

Altered By An Altar 2

We are continuing our sermon series Altered by an altar. Last Sunday I shared a bit of the background and the history of what we call an altar. You remember we talked about the meaning and significance of the ancient altar. The word altar in Hebrew is *mizbe'ach* and means “slaughter site”. It was a place where a sacrifice was offered to God in worship and surrender. I explained a bit of the process of how over time we moved from the idea of an altar like this **(photo of ancient altar site)** to the altar in the temple, **(artist drawing)** to **the cross** another “slaughter site” where sacrifice is made like the one behind me) to the table of the Lord where the sacrifice of Jesus is presented before us in the bread and the cup, his body and blood and as we partake we proclaim the life giving power and efficacy of his sacrifice for us until he comes again. Finally, we moved to this kind of altar, what some called a mourner’s bench - a place where we pray and repent and surrender ourselves as a living sacrifice to God, a place where mercy is found and where we encounter the living God in fellowship. Keep in mind, all of these images and ideas of the altar carry the reality that the altar is a place of death and life, of slaughter and salvation. A sacrifice is offered, an animal dies in place of the one offering the sacrifice so the person is forgiven and offered life. Jesus dies on the cross as the once and for all sacrifice for us and our sins. He dies so we can live. He is slaughtered so we can be saved. At this kind of altar we die to ourselves in repentance and surrender and we find salvation and new life in Him. Death and life at the altar! When we think of an altar now and its purpose in our life, we can incorporate all of this into our thinking. This is how we are altered by an altar. (Remember our definition of the other kind of alter: “to change or cause to change in character or composition, to adjust, convert, remodel, remake, transform.”) We are saved by another’s sacrifice. Death and life at the altar.

This morning I want to broaden our understanding of the purpose and meaning of the altar by revisiting a couple of Scriptures we mentioned last week. I want us to include a couple of other aspects of the altar in our understanding. Think of the altar as a place of encounter, thanksgiving and prayer.

An altar of encounter, thanksgiving and prayer. When we examine the Old Testament Scriptures that mention the altar, we discover it often to be a place where people encountered the Lord. Something happened that prompted them to build an altar in the first place. Noah built an altar in Genesis 8 after getting out of the ark after the great flood. **“Then**

Noah built an altar to the Lord and taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it.” Genesis 8:20 He offered sacrifice to the Lord no doubt out of thanksgiving and great gratitude. If you had been on a big boat with a bunch of animals and your family for 12 months you would be grateful and thankful to get out of that boat! Grateful to get away from the sounds and smells of the animals and to get away from the sounds and smells of your family. Grateful to be alive when everyone else on earth perished in the flood. Noah built an altar to offer sacrifice to the Lord, to acknowledge that God spared their lives, that he provided salvation for Noah and his family. He offered sacrifice on the altar to acknowledge the God he served was the great and faithful God of rescue, the God who makes a way through the flood and through danger. In that place, as Noah sacrificed and offered prayers of thanksgiving to the Lord, God visited Noah and assured him that never again would he destroy all living creatures. He assured him of his provision going forward. The altar was a place of encounter and thanksgiving and a place of prayer.

Genesis 12 tells of Abraham, then known as Abram, setting out from his home and traveling to the land to which God had called him. At Shechem the Lord appeared to Abram and said, **“To your offspring I will give this land.’ So he built an altar there to the Lord who had appeared to him. From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel... There he built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord.” Genesis 12:7-8.** The altar was a place of encounter, where God spoke to Abraham, where he gave him a promise that God is still honoring, to give the land to Abraham and his descendants. Abraham responds by building an altar to remember the encounter and to thank God for the promise, for speaking to him. He offers thanks to the Lord and then journeys on to place later named Bethel where he again builds an altar. This time, before God speaks to him, Abraham speaks to God. The altar becomes a place of prayer where Abraham called on the name of the Lord. The altar was a place of encounter, thanksgiving and prayer. It should still be that way.

