

ABRAHAM pt.3 Genesis 12:4-9

ALTAR BOY

(Genesis 12) Today we have our third look at the Life and Times of God's man, Abraham, as we consider Abraham's calling from God to move away from his home to what we now call *the promised land*. Genesis 12:**1-9** *Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father's house, To the land which I will show you; 2 And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; 3 And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed."* 4 *So Abram went forth as the Lord had spoken to him; and Lot went with him. Now Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. 5 Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his nephew, and all their possessions which they had accumulated, and the persons which they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan; thus they came to the land of Canaan. 6 Abram passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. Now the Canaanite was then in the land. 7 The Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your descendants I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the Lord who had appeared to him. 8 Then he proceeded from there to the mountain on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the Lord and called upon the name of the Lord. 9 Abram journeyed on, continuing toward the Negev.*

Abraham is featured in Scripture as the father of those who have faith. Faith, or trust in God, was the primary quality of the man, and so it is from his faith that we take our lessons this morning. We see first of all that real faith moves out ®. By this we don't necessarily mean moving out of town, although that's what it involved for Abraham. I just use this expression to communicate that faith promotes action. In fact, it demands action. Now, faith is not in itself an action. Faith is simply belief. But people can often tell what we believe by the actions we take and those actions do speak louder than words don't they? You figure that if 2 out of 3 doctors use Advil than they must really believe Advil is most effective. We understand that, but somehow when it comes to matters of the soul we forget simple cause and effect realities in our attempts either to be spiritual or in our attempts to protect our feelings. Perhaps you hear people saying things like this: *I believe going to church is very important -- but they don't do it. I believe reading the Bible is a must -- but they don't do it. I believe spending quality time with*

our children is critical -- but they do very little of it. I ask you - do they really believe it? Real faith really acts. James 1:22 *prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves*. How do these hearers delude themselves? They tell themselves that they agree with the word, believe the word, when their actions say otherwise. If someone were to run in here and announce that this building is going to explode in ninety seconds how could I tell if you believed them? By checking to see if you nodded as you heard it? By listening for your *amen*? By taking a poll? "How many of you here believe the man's story about the bomb?" That's silly. It's nonsense for you to say you believe the bomb threat if you are staying in the building. Real faith really acts on what it believes. For Abraham that meant a move to Canaan-land. Nowhere in verse 12 does it say that Abraham believed what God told him. It doesn't have to does it? How do we know that Abraham believed God's promises? He obeyed him. He got up and he left. He did as the Lord instructed; that's the sign of trust. 4a *So Abram went forth as the Lord had spoken to him*. So then, faith is an internal grace or quality which has necessary outward manifestations. It is like love in that respect. I read recently that "love is a verb." That saying is meant to emphasize that love is an action, not an emotion. What do you think? Normally we refer to love as a disposition of heart and mind. Is it that or is it an action? Well, its just like faith. Love is a disposition of heart. That is internal and invisible, but there are necessary outward manifestations of that inward disposition. The abusive parent claims to love his child but he's deluded. So often we refuse to admit the connection between the inward and the outward. You hear the argument that even though someone's conduct is consistently immoral, ungodly and hurtful to others that, *well, deep-down he's a good guy*. You get the idea that what's deep down has no connection to what's shallow up, but it isn't so. The root and the fruit are vitally connected and essentially the same are they not? So, if you have faith as your root, that is going to be seen in the externals of your life. Back in the early days of pastoral life for me, my office was near an open field where, from time to time, there would be tent revivals. Anyone here ever been to a tent revival? Well, one night they had the organ really cranked up at one of these things, and they were singing and dancing and shouting. They sang this one song so many times over that I can never forget it. By my watch they sang the same song for 45 minutes and the lyrics were not complicated. It said, "*when the Lord says move you gotta move*" ® *It don't really matter if you rich or if you poor, when the Lord says move you gotta move.*" Brooke, why don't we ever sing that? Abraham believed God and one way we know is that

when God said *move*, Abraham moved. He obeyed and he went. Do you have the kind of faith that moves out?

