

Altered by the Altar
Worship as a Right Priority
Genesis 12:1-9

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July 19, 2015

Text Introduction: Genesis is the book of beginnings. Genesis shows us the beginning of many things—creation, humanity, sin, family, even nations. Genesis also shows us the beginning of worship. For example, the last verse of chapter 4 tells us, “At that time people began to call on the name of Yahweh.” (4:26)

We ought to be able to learn something about worship from this book of beginnings. A recurring phrase in the book is “built an altar.” We will look at each of these texts as we examine how worship changes us or how we are “Altered by the Altar.” Over the rest of the weeks of the summer we will look at each of the texts that have this phrase. Last week, we considered Noah. We learned from Noah’s building of an altar that “worship is the right response” to salvation. There is no other response, really, when you think about what God has done for us in saving us through Jesus Christ.

Today, we turn our attention to another familiar character of the Genesis story—Abraham.

Text: The LORD said to Abram:

Go out from your land,
your relatives,
and your father’s house
to the land that I will show you.

² I will make you into a great nation,
I will bless you,

I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.

³ I will bless those who bless you,
I will curse those who treat you with contempt,
and all the peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.

⁴ So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was 75 years old when he left Haran. ⁵ He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated, and the people he had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan, ⁶ Abram passed through the land to the site of Shechem, at the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. ⁷ Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, “I will give this land to your offspring.” So he built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him. ⁸ From there he moved on to the hill country east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. He built an altar to Yahweh there, and he called on the name of Yahweh. ⁹ Then Abram journeyed by stages to the Negev.

Introduction: A few weeks ago, I got a call to come up to the front desk where there was a couple who had stopped by to see the church. They were contemplating a job offer which would move them to

Lafayette. The man had been a few times to our city. The woman had never been. She wasn't altogether thrilled to be moving from their home in another state. They had done their research on churches by looking at various websites. They sensed that our church could be where God would lead them if they in fact moved to Lafayette.

As they drove into town on a house hunting mission, the wife said to her husband, "Before we do anything else I want to go by the First Baptist Church of Lafayette." And, that is how I got to meet them. They will be joining, I am quite sure, sometime this fall. That's not the first time that kind of thing happened. We have members who are here this morning who have done a similar thing.

That is the way it should be.

Last week, in considering Noah's altar, we remarked that the building of the altar was the right response to God saving him from the flood that destroyed the rest of the world. He exited the ark and immediately built an altar. In the immediacy of the building of that altar, we also note a degree of the priority of worship. I think we are going to see some overlapping of lessons as we continue to examine the altars of Genesis one by one. We certainly see in Abraham, or Abram as he is still being called in Genesis 12, something about the priority of worship. That's the lesson that I want to isolate this morning.

Abraham's story in Genesis 12 is a model story of what it means to take God at His word and obey. I have always been amazed at Abram's faith depicted in this account. As I have often summarized about this story, "God said to Abram 'Get up and go,' and Abram got up and went."

The part of the story that I want to isolate today is not Abram's journey to the land of Canaan, but instead what he did when he got there. He built an altar.

A Series of Altars

In fact in Abram's case, we see a series of altars. In chapter 12, we have two initial altars.

- ⁷ Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "I will give this land to your offspring." So he built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him.
- ⁸ From there he moved on to the hill country east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. He built an altar to Yahweh there, and he called on the name of Yahweh.

In chapter 13, we see the indication of additional altars. The first is the return to the altar between Bethel and Ai.

- Then Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev—he, his wife, and all he had, and Lot with him. ² Abram was very rich in livestock, silver, and gold. ³ He went by stages from the Negev to Bethel, to the place between Bethel and Ai where his tent had formerly been, ⁴ to the site where he had built the altar. And Abram called on the name of Yahweh there.

And, then once more in chapter 13, we read in verse 18 about the building of an altar.

- ¹⁸ So Abram moved his tent and went to live near the oaks of Mamre at Hebron, where he built an altar to the LORD.

Let me take you through a series of questions today to arrive at the application of this text.

When?

When did Abram build these altars? Immediately! He built the altar when arrived at a place to establish a home. Just as we saw with Noah, Abram builds the altar first.

Why?

Why did he build these altars? He built the altar to worship. He worshipped God because of God's...

- Presence—The Lord appeared to him.
- Promise—God reiterated the promises that caused Abram to leave his former home in the first place.
- Provision—The Canaanites were in the land.

Where?

Where did he build? He built at the new places he arrived to establish a home.

All of this speaks to the **priority of worship!**

Did Abram always build an altar?

Sadly, Abram did not always build an altar. Genesis 12:10-20 tells us that part of the story.

¹⁰ There was a famine in the land, so Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine in the land was severe. ¹¹ When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "Look, I know what a beautiful woman you are. ¹² When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' They will kill me but let you live. ¹³ Please say you're my sister so it will go well for me because of you, and my life will be spared on your account." ¹⁴ When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. ¹⁵ Pharaoh's officials saw her and praised her to Pharaoh, so the woman was taken to Pharaoh's household. ¹⁶ He treated Abram well because of her, and Abram acquired flocks and herds, male and female donkeys, male and female slaves, and camels.

¹⁷ But the LORD struck Pharaoh and his household with severe plagues because of Abram's wife Sarai. ¹⁸ So Pharaoh sent for Abram and said, "What have you done to me? Why didn't you tell me she was your wife? ¹⁹ Why did you say, 'She's my sister,' so that I took her as my wife? Now, here is your wife. Take her and go!" ²⁰ Then Pharaoh gave his men orders about him, and they sent him away with his wife and all he had.

Do you see the lesson?

When worship is not the priority, we are most susceptible to disobedience. Worship ceases at the place where trust wanes. Obedience ceases at the place where worship wanes.

So What?

We cannot neglect worship in our lives. We cannot neglect corporate worship. Corporate gathering of worship must be a priority in our lives. We cannot neglect individual worship. Daily worship must be a priority.

When we make one step away from worship, we are making a step toward disobedience.

Do you need to go back between Bethel and Ai?