

ABRAHAM'S ALTAR

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GENESIS 12, 13, AND 22

The book of Genesis is a book of biographies. God desires to show us what His will is concerning man through the biographies of eight person—how much He is interested in man, what works He has done in man, and eventually, what glory He will receive from man.

In the first man, Adam, we see the tree of life. God's purpose is that man should have His life—the tree of life—in him that he may be united with God and be one with God. Unfortunately, man chose the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He declared his independence of God. Man wanted to develop his own soul, his own power. He wanted to be his own god, and the result was death.

In Abel we see the sacrifice. Through the blood of the lamb we are able to return to God. The way to God is through the sacrifice, even our Lord Jesus.

After we have returned to God, then we need to walk with God, and that is what we find in Enoch. Enoch walked with God and this is what we need to do. The result of Enoch's walking is that he was taken by God. And if we walk with God, we have the opportunity of being raptured to heaven without passing through death because we know His coming is very near.

The secret of walking with God is to abide in Christ, and

that is what Noah's ark tells us. Noah was shut up in the ark for a year and ten days, through the whole period of the flood. When he came out of the ark, he inherited a new earth. We are exhorted to abide in Christ; and if we abide in Him, we shall inherit the new heaven and the new earth.

The fifth person is Abraham. God is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Abraham is the father of faith. During his life, he built altar after altar, not just one altar but four altars, because *altar* is symbolic of the life of Abraham.

No one would build an altar for himself. You might build a house for yourself, but when you build an altar it is for God. In other words, altar is symbolic of our religious life, or, to put it more accurately, our spiritual life. Without the altar there will be no spiritual life. The altar in the Old Testament is the cross in the New Testament because Hebrews 13:10 says, "We have an altar." If you read the context it speaks of the cross. We must not only have a basic, objective faith in the cross of our Lord Jesus, we must also have a continuous, subjective experience of the cross working in us. We know that an understanding and a faith in the cross of our Lord Jesus is basic because if we have no understanding and no faith in the cross of our Lord Jesus, then there is no salvation. We have no life; there is no forgiveness; there is no redemption. It is the cross of our Lord Jesus that gives us salvation. We need to

know the cross of our Lord Jesus—how our sins were borne by our Lord Jesus in His body on the cross, how we ourselves were crucified with Him on the cross because we were in Him, how the enemy, Satan, and all the powers of darkness were completely routed, taken captive by the victory of the cross. We need to know all the different phases of the work of Christ on the cross because this is the basis of our faith and it gives us salvation.

We need to know the cross in all its objective sense. But more than that, we must receive the cross into our very being and let the cross work in us to cast away that which is of the flesh, of the old creation, of our self. It will bring in that which is of the new creation which is of Christ, that we may be transformed and be conformed to the image of God's Son. So the cross is most vital to our spiritual life. If there is no cross, there is no Christ. If there is no cross, there is no Christian. It is as important as this. You cannot separate the cross from Christ; and, in the same way, you cannot separate the cross from Christians.

Abraham's native country was Ur of the Chaldeans, and in Acts 7 we are told, "The God of glory appeared to Abraham in the land of Ur of the Chaldeans." Tradition tells us that Abraham's father, Terah, was a maker of idols, and excavation shows us that Ur was a city full of idols. At that time the whole world had left God and worshiped idols. And Abraham's father was an idol

maker. But the glorious thing was that out of a city of idols, even from the family of an idol maker, God called Abraham. The God of glory appeared to Abraham, and God called him out.

The story is told that Abraham was seeking after the truth, and he often wondered about these idols. One day when his father was going away, he told his son Abraham to take care of the idols that he had made. But after his father left, Abraham began to take away an arm from one idol and a leg from another idol and he broke them into pieces. He put them all into confusion. When the father came back and saw all the idols on the ground upon each other and all broken up, he was very angry with his son. He said, "Why didn't you take care of my idols?"