Point #2 today is that faith recognizes God's presence. ® 6 *Abram passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. Now the Canaanite was then in the land.* Uh-oh. This was not a vacant land God sent Abraham too. It was inhabited. There were those Canaanites. They could be trouble. But they weren't the inhabitants that concerned Abraham. He was more interested in the inhabitant he met in the next verse 7ab *The Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your descendants I will give this land."* The Lord appears. Verse one said he spoke to Abraham but this is the first time we know that He appears. And consider how this appearance must have impacted Abraham. We don't know how long it had been since God first spoke to his servant, but it was possibly years. Abraham had obeyed, had gone to the foreign land. Surely there were moments of wondering. *Had I really heard God? Was it possible that I was temporarily insane? Should I risk it all on some invisible God when all around me are gods I can touch and see?* But then, "Boom" God appears and all the doubts are gone. The Lord who sent him to this new land meets him in the new land. He had not been deserted! The main question to ask about any place is this one—is God there? Is God there? Some of you have lived all over the planet. Not me. I have lived in six cities in only three states and most of my life in Florida. Friends from Florida ask how I like living in Pittsburgh and I tell them I like it just fine - but really I have never cared much where I lived. God has been in each place, although I wondered when I first moved there. When I made the big 35 mile trip from Ocala, Florida to Gainesville for college I wasn't sure if God was going to be there. I had heard stories of what a godless place the university was, but my first time in Community Church of Gainesville convinced me that God really did live in the heart of Gator Country. But then I moved to Jackson, Mississippi to attend seminary. I really had my doubts about God being there. But the first evening in my new home I went for a walk and prayed and God showed up and refreshed my soul. He lives out there too. We talk about certain locales being a God-forsaken wilderness. If I have ever laid eyes on such a thing it was in the Judean wilderness in Israel, but we know from Scripture that God is there as well. We sing a hymn called, "This is My Father's World" which says in the second verse: "This is my Father's world the birds their carols raise, the morning light, the lily white declare their maker's praise. This is my Father's world, He shines in all that's fair. In the rustling grass I hear him pass, He speaks to me everywhere." One of the capacities of growing vital faith is to see God where others might miss

him - in nature, in persons, in events, in the movements of your heart. Pray for that capacity of faith to recognize the divine presence. Take the time to look for God, to seek God. He seldom shows up in the stream of our busy-ness, but He more often does appear in our quiet and still moments and in response to our desperate cries. Who here would like to grow in faith? *Oh Lord, we believe, help our unbelief and give us eyes to see you in every place where you might take us.*

Thirdly today let's see that faith worships ®. Where am I getting that from our story? Verses 7 and 8. Can you see what I mean? 7-8 *The Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your descendants I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the Lord who had appeared to him. 8 Then he proceeded from there to the mountain on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the Lord and called upon the name of the Lord.* Wherever Johnny Appleseed went he left what? Apple trees. Everywhere Abraham went what did he leave? Altars. These altars were two things. First of all, they were monuments, in a pagan land, they were monuments to the reality of God. Some of the commentators on Genesis believe that Abraham's primary motivation in building these was to figuratively claim the land for God. The altars were a testimony to God's presence in the land and God's claim upon it. The altar became like a flag, posted in the sand of a beach, claiming it for the King who sponsored the explorer. I like to think of our church building in that way. It is the flag of King Jesus, posted in this city, announcing that Christ is the Lord and Sovereign of Wexford or McCandless, wherever we are. It bears witness to all who see it that Christ is alive. And even when we are all dead and gone this place and the church that fills it will carry on our witness for Jesus.

Then too the altars could serve Abraham as a reminder of the Lord who met with him in the places where they were built. When the children of Israel settled the promised land, three of the tribes ended up on the east side of the Jordan River. There was concern expressed that these tribes would in years ahead be excluded from the others who settled west of the Jordan and not be given their place in the nation. So the founders of Israel did this: Joshua 22:26-27a *Therefore we said, 'Let us build an altar, not for burnt offering or for sacrifice; 27 rather it shall be a witness between us and you and between our generations after us.* You get that? The altar would be a reminder, a memorial. The altars of Abraham would have served that purpose as well. They were places Abraham could go and remember the visitations of God that confirmed him in faith. Do you have places like that? For me I would build my altars at Daytona Beach,

and the Glen Eyrie Conference ground in Colorado and the Grace Presbyterian Church of Ocala, Florida. These were all places where God met with me in a special way and when I go there my faith is strengthened in the remembrance. Where would you put the altars in your life?

