

Abraham's Four Altars

Part 1

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[00:00:00] I turn together to Genesis chapter 13.

This world is a wilderness wide, we have nothing to seek nor to choose, we have no thought in the waste to abide, we have nothing to fear nor to lose.

Abram was called to a path of separation, of devotion to God.

He was not intended to remain in the position in which God had placed him. He was there as a sojourner, as we have seen, simply passing through. This is the path of the believer. We are here in a world that is altogether contrary to the mind of God. [00:01:01] And yet nevertheless there is sustenance and strength and support in the hand of God to enable us to pass through.

But I would like to seek to get before us some things in reference to the proper character of the path of faith, that of being thoroughly committed to the will of God.

I think that in the four altars of which we read that Abraham built, we have a very striking picture of this. We are going to read the first one in chapter 13, verse 6.

Abraham passed through the land unto the place of Sycam, unto the plain of Moriah, and a Canaanite was then in the land. [00:02:02] And the Lord appeared unto Abram, and said, Unto thy seed will I give this land. And there built he an altar unto the Lord, who appeared unto him.

The first time that God appeared to Abram, after he had told him before, some time before, to get thee out from thy country, from thy kindred, from thy father's house, unto a land that I will tell thee of.

This is the first altar that we find in connection with the history of Abraham. He had been told to get out. Eventually he reaches the land, and he passed through the land.

He did mention the fact of the meanings of those names before, unto the place of Sycam. The word Sycam means shoulder, the same as shekel, and to the plain of Moriah, which means teacher.

Now, we have remarked before that it's just at this point that you find Abram willing [00:03:07] to take the responsibility for a full, clear testimony for God. He is on a land of idol-worshippers, he has left a land of idol-worshippers.

Now he is coming to the land that God is going to give him eventually. But the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full. Here he is in the land of Canaan, and we are told the Canaanite was then in the land. And the word Canaanite, by the way, means trafficker or a traitor, a very striking picture of one's traits in spiritual things.

Dear friends, I certainly hope that none of us is like that. What do the things of God mean to us? Something that we can just make a little gain of in this present world? Are they something of such vital value? They connect us with eternity. They are those things that have so filled our hearts that our souls are going out after Christ in the glory.

The world likes to trade in religion, likes to trade in Christianity, the precious things [00:04:05] of God, and to bring them down simply to a worldly level, a basis that is just simply trafficking.

These enemies were in the land.

In the face of this, what is the believer to do? He is to maintain a witness for God. Now, Abram, no doubt, in many respects, was a lonely man. I called him alone, scripture says.

Very striking expression. We know that Lot went with him, we read of this. Lot went with him. It's sad to say that Lot did not have the energy of faith to sustain himself after he separated from his uncle Abram, but he went with him.

Dear friends, I hope that you and I are not just simply tagging along. I hope that there is a real energy and devotion of faith that is walking with God. This was true of Abram, no doubt, but in reference to those two questions of the shoulder and [00:05:04] teacher, it's when responsibility is taken upon your shoulders, the yoke, in other words, is taken upon your shoulders that you begin to learn of Christ. If you don't take the yoke, you'll not learn properly. We all need proper learning. I hope we are really concerned about learning well. Wisdom is excellent to get, understanding, with all I get in, get understanding, we're told. But let's remember, in order to get it, there must be first a submission to the yoke, or else all that learning will be actually detrimental to us. I'm certainly not by any means belittling true knowledge. True knowledge is wonderful, but let it be in subjection to the authority of the Lord. The first altar that we read of here I would characterize as being that of submission.

[00:06:01] The altar always in scripture speaks of Christ personally. We have an altar whereof they have no right to eat who serve the tabernacle.

Christ personally is the altar.

The offering upon the altar speaks of Christ and his work for us, that which he has done for us.

And the altar sanctifies the gift. Which is greater?

Why, of course, the altar is.

The person of Christ is greater than the gift he gave, that is, the gift of the sacrifice. The work is marvelous. The work receives all its value, however, from the fact of who the person is. They are overall blessed forever, manifest in human form, manifest in humanity, and marvelously accomplishing that blessed work of eternal salvation at Calvary. However, this is the basis of our

relationship with God. In regard to the altar, this signifies Abram's relationship to God.