Abraham said, "After you left, these idols began to fight against each other and that is the result of the fight."

His father said, "That is nonsense; these idols cannot fight."

And Abraham said, "Why should we worship them?" (That is a Jewish story; it is not the Bible.)

Here was a man who was completely delivered from idol worship. The God of glory appeared to him, calling him to leave his land, his kindred, and go to the place that God would show him. That was how the story began. But unfortunately, Abraham consulted with flesh and blood. The result was that instead of leaving the land and

his kindred, it was his father, Terah, who took Abram and his nephew, Lot, and left Ur of Chaldea on the way to the land of Canaan.

Evidently, after Abraham heard the call, he consulted with his father. When his father, Terah, saw that he was insisting on leaving, he took the initiative and took Abraham out. Instead of following the Lord all the way, he stopped mid-way in Haran (see Genesis 11). And if you look at geography, Haran is right in the middle. Abraham obeyed God only half way.

We do not know how long they sojourned in Haran. It was not until God took Terah, Abraham's father, that God appeared to him and told him to leave his land, his kindred, and his father's house to go to the place of God's choice. In Genesis 12 Abram took his wife, his nephew Lot, all the properties they had accumulated in Haran and all the servants, and went to Canaan.

THE ALTAR OF REVELATION AND SEPARATION

After they arrived in the land of Canaan at a place called Shechem near the oaks of Moreh, God appeared to him and said, "I will give this land to your seed." For this Abraham built his first altar. God appeared to Abraham when he was in Ur of the Chaldeans, but he did not build an altar there. He went out of Ur to Haran and stayed there for a number of years, but he did not build an altar there. It was not until he

arrived in Canaan, and God appeared to him again and said, "I will give this land to your seed," that he built an altar.

You cannot just build an altar anytime, anywhere. Spiritually speaking, there is a time and a place for an altar to be built. Not only must there be the appearing of the Lord, there must also be the obedience to the Lord. We may call this altar that Abraham built the altar of revelation because the God of glory appeared to him. Revelation is the foundation of Christian life. If there is no revelation, there is no beginning. But when God appeared, then it began.

Even though God appeared to Abraham when he was in Ur of Chaldea, there was no altar because after God gives revelation, God has to be obeyed. In Haran Abraham obeyed God only half way; therefore, he could not build an altar because there was no testimony until he arrived in Canaan, in the place called Shechem. *Shechem* in Hebrew means "shoulder;" it means "responsibility." *Moreh* means "teacher, to be taught." In other words, after God has revealed Himself, you have to put your shoulder under the command of God, be responsible, and respond to God, and learn what God wants you to learn. It is not until then that you can build an altar.

Has God revealed to us? Thank God, He has revealed His Son in us. That marks the beginning of our Christian life. But when God reveals Himself to us, invariably there will be a

calling. And the calling is to “come out” and to “go into.” We are called to come out of the world and to enter into Canaan, which is Christ. In other words, when God appears to anyone, there will be a calling for separation. God appeared to Abraham and called him to separate himself from his old country, even from his old kindred so that he might be completely God’s—separation. Until that separation was completed, there was no building of the altar. And in spiritual things it is true with every one of us.

Thank God, He has revealed His Son in us, but with the revelation comes the calling. We are called to be separated from the world that we may belong to Christ completely. We are not our own; we are His. We are bought with a price; therefore, we must be separated from the world.

Many of God’s people today, who have received the revelation of God’s Son Jesus Christ, have failed to follow Him in the way of separation. How many of God’s people today are saved and yet have not completely separated themselves from the world! Probably they have come out of Ur of Chaldea but they stop short in Haran, midway, instead of going all the way with the Lord. Because of this we find our life with Christ is not complete. We have one leg in the world and another leg in Christ. Unfortunately, this seems to be the life of many Christians.