Finally, (but a long finally) we see that the altars would also have served the purpose which altars are meant to serve and that is for worship. But not just any kind of worship. Altars were used for what? Sacrifices. That's sort of understood. It doesn't say it but we know that in Shechem Abraham built an altar and worshipped God. When he was between Bethel and Ai it says he built an altar and this time it explicitly states that he called on the name of the Lord, which is a euphemism for worship. It says it again in 13:**3,4** *He went on his journeys from the Negev as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, 4 to the place of the altar which he had made there formerly; and there Abram called on the name of the Lord.* This became a holy site, a place of praise and meeting with God. But that meeting with God took place in the context of animal sacrifice because that is what an altar was for. Listen now. I really hope you get this idea. You can boil the teaching of the entire Bible on the subject of worship down to one word. That word is "sacrifice." That may sound odd to you but the idea of sacrifice in and as worship is woven through the entire fabric of God's revelation. In Genesis chapter 4 we find the first instance of recorded worship - the story of Cain and Abel, and what are they doing? **3-4** *So it came about in the course of time that Cain brought an offering to the Lord of the fruit of the ground. 4 Abel, on his part also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and for his offering.* Here these sons of Adam approach God, in the hope of pleasing Him or winning his favor and they do so with sacrifices. Now, in Genesis 8:20, after the flood episode, Noah comes out of the ark, onto the soil, and he, of course, stops to worship the God who has saved him. What does he do? Genesis 8:**20,21a** *Then 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. 21 The Lord smelled the soothing aroma.* Animal sacrifice from Noah pleases the Lord. When we come to the time of the Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, how do we see them worshipping? Our text today shows us. And throughout Genesis Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob built altars for worship.

When we come to the time of Moses, we have a further development of the sacrificial system. Whole chapters of Exodus, Number, Leviticus are given to a theology of sacrifice. The tabernacle, the house of worship prior to the temple, was to be a place for sacrifices. Things did

not change in the days of David and the kings either. Solomon constructed a temple for the men to bring their sacrifices to God. Animal sacrifices, fruit and grain offerings were the central aspect of worship for the Old Testament saint. Is that completely gone in the new covenant era in which we live? Not at all. As the Scriptures move along however we find less and less concern and teaching on the mechanics of sacrifice and more and more on the true meaning and significance of sacrifice. God grew distressed over the fact that the procedures of animal sacrifice had become the beginning and end of worship for so many and that people went about their ritual sacrifices but were missing the heart of what God wanted in worship. Does this happen in our day? You know it. You can go through the bare forms and mechanics of worship and be totally off track in your thinking and your worship unacceptable to God. David realized this and he said in Psalm 51:**16,17** *For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; You are not pleased with burnt offering. 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.* David did not despise the animal sacrifices, but he understood that the broken flesh of the animal was vanity without the broken heart of the worshipper. He realized that God was not pleased if you give him your ox without giving Him yourself.

When we get to the New Testament we have a full-orbed completely revealed picture of what worship by sacrifice is all about. The Old Testament was an era of shadows and types, but the New Testament brought the real thing. What does it say about sacrifice and worship? There is one verse in the New Testament that stands as the pinnacle of Scriptural teaching on the subject of sacrifice-worship. I speak of Romans 12:**1** *I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.* What is true, New Testament, spiritual worship? What does it say? It is sacrifice and not just your beasts or your produce or your money but yourself. And not just your life, but your living. The altars we build are for the laying down of our lives. Once that is done then there are other sacrifices to be offered there. Paul writes a letter to the church at Philippi, partly to thank them for a gift they had sent and he does so, but says in Philippians 4:**17-18** *Not that I seek the gift itself, but I seek for the profit which increases to your account. 18 But I have received everything in full and have an abundance; I am amply supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you have sent, a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God.* Here are our church we take up a collection in the worship service because that is how we hope you will look at your giving, as worship, as sacrifice to God. That

is also how we hope you look at your singing of praise. Hebrews 13:**15** *Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name.* That is beautiful! When we give thanks in our hymns and in our prayers we present to God a sacrifice and the smoke rises to heaven. Beautiful! We have no altars but that in heaven. We have no priest but He who sits at the Father's side. To these we bring our offerings, including the offering of our lives.