[00:07:02] Another thing is found in Abram's history, and that is his tempt. It signifies his relationship to the world. He was only passing through, a tempt and an altar.

Do you know, dear friends, the first thing that God ever commanded to be built in scripture? An altar.

It's the only thing in the first few books of the scriptures, the altar, that was commanded to be built by men, by believers. We only read of believers building altars in Genesis, except for Jacob. It says he built a house at Shechem, where he had no right to build a house at all. He had to leave it very quickly, too. Because building very commonly speaks of that which is to last, that which is permanent in God's account. Cain went out from the presence of the Lord and built a city. [00:08:01] You see, he wanted to do something large. What about us?

Are we content to have our altars, not the city?

Now the altar appears to be very small, but dear friends, let's build up our proper relationship with God, the living God.

And here is the very first one, it speaks of submission. That spirit of submission always therefore goes along with the understanding of the Word of God, teaching, you'll be taught when you submit. He that willeth to do God's will shall know of the doctrine. Why is it that the people of God don't understand much of scripture?

That's the question. Why? Very commonly, dear friends, and I'm saying this advisedly, very commonly the reason for it is that we are not willing to obey it. Now, that's a pretty serious consideration, but I think that's true.

Those who are willing to obey the truth of God will learn the truth of God. [00:09:03] If I will not take a step in the path of faith and obedience, God is not going to show me something beyond that step.

The things of God are not learned just simply mechanically or academically, they are learned in practice, and so Abram has to learn that.

But here the Canaanite was then in the land, no excuse for not learning, he didn't make that an excuse for not learning the Word of God.

He was taught, nevertheless, let us make no excuses, no matter what there is around us to hinder us from enjoying the things of Christ. Let us make no excuses for it, but have hearts that are longing to learn, to understand the things of God. Now, the second one is found in the same book, the same chapter. In verse 8, And he removed from thence unto a mountain on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, having Bethel on the west, and Hai on the east. [00:10:02] And there he built an altar unto the Lord, and called upon the name of the Lord. So a second altar, very quickly here, is found, and in this case, having Bethel on the west, and the west was the direction in which he was going, and on the east, Hai. What does it speak of?

Hai means ruins.

Bethel means the house of God.

Which are you going to choose?

Ruins.

Behind him were the ruins.

Now, Abram could look back at a great deal that he had left behind.

He had left a great population, a great civilization, and in fact, no doubt a wealthy man, everything going for him, he had left it behind. What does he call it, in effect? Ruins.

And the house of God is on the other side.

The house of God. Here is God's interests involved, that which involves the interests of God. [00:11:05]
Now, what does it teach us? What are we living here for?

What is the house of God today?

Why, of course, the house of God is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.

This is that which composes, comprises all true believers everywhere, the body of Christ, the church.

God is building a house, there is no doubt. Now, he expects us to begin small, with an altar.

God can build his own house, and the Lord Jesus says, this rock I will build my church. He does this, thank God he does.

But he expects us to build the altar. That is the personal relationship with himself. Now, it may sound small. We would like to build something big, no doubt, like a city. But God says, oh no, that's not the thing for you. Now, in this case, notice what the altar is connected with. Ruins on the one hand, Bethel on the other hand. Doesn't it give us a thought of decision, or separation, if you will? [00:12:05]
As regards all that I've left behind, do I have any hankering for it any longer? Am I after those things that are merely in the world? Maybe there's been a great deal there. Do I hold on to it with a hand that still wants some of the world?

Now, there's a real blessing for us. What do I want?

What is of real value to me? Do you know, in the truth of the house of God, there is wonderful blessing. Now, that's the proper dwelling of the believer. Ephesians speaks of this, an habitation of God through the Spirit, and a household. Ye are of the household of God.

This is your proper dwelling place.

Are we going to hanker after all those things, ruins, so we have the household of God?

Doesn't it remind you of Philippians 3, where Paul says, [00:13:03] The things that were gained to me, I

count as loss for Christ. I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord. Which is it going to be? Do you know, for every soul, a time of decision must come in this regard. Which is it going to be? It can't be both.