We must put our shoulder to

the calling of God. We must learn the lesson, and it is only then that the cross begins to appear in our life. Is the sign of the cross in our life? Are we separated from the world? Do we belong to Christ fully? Is this our testimony? So this is the first altar—the altar of revelation and separation.

THE ALTAR OF COMMUNION OR CONFESSION

Then Abraham began to move south from the plain of Moreh up to the mountains. When he moved, he pitched his tent between two places—Bethel in the west and Ai in the east. After he pitched his tent between these two places, with his back to Ai and his face toward Bethel, the Bible says he built another altar and he called upon the name of the Lord. This is the second altar that Abraham built. We may call this altar the altar of communion or the altar of confession.

Christian life is never stagnant. It is true that after we move on a distance we may rest for awhile to consolidate that which the Lord has shown us, but you find that we again have to move on. Our Christian life is a continuous on-going life. We move from the plains to the mountains. We are always ascending, ascending, ascending. It is a continuous moving onwards and upwards. This is Christian life.

After we have separated ourselves from the world and have given ourselves completely to Christ, then we come to a

place in between Ai and Bethel. This is the place where we will put our tent. It is in that place the second altar will be built. In other words, the second phase of the cross will begin to be built in our life.

In the original, *Ai* means “a heap of ruins,” and *Bethel* means “the house of God.” What a contrast! On the one hand you find a heap of ruins. That speaks of the old creation. That speaks of the flesh. It is just a heap of ruins. That speaks of the self in us; that is, in our self there is no good. It is just a heap of ruins. Have we been ruined? Yes, we have been ruined by sin.

On the other hand, the house of God speaks of the new creation. It speaks of that which is recreated in Christ Jesus. It speaks of the spiritual house in which God dwells. So, as we continue to move on with the Lord, as we fellowship, commune with the Lord, we will come to a place where we begin to see the division of the spirit and the soul. We begin to see that which is of our self, of the old creation, is but a heap of ruins. We will leave it behind. Our face is toward that which is recreated in Christ Jesus, the house of God, Bethel. This is the place where we will put our tent. There will we stay. Out of ruin God is building His beautiful house.

Later on, at Ai, the children of Israel suffered a great deal because one of them, Achan, coveted a beautiful Babylonian garment, two hundred shekels of silver, and ten shekels of gold.

He took them and hid them in his tent. Because of his sin, the whole army of Israel suffered defeat until that sin was dealt with. What does this mean? It means that he wanted that beautiful garment; he wanted the silver and gold to build his own house. And in trying to build his own house it became a heap of ruins.

How often we try to beautify our flesh! We try to build up our old self, and the result is a heap of ruins. God wants us to see that on the cross the old creation passed away. It is now all new; it is now all of God; it is all in Christ Jesus. And it is only then that we find the house of God is built. The cross works a little deeper. There is not only separation from the world but separation from the old creation, from the soulish, from the flesh, that He may be able to build us up into the house of God.

Abraham built an altar and he began to call on the name of the Lord. What does it mean? When you call upon the name of the Lord, it means that you realize how helpless you are; therefore, you have to call upon Him. You have to depend on Him completely. If you can help yourself, you will not call upon the name of the Lord. We begin to realize how helpless we are. We have to call upon His name and let Him do everything that is needed to deliver us from this self, the old flesh, that we may live in the good of the new creation and be built up together into the house of the Lord. That is the second altar.

This also needs to be seen in

our lives. Has the cross so worked in your life that it begins to divide the soul and the spirit to show you that whatever is of you is just a heap of ruins, nothing? Do you see that your hope is in Christ and that which is out of Christ will be built into a beautiful house of God? It is the altar of communion as well as the altar of confession.

When Abraham was tested because of the famine, he failed. He went to Egypt and there was no altar. Materially, he was blessed because Pharaoh gave him many servants and cattle, but he took his wife away. There was no altar there. But when he returned to the land of Canaan, by the grace of God he returned to the place where he had built that altar between Ai and Bethel. You have to go back to the place of communion and the place of confession.