There are a couple of very important ways that applies to us. The first is that when you come to worship you are to focus on giving, not getting. ® A Leadership magazine asked four pastors this question, "Why are so many people bored in our Sunday morning services?" I'd like to read two of the answers. One man says, "we are going to the worship service with a list of spoken and unspoken requests. We all bring our hidden agendas and when our personal agendas are not the center of focus we're disappointed and then bored." You hear that? He says boredom comes from a self-centered disappointment with what others are doing. Think about it. The other fellow said this: "So much of our recent history has been slanted toward developing a receiving mentality as Christians. God exists to meet our needs, to give us blessings, to fill us up. So, when we come to church it is with our hands cupped open so they can be filled again. We have become professional beggars in the courts of the Lord and we have to turn that around so we see ourselves as offerors, not receivers." I used to entirely agree with that statement but now I agree only in part. I do worship and think we should worship to meet our own needs, but if that is our primary disposition, we are missing out. We are to come to God with our hands out, not just to receive blessings but to offer gifts God-ward. Our purpose is to bless the Lord with all that is within us.

Our second principle of application is this: since worship is sacrifice we must bring to God our best. In Malachi 1 God is speaking to the Jews about their sacrificial worship. 1:**6-8** *when you present the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? And when you present the lame and sick, is it not evil? Why not offer it to your governor? Would he be pleased with you? Or would he receive you kindly?" says the Lord of hosts.* God says, "you present to me the lame, the sick, the blind from your herds and I won't accept them." God did not accept Cain's sacrifice. He did not accept Israel's and if you don't give of your best to the Master should you expect Him to accept yours? God expects the first-fruits. He wants your best. Worship, to be acceptable, is to cost you something. True worship takes time, takes money, takes energy and takes your sins away because you can come to God just as you are but if you truly do you won't stay that way.

Romans 12 says to present yourselves holy and acceptable unto God. If you came here this morning with a dirty conscience it is good you are here but you aren't truly ready to worship until you sincerely repent. If you came sleepy because you were up till two on your computer could your sleepy, distracted worship be described as lame and sick? If you mumbled out your hymns and day-dreamed in your prayers God is not pleased. He wants your best. That means it will cost and that is true sacrifice and that is true worship.

Our gracious Lord, who wants what is best for us, is calling us to a higher place in our praise. Maybe if we all went home thinking about how we can worship more purely or more passionately next time, we would see something glorious happen in our midst. Those who lead us would come prayed up and prepared. You and I would have a sense of anticipation and readiness to pour out our souls. And that's exactly what we are to be doing because when we sacrifice, we are to offer our best. Can you commit yourself to that today? Would you say to God this morning, "Father, you deserve my best in worship, my best offering, my best singing, my full attention. Forgive me for failing to give you that. With reliance upon your grace I now pledge myself to an ever-increasing sacrifice of praise." I invite you to make that commitment with me right now as we go to God in prayer and seek a faith that moves out, a faith that recognizes God's presence and a faith that worships.

(all together) Father, worthy King, blessed Savior. In response to your grace in Christ, we lay down our lives, our bodies as living sacrifices. We are yours. We are ourselves an offering. Consume us for your glory. Make our songs and our services and our financial gifts all to be the expression of a heart given over to you. Father, teach us how to offer a pleasing sacrifice to you. We have so often given to you second best, lame worship. Forgive us and now purify us to offer sacrifices in righteousness that reflect the best that we can bring to you. For this we know is our reasonable service of worship. Build us up Lord in our faith. Give us eyes to know your presence with us. Give us hearts that are ready to move at your command.

Let's respond to the Lord now in song.