

The place in which people choose to worship reflect and/or influence their values concerning worship. As Christians, we have been given the freedom of where we worship (John 4:21–23), but for Israel the place was determined by God, first at the tabernacle and later at the temple in Jerusalem with its magnificent building and courtyards. Today as worshipers of God, we can picture ourselves figuratively entering His gates with thanksgiving and coming into His courts with praise (Psalm 100:4), which was and should be a joyous and blessed event (cf. Psalm 65:1–4; 84:2; 100:4.) Embracing the truths expressed in the outward forms of Israel’s worship will affect our personal experience of daily worship. Two items confronted each worshiper visually and together offer a defining statement about man’s relationship to God and about our approach to God: the bronze altar and the courtyard.

I. *The Bronze Altar (27:1–8)*

A. *Instructions for building the altar*

The altar was essentially a wooden box, covered with bronze, roughly 2½ meters square and 1½ meter high. The four horn-like projections on the four upper corners would receive ceremonial daubing of sacrificial blood for purification and atonement (Lev. 8:15; 16). Both the horns and the emphasis on blood appear to be unique to Israelite worship.

Utensils needed in sacrificing were also made of bronze. The nature of the “grating” and the “ledge” remains uncertain. Some suggest that the ledge was the top edge, others place it around the mid-section. The “grating” was literally a lattice-work. Though some suggest it was to hold the fire within the altar, it appears more logical that it was an external, vertical lattice-work around the lower half of the altar, making the transport rings fully accessible. The altar, as a hollow box, was probably filled with stones upon which the fire was built (cf. Exodus 20:24–25).

B. *The function and significance of the altar*

1. The need for the altar had been anticipated in the instructions for building the ark of the covenant, upon which was the atonement cover, the place where a ransom price was offered.
2. The function of the altar would have been clear, as sacrifices had been offered since the fall of man into sin. The horns pointed to the blood which represented life (Genesis 9:4; Leviticus 17:11). A substitute life had to be sacrificed for atonement to be made.
3. The altar with its horns was a reminder of important spiritual truths: of the worshipers sinfulness, that sin separates, and that the penalty of sin is death (Genesis 2:17; Romans 6:23). But the altar also reminds the worshiper of God’s provision (Leviticus 17:11), that blood was given to make atonement on the altar. Never-the-less, it should have shown also that animal sacrifice was insufficient (Hebrews 10:1–4).

There is, however, a greater sacrifice that is sufficient to make the believer holy. (Hebrews 10:5–14.) Jesus Christ was God’s perfect provision, a perfect sacrifice, that could take away sin and by which the worshiper could be made holy before God. As the Israelite worshiper faced the altar and considered its significance, so we need to face Jesus Christ and consider the significance of His death. Only in His sacrifice can we have free access into the presence of God.

II. *The Courtyard (27:9–19)*

A. *Instructions for building the courtyard*

The focus in the courtyard was not the hangings which defined it, but the courtyard itself. Linen hangings, probably white, supported by pillars in bronze bases and fastened with silver hooks and bands, defined an area approximately 25 meters wide and 50 meters long. A broad entrance way, approximately 10 meters, was shielded with a screen of linen, worked with blue, purple and scarlet threads.

B. *The function and significance of the courtyard*

We look to the courtyard itself for the primary significance, though little is said about it. Leviticus describes the courtyard as a holy place, which might have been symbolized in the white linen hangings. The priests were to eat certain of the sacrifices in a holy place, specifically, the courtyard of the tabernacle. Such was symbolic of fellowship with God. Sins had been forgiven, the relationship restored, the threat of judgment removed.

The Psalmists considered being in the courts of the Lord a blessing and a joy (Psalm 65:1–4; 84:1–4, 10a). The prelude to the joy was the forgiveness of sin, that which was pictured by the altar.

The courtyard portrayed the best place in the universe to be, in the presence of a holy God, full of loving-kindness. But the way into the courts has to go past the altar. “Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. (Psalm 32:1 *NIV*) God gives joy, even in adversity (Romans 15:13; Galatians 5:22; 1 Thessalonians 1:6; 2 Corinthians 8:2).

Beware of the culturally “acceptable” sins. Failure to give thanks and failure to trust God are sins, disobedience which will prevent His joy. Entrust yourself fully to Him. Remember Christ, the perfect sacrifice. Walk in His Spirit. Receive His forgiveness and entered joyfully into His courts.