After Abraham and Lot returned from Egypt their property accumulated. Abraham had many cattle, many herds, many flocks, and so did Lot. Their herdsmen began to quarrel with each other for the pastures. Because of the abundance of material things the brothers could not stay together in peace. Isn't that strange? Abraham told Lot, "We are brothers, and when our herdsmen quarrel before the Canaanites, it is not a good testimony." So finally, Abraham said, "The day has come that we have to part. The whole land is before you. You choose. If you go to the east, I will go to the west; if you go to the south, I will go to the north. You choose."

God gave the land to Abraham, not to Lot. Lot just followed Abraham, his uncle, out. According to the custom, surely the young must give ground to the old, to respect the old. Even though Abraham graciously told Lot he could choose first, Lot should have said, "Oh, no, you are my uncle; you have the first choice, and whatever is left, I will take." That was the right thing to do. But Lot, having no revelation, having no vision, and since God had not given anything to him, he thought the opportunity had come for him to seize upon the best. So he looked around and saw Sodom and Gomorrah, where the Dead Sea is today. It was as fertile as Egypt, as the Nile River from where they had just come. So when he saw that place, he chose it. He took the best of the land.

After Lot left, God appeared to Abraham and said, "Abraham, lift up your eyes. Look to the east, to the west, to the north, to the south, and whatever land you see is yours." In other words, Lot chose his land but God said, "Whatever you see, Abraham, it is yours," because Abraham saw that land, too. God said, "It is all yours. Rise up and go through the land because I have promised it to you."

THE ALTAR OF WITNESSING

Abraham began to move again, and he moved to the place called Hebron, to the oak of Mamre. There he built a third altar. We call it the altar of

witnessing because in the incident that we just mentioned, Abraham was even able to give up his rights. It is very difficult to give up one's rights. When you are able to give up your rights, you really give up yourself. Often we say, "That is my right!" If a person is able to give up his rights, he is giving up himself.

In letting Lot make the first choice, even though the rights belonged to Abraham, it showed that Abraham was able to give up himself completely. He was not trying to grasp anything for himself, but he was willing to give up even his rights. In doing that, he entered into a more abundant life. You do not measure your life by gain; you measure it by loss. Because Abraham was willing to give up his rights, God gave him more abundantly. He was able to give up himself so completely, therefore he entered into an abiding life.

The word *Mamre* means "firmness or vigor." In other words, Abraham's life was fully established in God, and because of that he was full of strength. How do we know? Immediately after that there was a battle of four kings and five kings. The four kings under Chedorlaomer overcame the five kings and took away all the people—men, women, children—and all the properties of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Lot was in the city, so Lot and his family and property were taken captive.

When Abraham heard the news, he did not say, "God vindicated me." Not at all. When

Abraham heard the news that his nephew Lot was taken captive, he gathered the 318 young men that he trained in his own house and traveled all night until they came upon the four kings. With that handful of people he defeated the four kings and delivered Lot and everyone out. What strength that was! What a witness it was!

After that great victory, the king of Sodom said, "You may take all the properties, all the riches, just give me the men," And Abraham said, "No, I do not want anyone to say the king of Sodom made me rich." He refused everything because the God of the heavens and the earth was His God." What a testimony! What a witness! What a strength!

This is what is meant by having the dying of Jesus in us, so that the life of Jesus will be manifested in us and also in other people (see II Corinthians 4). How can we minister life to other people? Where is the strength? The strength comes when we are willing to give up our life, when we are willing to bear in our bodies the dying of Jesus. Think of the dying of Jesus. Our Lord Jesus had every right. He being equal with God, He is God and that was not something to be grasped at. Yet He emptied Himself; He gave up His rights as God—His worship, His honor, His glory, His majesty, His power. He gave up all these things to become a man. Even as a man He had rights, but He gave up His rights. He became obedient unto death, even death on the cross.

