to God as a replacement for the eternal Death of all humankind.

By necessity the sacrificial system was put into place. While God looked toward the day when this would no longer be necessary. During the time of the Old Testament, however, it was necessary. Mankind was corrupt, committed sins, and was in need of facing the terrible truth of the Death that Sin caused. Even though this was true for Noah and his family after exiting the ark, God made a promise to Noah and all living things.

God promised never to destroy every living thing by flood again, but not because there had been a fundamental change in humankind. This verse clearly states, "for the intent of man's heart is evil from his youth" (Genesis 8:21).

God chose to set aside the state of being dominated by Sins, and the sins of Noah and his family, because he had acted obediently by faith, trusting God that the sacrifices would be sufficient in God's grace to prevent judgment. God knew that humankind required His Grace if there was going to be any relationship between Himself and humankind.

"Then God spoke to Noah and to his sons with him, saying, 'Now behold, I Myself do establish My covenant with you, and with your descendants after you; and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you; of all that comes out of the ark, even every beast of the earth. I establish My covenant with you; and all flesh shall never again be cut off by the water of the flood, neither shall there again be a flood to destroy the earth.' God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant which I am making between Me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all successive generations; I set My bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a sign of a covenant between Me and the earth. It shall come about, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow will be seen in the cloud, and I will remember My covenant, which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and never again shall the water become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the cloud, then I will look upon it, to remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.' And God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of the covenant which I have established between Me and all flesh that is on the earth.'" (Genesis 9:8-17)

It is important to note that God made this covenant with Noah, his descendants, and every living creature with flesh on the basis of their physical presence on the ark. Clearly all of God's creation is important to Him. Because we are separated from His creation, we do not sense how much all of creation longs to be set free from the power of sin.

"For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now." (Romans 8:20-22)

Noah had "found favor in the eyes of the Lord". He had faithfully built an ark for one hundred and twenty years, been protected by God from the flood, offered sacrifices to God, and had God establish a covenant with him. That's quite a set of events. You'd think that this lesson concerning the consequences of Sin would make a lasting impression, but what do we see happening next in the life of Noah?

"Then Noah began farming and planted a vineyard. He drank of the wine and became drunk, and uncovered himself inside his tent." (Genesis 9:20-21)

To Noah's credit there is no mention of this ever happening before or after this event. He had resisted the many temptations prior to the flood, but for some reason he is overcome by strong drink and his family suffers as a result.

His son Ham sees his condition and gloats over his father's sin, announcing his shameful state to his two brothers. Rather than joining with Ham in deriding their father, they respectfully covered his body. The result is that the two brothers are blessed, and Ham's son, Canaan, is cursed.

It was Ham's descendants that built the tower of Babel, and Canaan's descendants that inhabited a large territory that included Sodom and Gomorrah; if we know the stories from the recorded history of the Bible those are two names that we probably remember. We can clearly see that the attitude that Sin fosters has long-term implications for people and their children.

Also, we begin to see one of the reoccurring themes within the Old Testament. God forgives people, saves them or restores them and they reject Him in return. That's over simplified but it's pretty much what happens time and again.

The altar was a special place to remember the blessings of God, symbolically demonstrating the penalty of sin, ask for God's continue blessing, and express one's desire to remain in relationship with God while longing for His presence. In a way it also demonstrated the futility of humankind's efforts to fix their relationship with God. All people had to offer God was Death.

If any of us have ever taken the life of an animal, we know that it comes down to an abrupt act of violence that is bloody and final. There was no hunt for food involved here, no challenge other than the work of killing and slaughter so that the blood was drained, and parts of the sacrifice could be placed on the altar to be burned. It was a terrible bloody business at best.

We could not do this and take the process lightly. In the Old Testament times, when the Hebrew people brought their sacrifices it was animal after animal, bird after bird being put to the knife in a very close and personal manner. Out of respect for some who may be particularly sensitive about this we'll bypass the details.

Only with the utmost respect for the life being taken and the purpose for the sacrifice would Noah have completed this act of obedience. An act of acknowledging God as the one True God, the only source of Life, and seeking that any sins of his family members be forgiven.

Another thought that is not human-centric, which is usually the basis of our perspectives, is that by animals being used we should note the importance of animals to God. This is not something done lightly by God. Only by understanding how important people are to God can we better understand God's Love for animals and the rest of creation.

When an animal such as a sheep was used as a sacrifice it was first inspected to ensure it had no blemish, markings, or defects. This is because a sacrifice must be free of anything that might detract from its quality so only the best was offered to God when seeking God's forgiveness. In this way the sheep symbolically represented the perfection that a person must have in order to be forgiven.

To offer something less would be demonstrating the person's opinion that the best could be kept for themselves, and second-best was good enough for God. Many times, people have noted that God provided garments with the skins of animals as mentioned earlier. But make no mistake, this was not done lightly by God as though the life of the animal meant nothing, or little to God.

We need to realize that God could have made their garments out of something else, after all we're talking about God here. Realize this, by making their garments out of animal skin they had to wear this symbol of death caused by their sins. The animal that had to die because of them.

