

## Altered By An Altar Part 4

Two Sundays ago we were at our General Council in Florida and Pastor Brian continued our emphasis on the altar, speaking from Romans 12 about what it means to offer ourselves on God's altar as a living sacrifice. Remember the Hebrew word for altar means "slaughter site." It was the place where sacrifice was made to atone for sins. The altar is a place of sacrifice and death, of complete surrender, a place of worship, a place of encounter, a place of remembrance, a place of thanksgiving and prayer. We talked about the altar as a place to find forgiveness and mercy as we talked about Adonijah and Joab running to grab hold of the horns of the altar, hoping to find mercy from King Solomon.

As we read about the importance of altars in the Old Testament, we discover instruction not only for building altars but also instruction about tearing down some altars. It was one of the first commands given to Israel as they prepared to enter the promised land. **"These are the decrees and laws you must be careful to follow in the land that the Lord, the God of your fathers has given you to possess as long as you live in the land. Destroy completely all the places on the high mountains and on the hills and under every spreading tree where the nations you are dispossessing worship their gods. Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and burn their Asherah poles in the fire; cut down the idols of their gods and wipe out their names from those places. You must not worship the Lord your God in their way."** Deuteronomy 12:1-4 (Asherah poles suggest a female goddess or idol. Cananite worship involved fertility rites, cultic prostitutes, human sacrifice, manipulating the gods, etc.)

It couldn't be plainer could it? Break down false altars, cut down the idols. You mustn't worship the way pagan nations worship. God tells the people he will select a place where they are to offer sacrifices to the Lord and to worship him alone. **"Be careful not to sacrifice your burnt offerings anywhere you please. Offer them only at the place the Lord will choose..."** Deuteronomy 12:13 Tear down the false altars, destroy the idols and then you are to build a proper altar where God tells you where sacrifices are offered to the Lord and only to the Lord.

God tells them this before they cross the Jordan and begin to inhabit the land of Israel. They begin obeying God and destroying the pagan altars, but as they settle in the land and as time goes by, compromise creeps in. Instead of tearing down the false altars they began using those pagan altars to sacrifice to the Lord. Using something profane to try to honor God and in a profane method! God tells them, **"You must not worship the Lord your God in their way,**

**because in worshiping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the Lord hates. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods.”**

### **Deuteronomy 12:31**

The warning is given and yet, Israel ignores God’s commands and over time falls deeper into sin. Eventually the temple is built in Jerusalem and God says this is where you are to offer sacrifice, at my altar. After Solomon dies the nation divides into Israel and Judah. Jereboam builds altars at Dan and Bethel and sin and idolatry become entrenched in Israel and in Judah. For example, 2 Chronicles 28 tells of Ahaz the king of Judah (he was King Uzziah’s grandson). He did all those things God said not to do including making idols and altars and sacrificing his own sons to Molech. Because of his sin God allowed his enemies to defeat him in battle and his response, instead of repenting and turning to God, he chose to offer sacrifice to the gods of Aram since they had obviously helped the Arameans defeat him in battle. The bible says **“Ahaz shut the doors of the Lord’s temple and set up altars at every street corner in Jerusalem. In every town in Judah he built high places to burn sacrifices to other gods...”** 2 Chronicles 28:24-25

Ahaz’s son was King Hezekiah and he tore down the altars his wicked father built. He was a faithful king and brought about reforms but then his son Manasseh rebuilt the pagan altars his father had torn down! The bible says **“He built altars in the temple of the Lord...to all the starry hosts. He sacrificed his sons in the fire...practiced sorcery, divination and witchcraft and consulted mediums and spiritists...He took the carved image he had made and put it in God’s temple.”** 2 Chronicles 33:4-7 This is how far the kings of Judah and of Israel had fallen and the people followed them blindly, willingly. No wonder God allowed them to be carried off into exile and experience destruction, first Israel and then Judah!

There is so much to say about this but notice a couple of lessons for us. Part of the problem was the people had no knowledge of the Law. **Lack of knowledge leads to disobedience and sin.** They didn’t have access to the word of God. No one was instructing them in God’s law and because of their lack of knowledge, they easily fell into sin and disobedience. “That all seems good. Altars at every street corner seems reasonable and convenient. Worshiping other gods in addition to the God of Israel seems diverse and inclusive.” Without knowledge of God’s word, we perish!