God highly exalted Him and gave Him a name that is above every name. At that name every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord.

This is where the strength comes. This is where the witness comes. This is where ministry comes. It is when we are willing to give up ourselves completely, even our lives. It is when we begin to be established in Him, in that abiding life with Him, that we are able to minister. Out of weakness comes strength. This is the third altar, the third phase of the working of the cross in our lives.

THE ALTAR OF WORSHIP

When Abraham was 100 years old, he got a son, Isaac. But one day, God said to Abraham, "Give your son, your only son, your beloved son, Isaac, to Me as a burnt offering." God tested Abraham. He rose early in the morning, not consulting with flesh and blood, took his son, and traveled three days journey to Moriah, the place where God wanted him to offer Isaac. When he came to Moriah, he told his servants, "Stay there; I and the lad will go to the mountain to worship and we will come back."

They began to climb the mountain and Isaac said, "Father, you have the knife, you have the wood, but where is the sacrifice, the sheep?"

Abraham said, "God will provide."

After they climbed Mt. Moriah, Abraham built the last altar. He bound his son and put

him on the altar. And God said, "That is enough; I know that you fear Me and have not kept back anything from Me." And God provided a lamb to be that sacrifice. God took oath on Himself and said, "I will bless you, and in your seed all the nations will be blessed." That is the last altar that Abraham built, and we call it the altar of worship.

What is worship? Worship is seeing the worth of God. How much is God worth to you? God was so worthy to Abraham that He could have his only begotten son. He did not withhold even his son from God because he said God was so worthy. He gave God the first place, and that is worship.

Moriah means "seen of God." It does not matter whether people see or not. What is important is to be seen of God. What does God see in you? Does He see in you that appreciation of His worthiness, that you would not even withhold the best from Him? All the hope of Abraham was centered in Isaac. All the promises of God to Abraham were focused on Isaac. If Isaac was gone, everything was gone, but Abraham had the faith. He believed that Isaac would be resurrected. That is why in Romans 4, the faith of Abraham

was that he believed not only that God creates everything out of nothing but that God is a God who raises the dead. He had the faith.

That is worship. Worship is seeing God's worthiness. Worship is not holding anything back but letting God be God. Worship is not just words; it is an act of worship. Worship is life. Our life must be such that we see God as He is. He is so worthy. To offer Ishmael was difficult, but to offer Isaac was impossible. To offer that which belongs to the natural is not easy, but to offer that which comes from God is almost impossible. Whatever God has given you, whether it is gifts, or whether it is grace, if one day God says, "Give that back to Me," will you argue with Him? Will you say, "You gave it to me"? Or are you willing to let go even spiritual gifts, even all the grace and virtues that God has given to you? If God wants to strip you naked, as it were, are you willing to let Him have it? That is worship. That is the cross.

The cross has to do a deep work in our life. It is not only separation from the world, not only separation from the old creation, our flesh; not only denying ourselves, our rights, but even letting go of the

spiritual gifts that God has given to us so that God the giver will be everything. Do we allow the cross to work that way? If we do there is worship. We know that the temple was built on Mt. Moriah. That was the site that God chose for the building of the temple. It is in the place of worship that the house of God is built.

In the life of Abraham, we find that he built altar after altar, and every altar was a progression. It got higher and higher. Likewise, the cross must be seen in our lives continuously. It begins with the cross of revelation. It continues with communion and confession, into witnessing, and into worship. Throughout our life the cross must be there. The problem with the Galatian believers was that they wanted to escape the cross. They were afraid of the scandal, the offense of the cross. So Paul ended his letter to them saying, "See, I bear the brand-marks of the Lord Jesus Christ on my body." In other words, in the life of Paul you will see the cross. How much of the cross is seen in our lives? God is the God of Abraham, and in Abraham's life you will find an altar. God is your God and my God, and in our lives there must be the cross.