

Altered By An Altar 6

We are bringing this sermon series to a close this morning. We've spent these weeks talking about being altered, changed by an encounter with God at an altar, a place of sacrifice and surrender. I want to share some final thoughts as we wrap this up.

We began with an overview of the history of the altar as a place where sacrifice is offered. The first mention was in Genesis 4 when Cain and Abel brought offerings to the Lord. Even though the word altar is not specifically mentioned, it is implied that an animal sacrifice was offered to God, a burnt offering. Genesis 8 tells us Noah built an altar when he came out of the ark and offered the sacrifice of a burnt offering to the Lord. From the beginning, humans have been building altars and offering sacrifice to the Lord or sadly, to an idol.

From the altar carried by the priests in the wilderness to the altar built on the temple mount, the people of God always had before them the idea and the image of the altar. As we've reminded you each week, the Hebrew word for altar means "slaughter site." It was the place where a sacrifice was offered in place of another. Something, eventually someone, died in your place. Your guilt, your sins were symbolically transferred to a sacrificial animal and then that animal paid the price with its' life and satisfied the demands of the law, the demands of justice. The lamb died in your place. For us as Christians, the cross of Calvary became the ultimate altar, the ultimate slaughter site where Jesus, the one the bible refers to as the Lamb of God, bore our guilt and our sins in his own flesh. Our sins were laid upon him and He took our place and died for us that we might be saved and declared free of our sin and guilt.

We explained how the concept of an altar of sacrifice was broadened in the church to include the table or the area from which the bread and cup of communion were shared and finally grew to include what some called the mourner's bench, a place of sacrifice and surrender, and altar of prayer where sin was confessed and mercy and pardon received!

An altar is a place where heaven meets earth, a place of redemption, where God's mercy meets the repentant heart. An altar is a place of prayer and petition. The bible says Abraham built an altar at Bethel and learned to call on the name of the Lord. The altar is a place to seek God, to seek his help, his direction, to exchange our burden for his peace.

We talked about the idea that altars were sometimes built as places of remembrance. They marked places and moments of divine encounter. "I met God here. He spoke to me here." If you've been serving Jesus for any length of time, you can probably go back to some altars of

encounter, altars of remembrance. It might be an altar in a church. I mentioned I could take you to places in this sanctuary, or I could travel back in my memory to churches and places where I knelt and surrendered to God's plan, his will, where I encountered God in life-changing ways. I met God at his altar! Many of you know what I'm talking about. Altars of remembrance and of encounter! Maybe it was in children's church, at VBS, maybe it was in youth service or at youth camp. Maybe it was on the couch in your living room or alone kneeling at your bedside, but you surrendered your heart, your life, to God. You remember the place, the moment. You carried that crushing weight of sin or addiction or bondage or fear and surrendered it to him and you felt him lift that weight from your shoulders. You remember that altar as a place of sweet encounter with God and his presence and his mercy.

If you've had an experience like that, you may remember more than one. The reality is, it's not just a onetime experience. It shouldn't be. It's a journey, a lifetime of experiencing God at his altar. We saw it in Abraham's life as he built altars. We saw it with Moses and the altar that traveled with them in the wilderness tabernacle. It was before them every day, inviting them to come and seek the Lord. Think about the altar at the temple in Jerusalem. It was constantly before the people. The smoke from the altar was always seen. The offerings and sacrifices and prayers were daily. The place of surrender, the place of encounter, the place of God's redemption and mercy, was always there, always before the people of Israel. It was daily. They couldn't forget. At least they shouldn't forget. Neither should we.

Our journey with God, this journey of faith we are on, living for Jesus, is marked by altar encounters. It's not just a onetime experience at an altar, it is to be every day, every season, surrendering ourselves, surrendering the sovereignty and control of our life to God. It is every day saying yes to Him, to his place of supremacy, his control, his purpose, his will being done in our life. It is offering ourselves, every day, as a sacrifice to the Lord.

We don't walk past an altar at a temple like the Jews did in Jerusalem. You likely don't have a mourner's bench in your home; you may not have an altar space or even a prayer closet at home, but everyday you need to visit a spiritual altar and surrender your heart and life to God. As surely as a first century person went daily to the temple to offer a sacrifice or pray, we are to offer ourselves, our prayers and our commitment to the Lord. The altar at the temple was the place where Heaven and earth met up, where worshipers connected with God and caught a clearer glimpse of Heaven's perspective and agenda and that spiritual altar in your life should be

the same – the place where Heaven’s perspective and agenda is encountered and embraced on a daily basis. At the altar we say, “Your will, revealed and done on earth just as it is in heaven.”