This had never happened before on the earth. It was a terrible event that Adam and Eve would never forget. We can't know their pain of seeing this because we've never lived in a perfect world. That's correct, we cannot understand the significance of this because we live in a world where death happens all the time in one way or another.

We should never take the death of other living creatures of God's creation lightly. Each death is of greater significance to God than we realize. God truly Loves His creation; all of it! While death is part of our existence on the earth it doesn't take away the fact of its tragic nature.

Now, someone is surely feeling like quickly saying, yes but it's okay because it's a part of living on the earth. After all God tells Noah this will be the case going forward:

"And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. And the fear of you and the terror of you shall be on every beast of the earth and on every bird of the sky; with everything that creeps on the ground, and all the fish of the sea, into your hand they are given. Every moving thing that is alive shall be food for you; I give all to you, as I gave the green plant. Only you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. And surely I will require your lifeblood; from every beast I will require it.'" (Genesis 9:1-5)

First of all, we need to note this killing for food goes both ways. It's a good thing that God put the fear and terror of humankind on every beast of the earth and bird of the sky, because without that it's quite possible the human race would not exist. We need to be clear in our mind and emotions that this enmity exists because of the sins of humankind and is not something to be celebrated.

Yes, God gave everything that moves on the ground, birds, and fish for us to eat. This, however, was not perfect behavior, or something that God preferred. It was part of the reality of the existing reality after the global flood. Even with the destruction of all life on the earth except for what was in the ark and water we see a continued deterioration of the relationship between humankind and all other living things.

Clearly this was not something God preferred. It is another example of God allowing the results of Sin and Death in the world to increase. Why? Because this comes as a result of the continued choices of humankind. Every person retained their ability to choose God's will or their own, which was based upon the foundational perspective created directly by Satan, which invaded all of creation because of Adam and Eve.

Some of us may be wondering about the life blood of humankind being taken by every beast of the field, and wondering how that's going to happen by an animal that just eats grass. This is just a sign some of us simply haven't been around animals enough. An animal doesn't have to eat people in order for our blood to flow and life be taken by an animal.

Just think about the poor soul that got butted off the edge of a cliff by a sheep just because the sheep didn't like the person being where they were at the time. Any person that's been caught between a cow

trying to move one way and a fence post that has no give to it knows how fortunate they are to be alive. Just as people who live in Alaska about moose. The list of possibilities are too numerous to mention.

It's ok for us to eat anything moving on the earth, but is another example of part of the necessity of living in a world dominated by Sin. No one here is saying it's wrong if a necessity. It can even become necessary to control the population of animals.

Nothing in these scriptures, however, intend the taking of a life is ever to be "fun". Also, there certainly is nothing here that gives humankind the right to cause the destruction of a species. Since some may be wondering, this is not being written by someone who doesn't understand the necessity of violence being met by more effective violence to protect others, or animals within our care.

Some of us wrap ourselves up within violence as a means of dealing with violence repeatedly. We stuff the effects of violence deep inside, though we do discover that it always breaks out usually creating more pain for ourselves and others. For some of us we refer to aspects of violence with levity and minimize the severity of its outcome because of its necessity. Got it.

Many of us can find no other way to deal with violence. The same was true for people in the Old Testament. They was, however, a place for them to deal with this and that was the altar. It was the only place to deal with Sin and our sins, because the results of both is Death. Fortunately, for us today it does not require the sacrifice of animals of any kind, because God has provided another sacrifice that we will learn about in another chapter soon.

In the Old Testament, however, that's all people had and for good reason. Since the nation God created through the man Abraham never remained faithful to God the intent for their existence was not accomplished as God desired. Generation after generation had to learn the same lessons over and over again.

Why? Because the intention of their perspectives and choices never changed. While individuals were faithful to the Lord, as a nation they wanted to be in control rather than being humble before God and obeying God's guidance.

God created the nation of Israel for the Hebrew people in the best place possible for people from everywhere to learn about how to have a relationship with Him. Their nation was the pathway from one major part of the world to another.

All the Hebrew people needed to do was live where God put them faithfully in their relationship with God. Then teach the world about God as it passed through their land. Instead they made having a relationship with God terribly complex, and only allowed Hebrew people within the temple where God was worshiped.

What did their unfaithfulness cause? It caused God to have to go through one cycle after another of His people repenting of their sins before Him faithfully and then rejecting Him time after time. As a result, the Hebrew people suffered all types of conflicts, wars, conquering, and oppression until they repented once again.

The end result is a record of the history of the Hebrew people that reveals to the world that sins are punished, and repentance through sacrifice brings restoration of relationship with God. That

relationship, however, has brokenness inherently as part of its existence because of people. Yet, God is faithful to keep His promises. God is ever faithful to His Word.

This was learned by the world piece-by-piece by the contemporaries of the Hebrew people at the time. Thankfully, we can learn about this by just reading the Old Testament of the Bible.

One of the things we need to remember is that God's intended will shall always be fulfilled. There is the best way for this to happen, and there are other ways this can occur that will always include unnecessary suffering. Regardless of what we choose God's ultimate will shall prevail.

The persistence of people wanting to rebel against God seems never ending within the Bible. How can God ever change this and provide a solution? That we can best understand by first clearly understanding the problem.