

THERE BUILDED HE AN ALTAR UNTO THE LORD

TEXT: GENESIS 12:1-7

INTRODUCTION:

1. The first time we see an altar in the Bible is in Genesis 8:20, where we read, "And Noah builded an altar unto the LORD; and took of every clean beast, and of every clean fowl, and offered burnt offerings on the altar."
2. All of the altars in the Old Testament pointed toward the cross of Christ, and there are no altars after Calvary.
3. The book of Hebrews emphasizes this. The Hebrew Christians were being pressured to return to Judaism, and there are several warnings in this epistle about the danger of going back into Judaism.
4. The unsaved Jews opposed Christianity, and they said that Christians had no temple, no sacrifice, no priesthood, and no altar. So Hebrews 13:10 says, "We have an altar..."
5. In contrast with the altar in the temple in Jerusalem, which would be destroyed just a few years after the epistle to the Hebrews was written, our altar is up yonder in heaven.
6. For example, in Revelation 8:3, John saw an angel came standing at the altar in heaven, having a golden censer in his hand.
7. And in Revelation 9:13, John says he "heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar which is before God."
8. There are also references to the altar in heaven in Revelation 6:9; 14:18; and 16:7.
9. HA Ironside said, "We have an altar, he tells us, of which they who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat; that is, our altar and our service are all of a heavenly character. Since Christ has died there is no altar on earth; but in Heaven, that of which the golden altar was a type, abides, where Christ makes intercession for us. To talk of any other altar, as is done in Romanism for instance, and some sects of Protestantism, is to deny the truth of the finished work of Christ" (*Hebrews*).
10. The words "altar" and "altars" are found over 400 times in the Bible. This morning I would like to consider four of them, all built by Abraham.

I. THE ALTAR OF SERVICE (12:7)

1. This took place on the arrival of Abraham to the land of Canaan, in obedience to the call God (Genesis 12:1).

2. Acts 7:2 says, "The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran."
3. Abraham's obedience is referred to in Hebrews 11:8, which says, "By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went."
4. Abraham is referred to as the LORD's servant in Psalm 105:6, and Abraham was an obedient servant of God, so we will call this first altar the altar of service.
5. Abraham served God faithfully, and he trusted God implicitly and without questioning, for he believed that God would give him the land for an inheritance.
6. The altar Abraham built was "unto the LORD, who appeared unto him" (12:7).
7. Have you been to the altar of service? Have you told the Lord you will obey Him and follow Him (and meant it)?

II. THE ALTAR OF SUPPLICATION (12:8)

1. Most people would prefer saying, "the altar of prayer," but to help us remember we will keep our outline alliterated -- the altar of supplication follows the altar of service (12:7, 8; cf. 13:4).
2. The names in Scripture are very significant. Genesis 12:8 tells us that from the altar of service Abraham moved to a mountain on the east of Bethel ("house of God") and pitched his tent, having Bethel ("house of God") on the west, and Hai or Ai ("heap of ruins") on the east: "and there he built an altar unto the LORD and called upon the name of the LORD."
3. The names and locations are very significant. It was between the "house of God" and the "heap of ruins" that Abraham pitched his tent, which pictures the sphere of every believer's present path.
4. On one side is the world -- it is a heap of ruins, defiled by sin and under the control of Satan. And on the other side is the house of God, our protection from Satan's enticements.
5. First John 5:19 says, "And we know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness." The whole world lieth in wickedness. It is in ruins. It is under the control of "the Wicked One," who our Lord called "the prince of this world."
6. Abraham's "tent" and Abraham's "altar" symbolize our walk in separation with God. The tent represents our life as a pilgrim here in this wicked, sin-loving world.

7. Hebrews 11:13 says they "confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth."
8. First Peter 2:11 says, "Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul."
9. *This world is not my home I'm just a passing through
My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue
The angels beckon me from heaven's open door
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore.* -- Albert Brumley
10. Abraham's altar of prayer and supplication represents his dependency upon God. Genesis 12:8 says, "And there he builded an altar unto the LORD, and called upon the name of the LORD."
11. Jeremiah 33:3 says, "Call unto me, and I will answer thee, and shew thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not."