Paul wrote, **“Therefore I urge you in view of God’s mercy to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship.” Romans 12:1** This is what Christian worship looks like, our spiritual act of worship. Not bringing a lamb or a goat to offer as a sacrifice because Jesus has already been offered as a once and for all sacrifice to atone for our sin. But our life offered to him as an act of worship, an offering of thanksgiving, an offering of obligation. Give yourself, every part, your body, soul, mind, emotions, spirit, everything to God. Place yourself, your life on the altar. This is worship.

We come to an altar and surrender because we understand, because of that ultimate altar where Jesus sacrificed his life for us, we are no longer our own, we belong to him. The bible says, **“You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your body.” 1 Corinthians 6:19-20** Honor God with your body, soul, mind, spirit. Offer yourself to God as that living sacrifice. Bring yourself to his altar and lay yourself down before him. “Here Lord, is my life. I am no longer my own. It’s not about my choices, it’s about your choices for me and my life. I surrender it to you.” It’s not what I want, it’s what he wants because I belong to him. I’m surrendered to him and his will. That’s what this series has been about. That’s what a living sacrifice says, that’s how a living sacrifice lives. That’s what being altered by an encounter at an altar is all about.

Some wise person observed the problem with a living sacrifice is that it keeps crawling off the altar. We surrender to him and then we walk away from the altar and tomorrow comes and the struggle intensifies and we have to place our self before him once again, again, and again. It’s spiritual discipline. It’s daily surrender and commitment and obedience. It’s an understanding that the path we are on is a path of daily sacrifice and faith. **The walk of faith will always be marked by altars!** Plan on it. Don’t be surprised by it, rather, be thankful for it. It’s how your life is transformed. It’s how spiritual growth and maturity takes place.

Living for Jesus means a lifetime of surrendering ourselves at his altar. I shared with my lifegroup last Sunday night that Abraham learned about relinquishing control of his life to the Lord over a period of 100 years (75-175) so that by the time God asked him to sacrifice Isaac on an altar, Abraham knew what to do. He had been saying yes all those years. He had been growing and maturing, daily surrendering himself at the altar of God for all those years.

Eugene Peterson wrote, **“A sacrificial life is the means and the only means by which a life of faith matures. By increments a sacrificial life – an altar here, an altar there – comes to permeate every detail of life: parenthood, marriage, friendship, work, gardening, reading a book, climbing a mountain, receiving strangers...Abraham did not become our exemplar in faith by having it explained to him but by engaging in a lifetime of travel, life on the road, daily leaving something of himself behind (self-sovereignty) and entering something new (God-sovereignty).” ...Eugene Peterson**

After a lifetime of testing and trial and surrendering at altars, Abraham knew he could trust God. Remember, you either trust God or you don't. You either believe God or you don't. Look back at that long line of altars, where you prayed, where you trusted, where you laid down your burdens, where you laid down members of your family, where you surrendered something of yourself to God. Can you see them? What about it? Can you testify of lessons learned? Faith matured? Based on that lifetime of altars, can you say, “I trust God!” Then we can sing, “I'm so glad I learned to trust him, precious Jesus, Savior Friend, and I know that thou art with me, will be with me to the end.”

Peterson wrote, **“Faith, repeatedly tested by sacrifice, was a way of life for Abraham. Each sacrifice left him with less of self and more of God. Each sacrifice abandoned something of self on an altar from which he traveled onward with more vision, more promise, more Presence.” ...Peterson**

This is what I'm talking about. This is the journey of faith, from altar to altar, from surrender to greater surrender, from faithfulness to even more faithfulness, from glory to glory. All along the way we discover more of Him, more of his presence, more of his power and provision, more of his mercy, more of who he is and what he has in store. It's leaving self behind and finding more of Him. It's relinquishing control and surrendering to Him and every time we do we find his plans for us to be so much better, richer, fuller, more complete. Every time we surrender to him at every altar we find ourselves becoming more like him, being made conformable to him and his image. Every time we surrender to him we find more of his glory and his light and his life and his image being reflected through us and that means people see more Jesus in us and they too are drawn to him and to that resurrection life that he offers.