Isn't it right that the altar, this place of sacrifice and encounter becomes the place of prayer and thanksgiving? Isn't it right that we call on the name of the Lord here at the altar, where God meets the confessing and surrendered heart? Isn't it right that we offer a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to the God of mercy, that meets us with forgiveness? Have you encountered God, his mercy and forgiveness and grace at an altar? Have you encountered God at the altar, at the place of death and life, where we die to our self and to sin and rise with His

new life in us? That's what this is, the cross, the table, the altar. A place to die to sin and die to the past and die to the devil's control and by his grace and power rise to a brand new life in Christ! Altered by an encounter with God at an altar! When you've had that kind of encounter, you'll want to offer a sacrifice of prayer and praise and thanksgiving. They go hand in hand!

Abraham was altered by his encounter with God at the altar. The bible says he journeyed on but this time he walked with a promise, "to your offspring I will give this land." It was extraordinary because Abraham had no children, no heirs, no offspring and he and his wife were beyond child bearing years. How could God give the land to someone that didn't exist? But Paul tells us in Romans **"Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations. Without weakening in his faith he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead – since he was about a hundred years old – and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised."** Romans 4:18-21

An encounter with the living God will enable you to stand in hope when everything is hopeless. An encounter with the living God, where you call on his name in prayer with thanksgiving and he meets you there – it'll cause you to get the nursery ready and make you buy diapers and a stroller, even though you are childless and you're 100 and your wife is 90, because God met you at the altar and gave you a promise and you know that you know that you know that you heard from God and you are fully persuaded that your God has the power to do exactly what he promised! You find yourself altered by an encounter with God at his altar!

Facing an impossible situation, circumstances beyond your ability, beyond the scope of your talent, your reach, your resources? What you need is an encounter with God at his altar. We used to sing "take your burdens to the Lord and leave them there." You need to meet him at the slaughter site where your plans and schemes and efforts are laid on the altar, where you dare to let them die and in their place, by faith, you pick up God's plans and his purposes and by his power you dare to believe that God is able to do everything he promised and he is able to do more than you ever dreamed possible. You need to surrender yourself and your life and your plans and your dreams at the altar. Pour yourself out to him at his altar and let him transform and remake and remodel you. Let him alter you at his altar.

I'm talking to someone... You've been afraid to lay your plans on his altar. It's a slaughter site, a place of surrender, but I'm telling you when you surrender it all to Him it becomes a place of encounter and then a place of thanksgiving and praise to the Lord. You can trust him at his altar. A place of death that becomes a shining, brilliant place of life and light.

An altar of remembrance. Let me show you something else. That altar of encounter and thanksgiving and prayer often times was built as an altar of remembrance. It marked the encounter that person had with the Lord. Like Abraham's altar, it marked the spot where God spoke, where the promise was given, where provision was made, where God showed up and everything changed. Abraham journeyed on with that promise in his heart. He built an altar at Bethel, journeyed down into the desert and God blessed him with wealth and increased his flocks but eventually he came back to Bethel where he had first built an altar (Gen. 13:4). He remembered God had met him there. The bible tells us Abraham and Sarah miraculously conceive and give birth to a son and heir, Isaac, who grows up and marries Rebekah and she gives birth to twins, Jacob and Esau. The boys grow up not getting along and Jacob runs from Esau after cheating him out of his blessing and travels all the way from way in the south at Beersheva to Bethel, to the old homeplace of his grandfather Abraham. He falls asleep there and has a dream. Apparently he didn't know where he was but in the dream he heard the Lord promise the land to him and his descendants, just as God had promised to Abraham all those years earlier. God promised to be with him and wouldn't leave him until he had fulfilled his promise and his word to Jacob. Jacob said, "This must be the house of God! God's in this place!" He called it Bethel, house of God. The bible says he took a stone he had used as a pillow and perhaps with some other stones he made a pillar out of it and poured oil on top of it, almost like making a makeshift altar with what he had, pouring oil on it as a sacrifice, a libation and he marked that place. A place of remembrance. He didn't forget what God had done. He couldn't forget that encounter as a young man. Finally, after years had passed the Lord spoke to Jacob and told him to **"Go up to Bethel and settle there, and build an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you were fleeing from your brother Esau."** Genesis 35:1

Jacob told his family and his household to get ready, to get rid of any idols and to purify their hearts because they were going to return to Bethel, to the place where "God revealed himself to him when he was fleeing from his brother." Genesis 35:7. The bible says, "Jacob set up a stone pillar at the place where God had talked with him, and he poured out a drink offering

on it; he also poured oil on it. Jacob called the place where God had talked with him Bethel.”
Genesis 35:14-15.