III. THE ALTAR OF SEPARATION (13:18)

1. First, the LORD had to separate Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees, the land of his birth, and from his own kinsmen, in order to train and educate him.
2. It is good that a new believer learns the lesson of separation right away. Isaiah 51:2 says, "Look unto Abraham your father, and unto Sarah that bare you: for I called him alone, and blessed him, and increased him."
3. Abraham had to leave the comforts of home. Abraham had to learn how to stand alone because the LORD called him "alone" (Isa. 51:2).
4. Lot accompanied Abraham into the promised land, but it soon became apparent that Lot's worldly spirit hindered God's plan for Abraham.
5. After Abraham had arrived in the promised land, a famine arose, and Abraham started to backslide. The famine was a time of testing, but Abraham's faith failed him in this hour of crisis, and he sought refuge in Egypt.
6. In the Bible, Egypt represents the world.
7. Abraham, accompanied by his worldly nephew Lot, left Egypt and returned to the promised land. Genesis 13:4 says Abraham went to the place of the altar, which he had made there at the first: "and there Abram called on the name of the LORD."
8. Up to this point, it seems that Lot traveled with Abraham wherever he went. Though they were close relatives, they were as unlike as two people could be.
9. A. W. Pink said, "In almost every respect Lot compares unfavorably with Abram. Abram walked by faith, Lot by sight. Abram was

generous and magnanimous; Lot greedy and worldly. Abram looked for a city whose builder and maker was God; Lot made his home in a city that was built by man and destroyed by God. Abram was the father of all who believe; Lot was father of those whose name is a perpetual infamy. Abram was made 'heir of the world' (Rom. 4:3), while the curtain falls upon Lot with all his possessions destroyed in Sodom, and himself dwelling in a 'cave' (Gen. 19:30)" (*Gleanings in Genesis*).

10. Genesis 13:6 says, "And the land was not able to bear them, that they might dwell together: for their substance was great, so that they could not dwell together." It was time to split up (Gen. 13:6-9).
11. Then Lot chose him all the plain of Jordan...and pitched his tent toward Sodom" (Gen. 13:11, 12).
12. As for Abraham, he "removed his tent, and came and dwelt in the plain of Mamre, which is in Hebron, and built there an altar unto the LORD" (13:18).
13. This was the altar of separation. Abraham was Lot's uncle, but they had to separate. Sometimes we need to separate from certain people.
14. First and foremost, the Bible teaches that Christians need to separate from lost sinners (cf. II Cor. 6:14-18).
15. Furthermore, we have to separate from Christians who are not right with God. Romans 16:17 says, "Mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them."
16. The Bible teaches we should separate from backsliders and backbiters, and bitter and carnal believers. Abraham had to separate from Lot.
17. Second Peter 2:7 and 8 tell us that Lot was a just man and a righteous man. But he was a worldly, backslidden man.
18. Lot was so worldly and so backslidden that when he tried to warn his sons-in-law, which married his daughters, that the LORD was about to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, they could not take him seriously (Gen. 19:14).
19. We are to separate not only from what is clearly wrong, but also from all that is questionable. H.A. Ironside used to tell a story about a friend who was wondering if a shirt was clean enough to wear to an important banquet. His wife saw him examining the shirt by the light of the window, and said, "Remember, if it's doubtful, it's dirty."
20. So Abraham dwelt in Mamre, and there he built an altar unto the LORD (Gen. 13:18). This was the altar of separation.

IV. THE ALTAR OF SURRENDER (22:9)

1. Most of us are familiar with Abraham's remarkable trial of faith (Genesis 22:1). Abraham had been tested time and time again, but never as he was here in Genesis 22.
2. Abraham waited a long time for Isaac to be born. He was 100 years old when Isaac was born, and Sarah was 90!
3. After waiting so long for a son, Abraham was told, "Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering" (Gen. 22:2).
4. This was the altar of surrender.
5. The Bible teaches us that Abraham's faith in God was so strong that he was willing to sacrifice his beloved son, believing that God would raise him from the dead (cf. Hebrews 11:17-19).
6. Abraham's greatest trial was at the altar of surrender. Florence Nightingale was the world's most famous nurse. She grew up in a wealthy family, and as a young lady, she loved the social life her status could afford -- the worldly dances, the expensive clothes, the prominent suitors -- but she soon grew tired of it.
7. In her diary she wrote, "I craved for...something worth doing, instead of frittering time away on useless trifles... Now no more childish things, no more vain things. Now, Lord, let me think only of Thy will."
8. "Lord, let me think only of Thy will." That is surrendering to God's will.

CONCLUSION:

1. Andrew Murray began his book *Absolute Surrender* by quoting I Kings 20:1-4. It is an unusual text for a book on surrendering to God, but that is how Andrew Murray applied it.
2. He wrote: "What Ben Hadad asked was *absolute surrender*; and what Ahab gave was what was asked of him—*absolute surrender*. I want to use these words: 'My lord, O king, according to thy saying, I am thine, and all that I have,' as the words of absolute surrender with which every child of God ought to yield himself to his Father. We have heard it before, but we need to hear it very definitely — the condition of God's blessing is absolute surrender of all into His hands. Praise God! If our hearts are willing for that, there is no end to what God will do for us, and to the blessing God will bestow."

3. Let us consider Abraham's four altars: service, supplication, separation, surrender (22:9)