

Encountering God at the Altar

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I. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ALTAR-BUILDING

“We have an altar.”

*(Hebrews 13:8-10 NKJV) “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. {9} Do not be carried about with various and strange doctrines. For it is good that the heart be established by grace, not with foods which have not profited those who have been occupied with them. {10} **We have an altar** from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat?”*

People of every culture and society commemorate particular events in special ways. In some societies feasts are given for every occasion... in others, sacrifices are normally used to mark special days. Some people use gift giving to mark a particular event. Others gather and sing songs. Many people groups and cultures practice the erection of markers and monuments. Some will buy new clothes and parade down the street. Humankind appears to have a universal need to commemorate the significant events of our lives by rituals and traditions.

The people of God that we read about in the Hebrew Scriptures commemorated the significant events of their lives in a particular way.¹ Scripture records they did so by building an altar.

- Noah built an altar when he walked onto dry land following the flood.
- Abraham built an altar when he arrived in the land God has sent him to. Then he built the ultimate altar to sacrifice his son Isaac on.
- Isaac, too, was an altar-builder.
- Moses raised an altar and called it Jehovah-Nissi (The Lord our Banner) to celebrate military victory.
- When Gideon was preparing to do battle, he built an altar.

¹ The Westminster Pulpit - The Best of G. Campbell Morgan Volume VIII, Originally published by Hodder and Staughton. 1906-16, Reprinted by Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1954-55, P. 247.

- David built an altar on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite.

A consistent theme of the Old Testament was altar-building. It was the singular action that celebrated the significant events of the Old Testament. Altar building was always directed toward the God of Israel. At times of joy God's people built altars. At times of sorrow they built altars. In victory and in defeat they built altars. When there was a need for repentance they built altars. When there was a celebration of God's faithfulness they built altars.

It is important to understand the motivation behind these people as they built their altars. They were not motivated by the same reason as the temple priests - who responded to the requirement for religious ritual, and in many cases worshiped the ritual more than the God of the ritual. Instead, people in the Scriptures were motivated by their reverence for the God of Israel, who had intervened in their lives. They built their altars to worship Him and to express dependence and thanksgiving. They built their altars with deep feelings. They desired to connect with their God... and the altars became that point of connection.

We understand today that Christ's atoning sacrifice has destroyed all barriers between His people and Himself. Now we can build our altars, not out of sticks and stones, but out of the essence of our hearts. We have access! We have an altar!

WHAT HAPPENED AT THE OLD TESTAMENT ALTAR?

In Old Testament days, the Hebrew altar-builders understood their sins had distanced them from God and the altar was their place of repentance. They built the altar as a symbol of their submission to God. There they cried out for God's forgiveness. At other times the altar gave them a way to petition Him for deliverance from bondage to Israel's enemies. Altar-building was also a way they expressed their thanks following God's intervention. Altar-building was, in all these cases, a renewal of their commitment to the God of their fathers.

G. Campbell Morgan described it this way: *“Fundamentally, the action was one of worship; actively, it was sacrifice; experimentally, it was readjustment and a new beginning.”*²

From Morgan’s words, we can extract three essential facts.

1. Worship took place at the altar. In fact, altar-building itself, was an act of worship.
2. Once the altar was built, there was always a sacrifice made.
3. Following the sacrifice, a new beginning was the normal experience. The altar builder could look forward to a fresh start - to a new chance at life - to a future filled with hope.

Is it not the same today for the New Covenant child of God? When we build an altar, we can look forward to the same three happenings! Let’s examine these three happenings.

A. ALTAR-BUILDING: THE FUNDAMENTAL ACT OF WORSHIP

People of all faiths worship something or somebody. Often, this is an empty, unrewarding activity because who or what they worship is not worthy of worship and is incapable of responding to their worship.

As Christians, our worship expresses our confidence in the One we believe in. What sets our worship apart is that the God we worship is both worthy of our worship and capable of responding to it. Even more importantly, He is willing to respond... and He does! He responds in reaction to our submission to Him as our God. This has happened over thousands of years with God’s people. Every altar signifies submission to His sovereign authority and impeccable holiness. Old Testaments saints did it with physical altars. We do it with the altars of our hearts!

We do it with the altars of our hearts!

² Morgan, Volume VIII, P.249.

New Testament Altar-Building may be described as, “An act of worship from deep within the heart, in which we gratefully and willingly sacrifice all personal desires and self-interests in order to approach God. Altar-building is expressed from within the New Covenant Christian life. It acknowledges the absolute sovereignty and impeccable holiness of God.”³

Two Terms Vital to the Definition:

Absolute:

- Total
- Complete
- Utter
- Without any qualification - It stands alone!

Impeccable:

- Flawless
- Perfect
- Unimpeachable
- Above reproach
- Immaculate
- Spotless
- Unsullied

POINT 1

Altar-building is the fundamental act of New Covenant Christian worship.

“We have an altar.”

B. ALTAR-BUILDING: THE PRECURSOR TO SACRIFICE.

In the history of God’s people, the purpose of the altar was always to provide a place of sacrifice. Worship and sacrifice are not the same. Notice the difference:

- ☑ **Worship is a heartfelt “giving out” of our devotion and commitment.**
- ☑ **Sacrifice is an intentional “giving up” of all that stands in the way of our worship.**

Why did God always require a sacrifice at the Hebrew altars of the Old Testament? Why does He always require a sacrifice at the altars of our hearts today (in this age of the New Covenant of the Blood of Jesus)? The answer lies in the jealousy of God.