I'm just pouring my heart out to you this morning. I'm talking to someone. God wants you – he wants all of you, all your heart, your life, your dedication, your desire, your past,

present and future. He wants you and he is calling to you today. He is calling you to relinquish something in your past that you are still holding on to because he is calling you to a new beginning. You are getting ready to start again. He has something better for you but fear keeps you from surrendering everything to Jesus. He is calling you to his altar of surrender and I'll say it again, here you'll find more promise, more provision and more of his Presence.

I felt I was to share one last story with you. 1 Kings 19. Elijah has just had a showdown with the prophets of baal on Mt. Carmel. Fire fell on the altar Elijah built and consumed the sacrifice. He dealt with the false prophets and afterwards he prayed and it began to rain for the first time in 3 years. As a result of all this, Elijah had to run for his life from the wicked King and Queen, Ahab and Jezebel. Depressed and discouraged Elijah runs to the wilderness and asks the Lord to just let him die. In his mercy the Lord speaks to Elijah and assures him he has more for him to do. God isn't finished with him. Among the assignments God gives Elijah at that time, he is to anoint Elisha to be his successor as prophet. The bible tells us

“So Elijah went from there and found Elisha son of Shaphat. He was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen, and he himself was driving the twelfth pair. Elijah went up to him and threw his cloak around him. Elisha then left his oxen and ran after Elijah. ‘Let me kiss my father and mother good-by,’ he said, ‘and then I will come with you.’ ‘Go back,’ Elijah replied. ‘What have I done to you?’ So Elisha left him and went back. He took his yoke of oxen and slaughtered them. He burned the plowing equipment to cook the meat and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his attendant.” 1 Kings 19:19-21

Elisha is just plowing for his father, minding his own business when God interrupts his life. You may not have expected it, but an interruption is coming. Altars and encounters with God have a way of interrupting our plans. Don't get frustrated at God's interruptions, it always turns out better than we expected!

Elisha's family apparently were prosperous since he was over-seeing the plowing of their land with twelve yoke of oxen. Most farms would have just had one plow hooked up to one or two oxen, but here were twelve pair plowing the ground, no doubt covering a good bit of land.

Elijah walks up and throws his cloak around Elisha. The better translation is that he threw his mantle on him. Some commentaries suggest at this time the prophets may have worn a particular cloak or coat made of animal hide and hair. It may have identified them as a prophet

like John the Baptist wearing clothing made of camel's hair. Whatever the case, placing that cloak or mantle on Elisha was a clear indication he was being chosen as the successor to Elijah, that God was calling him to be a prophet in Israel.

Elisha's response was to leave his plow and oxen and follow Elijah. He responded and surrendered immediately to the call but then he asked Elijah for permission to go back and kiss his father and mother. Most likely what he was saying was, "let me go and receive my parents blessing and put some things in order and then I will see about following you." Elijah says, "What have I done to you?" It's as if he was saying, "You don't owe me anything. I haven't chosen you, God chose you. This calling is from God. Go back if you want to." So Elisha goes back to get his parent's blessing, but look what else he does. "He took his yoke of oxen and slaughtered them. He burned the plowing equipment to cook the meat and gave it to the people and they ate. Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his attendant."

Nothing is said about an altar. It doesn't even say he offered the oxen as a sacrifice to the Lord, but I think that is exactly what happened. I think he built an altar, or perhaps there was already one on the family property. He slaughtered the oxen as a sacrifice and burned part of it as an offering and fed the servants and the people with part. And notice what the Bible says. He burned the plow in order to cook the meat and in doing so, Elisha said goodbye to his past and to the future his family no doubt had planned for him. He said good bye to life as a farmer. There was no plow to go back to. He didn't just leave it. He burned it. With a strong, decisive act he surrendered to God's greater plan for his life as a prophet. It's time for a decision!

Sometimes, even though there will be more altars ahead, there has to be that moment of slaughter, that moment of relinquishing and turning loose of something that always seems to be drawing you back. It's time for a decision. Elisha burned the plow and slaughtered the oxen. He was saying "I don't know what is in front of me, what's ahead, but as of today, there is no plan b or c or d. There is nothing to fall back on, nothing to go back to. There is only what God has in store for me. I'm selling out to his plan, not mine." Sometimes you have to burn the bridge, to break ties, to burn the plow. Whatever happens, it's me and Jesus from here on out.

I shared this story of Elisha because someone today needs to kill the oxen and burn the plow. It's decision time for you! You need to lay something down that has kept you tied to your past. It has kept you from really committing to Jesus, really serving him. It's time to be altered at his altar. It's time to burn the plow and go all in. It's time to surrender. It's decision time!