I hope we can, every one of us, recognize this. Now, of course the world holds on to what it's got. And we look at the world and we may think they've got so much. Yes. How much have they got in comparison to the house of God? The things of God, the word of God, with all that it has there for the blessing of every child of God. How much?

Quite nothing.

Absolutely nothing in comparison. Well, now, here then, we have this second altar, that of decision. Be sure we build a proper relationship in reference to God.

Submission and decision. Now, shall we go on to chapter 13 this time?

[00:14:02] Chapter 13, and we'll read from verse 14.

And the Lord said unto Abram, after the lot was separated from him, Lift up now thine eyes, and look from the place where thou art northward and southward and eastward and westward, for all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed forever. And I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth, so that if a man can number the dust of the earth, then shall thy seed also be numbered. Arise, walk through the land, in the length of it and in the breadth of it, for I will give it unto thee. Then Abram removed his tent, and came and dwelt in the plain of Mamre, which is in Hebron, and built there an altar unto the Lord.

Now, here is a different situation.

He had just separated from his nephew Lot because both of them had so much in the way of possessions. They were not able to dwell together. He gave Lot the opportunity of choosing whatever he would. [00:15:04] He said, Just take whatever you please, I'll go the other direction. And Lot, instead of saying to his uncle that you should choose first, Lot lifted up his eyes, not high enough, and saw all the land of Sodom, the plain of Sodom. And it looked so beautiful, it was well watered everywhere, before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.

And he chose this.

Abram left the choice with God.

And leaving the choice with God, he found the deeper, sweeter communion after this. And that's precisely what this next altar speaks of.

We've seen that decision. In this case, we find the altar of communion. Hebron means communion.

And it is in the plain of Mamre, which means baptism, spiritual prosperity. Now, you see, he's going on. It's not simply that he's been content with one altar, that is, with one step of obedience. [00:16:02] But he's going on steadily in that pathway of faith. Now, here we find the place where he spent a good deal of time, Hebron, in a place of communion. I wonder how much we really enjoy it, dear

friends. If we don't know anything of the previous two altars, we won't know much of this one. Now, that's something to really consider. If we haven't learned to submit our wills to the Lord, and if we have not learned to decide to set aside that which is merely of flesh and of the world and choose the house of God instead, we're not going to properly enjoy communion. Lot didn't.

You see, Lot looked at the plain of Sodom. He saw what looked so nice and pleasant. And he pitched his tent towards Sodom. Now, what about communion with God?

It completely suffered.

He was a believer.

Can it be possible that believers are just not enjoying communion with God? [00:17:03] Well, yes, it is possible. Sad to say, it's far too prevalent.

But there are always roots in regard to these things. Where was Lot's altar?

Where are our altars?

Now, remember, the altar always speaks of Christ. He is the basis of submission to the Lord. He is the basis of any kind of decision. You think of the Lord Jesus as the one who satisfies God, that altar upon which the sacrifice is made? In each case, why, Christ is the one around whom all this centers. And in reference to communion, he is the very basis of all true communion, all enjoyment of the presence of God. Why, of course, the only way in which you enter the presence of God is through Christ. So here the soul may be found in quiet, constant simplicity of communion with God, enjoying God.

Communion involves two distinct things. One is that of speaking with God.

[00:18:01] The other is that of hearing God speak. I should have put them in reverse order, shouldn't I? It's most important to have God speak to you first. Listen to God speak first, and then enjoy.

His enjoyment, he tends to say, and let him know you enjoy. It's a two-way street, always, communion. Remember the Queen of Sheba communed with Solomon of all that was in her heart? There was a back-and-forth communication.

It wasn't just simply that she communicated to him. Give the Lord time to speak to your own heart. I wonder how much time we take for this. Abram, we're told in chapter 18, sat in his tent during the heat of the day, and very likely, from the way in which he speaks afterwards, he was just simply in communion with the Lord, enjoying the Lord's goodness and kindness. And the Lord appeared to him. There were three men appeared, and Abram ran to meet them, and he singled out one and said, My Lord. You see, being in communion, he had that discernment to recognize [00:19:04] when the Lord himself came.