2 Chronicles 34 tells the story of King Josiah. He was only 8 when he became king and at 16, as a teenager, he begins to seek the Lord with all of his heart. He orders the false altars to be torn down and idols to be destroyed. During this time of renewal, purging and cleansing the temple and the storerooms, someone says “I have found the book of the Law in the Temple of the Lord.” When they began to read the words of God’s law to the king, he tore his robes and wept. “This is why we’ve had trouble, because we haven’t been obeying God’s word!” Josiah called all the people to Jerusalem and he “read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant” and the people pledged to obey the law of God once again!

God’s word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. If you hide God’s word in your heart you won’t sin against him, and you’ll know his blessing, his favor, his peace. Study God’s word and you’ll know what to do and what not to do. Let me encourage you - find a Sunday School class to attend. We are systematically teaching the word of God on Sunday. Bring your students to Sunday School and to children’s church. They need both and so do you!!

Another lesson we see in this regarding altars: **If you build it, you’ll worship at it.** If you build an idol, a false altar, you’ll end up worshipping there. Hosea said **“Ephraim built many altars for sin offerings, these have become altars for sinning.” Hosea 8:11.** Once they started disobeying God and building altars on every street corner, once they started opening the door to compromise and sin, they inevitably began to sin at those altars. The point is, if you open the door to sin, if you start entertaining sin in your mind, in your heart, if you start making room for sin and you allow compromise, you’ll end up sinning and worshipping at that false altar. If you start putting other things, other people on the throne of your heart and life, they’ll become idols to you and you will end up serving those things instead of serving the Lord. False gods worshiped at false altars. If you make room for sin, you’ll end up serving sin. If you build a false altar, an idol, and you allow it a place of influence in your life and you move Jesus out of his rightful place as Lord of your life, you will end up bowing to that false idol and sacrificing yourself and everything that used to be important to you at that false altar! Harmony Moore is a teacher and blogger. She wrote, **“We can’t maintain altars of sin in our lives and avoid bowing before them. Our altars of sin become altars of sinning. It’s just the way it is.”** **Harmony Moore** Build a false altar, allow idols in your life, and you’ll end up bowing to them and sinning against God.

You say, “I’m not building an idol. I’m not bowing or sacrificing at a false altar.” What can be a false altar or idol in your life? Love of money. Power. Lust. Sex. Vanity. Pride. Career. My career? Sure. Anything we put before God and serving him can be an idol. An altar is a place of sacrifice and when we are willing to sacrifice our relationship with God, when we are willing to sacrifice relationship with family and friends and eternal values for the sake of earthly, temporal things, we are sacrificing at a false altar! When you put money and career advancement before your marriage, you are bowing and worshiping at a false altar. When you desire fame or wealth or notoriety more than you desire pleasing God, you are sacrificing at a false altar. When you allow drugs, alcohol, pornography or any other addiction to control and rule your life, when you choose that over serving God, you are worshiping at a false altar. When you put pleasing others, being accepted by others, a boyfriend or girlfriend, above pleasing God and obeying his word, you are bowing at a false altar! When you allow revenge, unforgiveness, self-righteousness, pride, prejudice to dominate your life, you are worshiping at a false altar. Something has to change! It’s time to tear down the false altars in our life!

I want to look quickly at Judges 6. It is the story of Gideon, the reluctant warrior! Once again the Israelites had sinned against the Lord. This was during the time of the judges, before Israel ever had a king. The people were doing as they pleased and were worshiping idols and sacrificing at false altars. As a consequence of their sin the Lord lifted his hand of protection and allowed the Midianites to dominate the land and the people for seven years. The Israelites would work the land and then the Midianites would come in and take all the produce and crops and wine. The bible says the Midianites ravished the land and impoverished the Israelites. When the people cried out to the Lord, the Lord sent a prophet to them who told them this was happening because they were worshiping idols.

Sometime later the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon and told him “the Lord is with you” and Gideon asks, **“If the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our fathers told us about?” Judges 6:13.**

Gideon is thinking cause and effect when he asks the question. “If the Lord is with us, shouldn’t we be ruling over the Midianites instead of them ruling over us? If the Lord is with us, shouldn’t we be seeing signs and wonders?” **The question Gideon and the Israelites should have been asking is not “Is the Lord with us?” They should have been asking “Are we with the Lord?”** “Are we obeying God and his word? Are we worshiping as he instructed us,

offering sacrifice and bringing offerings to him as his word commands? Are we serving the Lord and obeying him or have we sinned against the Lord by worshiping idols? Have we pulled down the idols and the false altars or have we built altars for sin and now we sin daily at those false altars? Some wise person once said “If God doesn’t seem close to you anymore, guess who moved!” Are we with the Lord? Are we walking close to him?