Jacob built an altar as a place to sacrifice, but it was also a place to remember. He wasn't the only one. In Exodus 17 the children of Israel were forced into a battle with the Amalekites. Moses told Joshua to take the fighting men and go to battle against them. Moses said “I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hands.” As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but when Moses hands grew tired and he lowered them, the Amalekites were winning. The bible says they took a stone and put it under Moses and Aaron got on one side and Hur on the other and they held Moses' hands up until sunset and the Israelites won the battle. And the Lord said, **“Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it because I will completely blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Moses built an altar and called it “the Lord is my Banner.” He said, ‘For hands were lifted up to the throne of the Lord.’ Exodus 17:14-16**

Moses built an altar as a place of remembrance. It was a place where God brought victory over their enemy. They needed to remember God wouldn't tolerate the sin of the Amalekites nor would he tolerate their sin either. They needed to remember that God could make a way when the odds were against them and when the battle was not going their way.

Do you have an altar of remembrance? A place where God proved to be your covering, your provision, where God gave you victory and cheated death, cheated the devil. **Why do we need an altar of remembrance? Because our memory gets a little fuzzy.** Life is so daily as someone said. Time goes by and we forget how God showed up. We get overwhelmed by the next temptation, the next struggle, the next mountain or giant in our path and we forget how good, how faithful God has been. We need to go back to the altar, the altar of remembrance. “Take me back to the place where I met you, show me again, remind me again of how good and faithful you are. Here is where the Lord gave me victory. Don't let me forget.”

Why do we need an altar of remembrance? **Because our perspective gets out of kilter/out of focus.** God told Moses to write this down on a scroll and build an altar and memorial because Joshua was going to need to remember this. There were going to be times when leading the children of Israel would just be too much, when it would be overwhelming and Joshua would need to pull out the scroll of remembrance and read it again. “And God miraculously gave them victory over the Amalekites.” Maybe someone else years later, lost and

wandering in the wilderness would see that altar and stop to realize, “God did it before, he can do it again.” We need to remember and when we do, our perspective can be altered at his altar. It all looks different from the vantage point of an altar of remembrance!

I’ve got altars of remembrance all over this building. Right down here as a teenager we would meet on Monday nights for prayer meeting, praying that God would forever change us and our friends. My friends and I encountered God at this altar. I need to remember that.

Right here at another kind of altar I declared to Paula that I would love and be faithful to her until death parted us. I revisit that altar and remember those vows. Here Paula and I stood and handed first Sarah and then Rebekah to Bro. McQueen and he dedicated them to Jesus. It’s an altar of remembrance that they belong to him and for his service. I’ve revisited that altar a few times along the way as the girls grew, remembering they belonged to Jesus.

Right down here I knelt one day, broken by the depression that was consuming me and told God if he wasn’t going to deliver me, to heal me, then I wish he would just let me die at the altar, but right here, more than once, faithful friends prayed for me and God heard their cry and showed me his mercy and we’ve carried on. Here, at an altar of prayer, at the slaughter site, I laid down my life, my burdens, my anxiety, my fears, over and over again and over and over again the altar became a place of encounter, a place of thanksgiving, a place of prayer. Again and again the altar became the place of victory as I surrendered it all to him. I need to remember the altars in my life. And I need to build some new altars as well.

God told Moses to build an altar out of field stones, stones that were perhaps produced by volcanic explosions or seismic events of some kind. Stones that came out of brokenness and upheaval, brought to the surface, worn by weather and seasons. And God says “take those broken stones and pieces and gather them up and arrange them before the Lord as an altar and then pour yourself out upon the altar and say “Here I am Lord. I offer my life, my everything, my all to you.”

How long has it been since you’ve had an encounter with the Lord? How long since you surrendered everything to him? How long since, like Jacob, like Abraham, you came back to the altar, back to Bethel, back to the house of God, back to the slaughter site where you laid it all down on the altar? Take me back, take me back dear Lord, to the place, where I first received you, where I encountered you, and once again, let me be altered at your altar!