It reminds me, doesn't it, of the case of Nathanael, when the Lord Jesus was brought to him, at least when it was Philip who introduced Nathanael to the Lord. The Lord said, Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no God. Whence knowest thou me?

When thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee. The fig tree, you know, was a place of communion, a place of prayer in Israel, under his fig tree. And no doubt it seems to me that Nathanael was under the fig tree confessing the sin and ruin of the nation Israel.

An Israelite in whom is no God, opening his heart in confession to God. The Lord Jesus said, When thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee. Immediately he said, Why, Rabbi, thou art the Son of God. Thou art the King of Israel. Well, here was the very one to whom he had been praying, [00:20:03] suddenly appears before him.

So with Abram, I wonder, do you enjoy communion with the Lord? I hope we do.

Take time to study your Bible.

And when I say study, I don't mean only to study it to get knowledge, but to study it rather to learn of Christ, to have Christ fill your soul with true unspeakable joy. There are different ways to study scripture. One of them is meditation. And I hope we practice it. Now, it's true that studying and comparing one scripture with another is excellent. It will help your mind a great deal. Meditation will help your soul a great deal. Get the Word of God right into your soul. Think of the significance of what you read. You can take one verse or a very small part of a verse and just chew on that all day long.

And perhaps at the end of the day, your heart is just so filled with unspeakable joy [00:21:01] that you can hardly contain yourself. Meditate upon Christ.

Now, communion is the thing that we see here. And there he built an altar unto the Lord. Now, let's remember, building the altar is that which is going to last for eternity. This is true building.

Now, let's turn to chapter 22. Chapter 22, verse 7.

[00:22:03] Now, we needn't read any further.

I'm sure we are all conversant with the history here. The Father and the Son going together on that memorable day.

Very beautiful picture of the Lord Jesus willingly submitting to the Father's will in suffering and dying for our sins. God spared Isaac.

He spared not his own son. But in this case, we find Abram, no doubt in his heart, deeply affected. When his son said to him, My father, where is the lamb for burnt offering? Imagine, how did he feel when he had to answer, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for burnt offering.

True words, absolutely true. But then he took his son and bound him and laid him on the altar. [00:23:02] Imagine the feelings going through that father's heart.

God having given him that son in his old age. Now God says, you have to offer him up.

Now, that's quite a sacrifice.

But he stood up remarkably well to the task. Got up early in the morning and took his son.

Now, he built an altar there, took Isaac and laid him on the wood, upon the altar. What altar is this?

I'm sure we have the altar here of true worship. Abraham's heart thoroughly and absolutely trusts the living God. He knows perfectly well that if Isaac dies there by his own hand, Isaac is going to be raised again. Hebrews chapter 11 tells us this. That he counted that God was able to raise him up again because God had said, In Isaac shall thy seed be called. [00:24:02] In other words, Isaac is going to have children. Therefore the only way he could was if he were to live again. So he had confidence, Isaac was going to rise if he died. Now, he is willing to give up everything, that which meant the most to him. Notice, God said, Thy son Isaac whom thou lovest.

God understood what his love for him was. Dear friends, listen.

Are we willing to give up to the living God, that which really means the most to us on earth? We won't.

That's worship.

In other words, who is first? Well, God is.

Absolutely first.

Now, there is no worship without sacrifice. Now, it may hurt, in some cases, to worship.

Because the flesh is always put down. It's just the opposite of what man is by nature. [00:25:02] Man is a self-worshipper. He loves himself. He lives for himself.

But here instead, we have the glory of God supreme. And Abraham is a very beautiful type here, of God the Father giving his own son. But at the same time, a very striking picture for all of us, in reference to this last altar, the altar of worship. In connection with the altar, we find all these things. I hope we have our altars, every one of us.

We've heard of a family altar. I hope this is true, too. The personal altar, direct communion with the Lord, our direct relationship with God. The family altar, the relationship of the family with God. I hope every one of us is really concerned about building that which is lasting and stable. It may be small. It may seem small in the eyes of the world. But it is not in the eyes of God.