The angel of the Lord says that Gideon has been chosen to save Israel out of the hand of the Midianites. Gideon informs the angel that his family is the weakest family in the tribe of Manasseh and he is the least member of his family. He can’t deliver Israel, but the angel tells him the Lord will be with him and he will defeat the Midianites. Gideon prepares a meal for this heavenly messenger and when he presents it to the angel, the angel tells him to place it on a rock and then he touches it with his staff and fire comes out from the rock and consumes the whole meal, as if it were a sacrifice, a burnt offering, and the angel disappears. Gideon realizes he has been in the presence of a heavenly being and what does he do? He builds an altar! **“So Gideon built an altar to the Lord there and called it ‘The Lord is Peace’.” Judges 6:24.** He built an altar as a place of remembrance, as a site of mercy because he thought he would die because he had seen the angel of the Lord (the Lord assured him that would not be the case in verse 23). It was a place of divine encounter, a place of sacrifice and obedience.

But then something else happens that night. **“That same night the Lord said to him, ‘Take the second bull from your father’s herd, the one seven years old. Tear down your father’s altar to Baal and cut down the Asherah pole beside it. Then build a proper kind of altar to the Lord your God on the top of this height. Using the wood of the Asherah pole that you cut down, offer the second bull as a burnt offering.’ So Gideon took ten of his servants and did as the Lord told him.” Judges 6:25-26**

Gideon has already built one altar and now God instructs him to build a second altar, a proper altar. But first he has to tear down the false altar, the altar to Baal! Gideon was afraid of his family and the men of the town so the bible says he did this at night, but at least he did what God told him to do! When the men of the town discovered what had happened they came to Gideon’s father, Joash, and demanded that he turn Gideon over to them. They knew it was Gideon that did it and they said he had to die for breaking down Baal’s altar. I love what Gideon’s father says to them. **“Are you going to plead Baal’s cause? If Baal really is a god, he can defend himself when someone breaks down his altar.” Judges 6:31**

Gideon breaks down the false altar to baal and builds a proper altar where sacrifice can be offered to the Lord. I don't have time to tell of the victory that came to Israel through the obedience of Gideon. With only 300 men armed only with torches and pitchers and trumpets, Gideon attacks the thousands of Midianites soldiers and defeats them. Deliverance comes to Israel, God is exalted through this miracle and Gideon is elevated among the people. Victory came to the people but first, the false altar had to come down and the idols had to be shattered.

What am I telling you? Blessing is ahead but first there must be repentance and obedience. **Before we build the altar of sacrifice and service to God the false altars have to come down!** Gideon couldn't risk attacking the Midianites if he still had an altar to baal standing in his father's back yard. It's interesting that Gideon's obedience to God led to a change of heart for his father and his family. God may use you and your obedience to bring salvation to your family, your parents or siblings, or your children. Who knows what might happen when you pull down the idols and the false altars in your life and get rid of them for good.

What have you been offering at the false altars of your life? Have you sacrificed your holiness on the altar of entertainment and pleasure? Have you sacrificed your purity on the altar of lust and sexual conquest? Have you sacrificed the spiritual wellbeing of your children on an altar of personal convenience and ease? Have you offered your time, your money, your resources, your gifts at an altar other than God's altar? Are there things in your life, idols and altars, that you know God wants you to destroy? It's time for obedience! It's time to tear down those altars and destroy the idols. Those idols and altars are preventing the blessing of God in your life. It's time for them to come down! It's time to build a proper altar and offer yourself as a living sacrifice to God but first you've got to tear down the altar of baal. It's time to say no to every other altar and every idol and say yes to Jesus.

Today is a day of decision. I'm talking about making a life-changing decision, like Gideon, like Hezekiah and Josiah did, and oddly enough like Manasseh did. If you think it's too late for you to tear down false altars and idols in your life, if you think you've gone too far, your sins are too great, consider King Manasseh. Remember all he did? Sacrificed his sons in the fire, built false, pagan altars in the temple of the Lord. Because of his sin he was captured and carried off into exile by the king of Assyria, but he repented and sought the Lord and God allowed him to come back to Judah, to Jerusalem. And after his return, the bible says, **"He got**

**rid of the foreign gods and removed the image from the temple of the Lord as well as all the altars he had built on the temple hill and in Jerusalem; and he threw them out of the city. Then he restored the altar of the Lord and sacrificed fellowship offerings and thank offerings on it and told Judah to serve the Lord, the God of Israel.” 2 Chronicles 33:15-16.**

It's not too late to tear down the altar and get rid of the idols. It's not too late to make a change and begin to obey the Lord and serve Him. Now is the time to tear down those false altars and build an altar to serve the Lord. Don't hesitate. Today is the day.