*(Exodus 20:2-6 NKJV) ““I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. {3} **You shall have no other gods before Me.** {4} You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; {5} you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. **For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God,** visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, {6}*

³ Definition by Dr. Abramson

but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.”

God requires that we elevate our worship of Him far above our worship or desire for anything else. He commands our full devotion. He will not share His sovereignty with anything or anyone. This requires no further explanation because God is not to be put in a place of having to justify himself to us. We are the clay. He is the Potter. We simply know that when we build altars within our hearts, these are acts of worship to provide places of sacrifice.

God has always designated sacrifice to be the test or barrier through which people would pass to get to Him. Under the Old Covenant, the sacrifice was the ritual slaughter of bulls and goats, or some other material possession (even Abraham's son Isaac). Blood had to be shed. Under the New Covenant we have the benefit of a far better sacrifice - the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. His sacrifice ended the old system - destroyed the need for rituals - the need for fresh blood to be shed. As it did, it brought into being a new system - one of freedom from the bondage of ritual, but still one of sacrifice! Now it requires a sacrifice of the heart. Now we are free to worship and sacrifice on altars built from love, gratefulness... and the joy of our fully restored personal relationships with God.

*(Hebrews 9:11-14 NKJV) “But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. {12} Not with the blood of goats and calves, **but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption.** {13} For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, {14} how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?”*

In this present age, it is in our hearts that we meet God through His indwelling Christ - and that we encounter the Holy Spirit. Here we submit gladly and gratefully to our Him. Altar-building used to be a physical effort preceding an unpleasant blood-letting. Now it is a beautiful experience that precedes the willing, hope-filled sacrifice of everything that stands between us and God. At the altar of our hearts we are forgiven and accepted by our merciful loving Savior, washed in His own blood.

*(Hebrews 8:10) "But this is the promise that I will make to Israel after those days, says the Lord: "I will put my teachings inside them, **and I will write those teachings on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.**"*

POINT 2

The only true and acceptable sacrifice to God happens on the altar of our hearts.

"We have an altar."

C. ALTAR-BUILDING: THE DEPARTURE POINT FOR NEW BEGINNINGS ON THE JOURNEY OF LIFE

For Old Testament saints, the altar was the place they met God. the altar represented the open door to new beginnings. The altar was the place to regain the favor and backing of God. At the altar they renewed their vision and revitalized their sense of purpose. It was the place they raised the banner of the Lord and then went out to fulfill their destinies. They went forth, stronger for their experience, confident in their calling and able to do the will of God.

Perhaps our best example of Hebrew altar-builders is Abram (Abraham). He had responded to the call of God to go from his

native land to the place God would show him. He was walking in faith and obedience. He had no idea where God was taking him.

(Genesis 12:1-4 NKJV) "Now the LORD had said to Abram: "Get out of your country, From your family And from your father's house, To a land that I will show you. {2} I will make you a great nation; I will bless you And make your name great; And you shall be a blessing. {3} I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." {4} So Abram departed as the LORD had spoken to him, and Lot went with him. And Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran."

Abram found his faith and obedience had brought him to through land of Canaan to a place called Shechem.

(Genesis 12:7 NKJV) "Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your descendants I will give this land." And there he built an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him."

Genesis 12:7 records that Abram's response to his encounter with God was to build an altar. The altar signified his reverence and his desire to worship Him. Now let's look at the altar between Bethel and Ai.

(Genesis 12:8 NKJV) "And he moved from there to the mountain east of Bethel, and he pitched his tent with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; there he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD."

(Genesis 13:1-4 NKJV) "Then Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that he had, and Lot with him, to the South. {2} Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold. {3} And he went on his journey from the South 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 at first. And there Abram called on the name of the LORD."

We can learn from these encounters Abram had with God. At Shechem, Abram encountered God and reacted by altar-building. Next, he journeyed to a place between Bethel and Ai. In his desire to meet with God there, he built his altar. This became the pattern for his life. Then, he returned to this altar between Bethel and Ai and again called on the name of the Lord. Abram continually built altars, either in response to God's call (as in Shechem), or to call on God (as in Ai) before he continued on his journey. God was central to whatever he did and the altars appeared wherever he went. And... we have an altar!

POINT 3

The altar is the place of guidance for life's journeys. Do not go far without building an altar. As often as necessary, revisit it.

II. A FAR BETTER ALTAR AND A FAR BETTER PRIEST

Today, we have a far better altar with a far better Priest. In Christ, we have all that we could seek in a Great High Priest. He is ever faithful to intercede for us. His prayers for us are not ritual, as were those of the Hebrew priest. They are completely effective, totally powerful in their working for our good. They empower our new beginning every time!

*(Hebrews 4:14-16 NKJV) "Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. {15} For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. {16} **Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.**"*

*(Hebrews 8:1-2, 6, 10 God's Word Translation) "The main point we want to make is this: We do have this kind of chief priest. This chief priest has received the highest position, the throne of majesty in heaven. {2} He serves as priest of the holy place and of the true tent set up by the Lord and not by any human...{6} Jesus has been given a priestly work that is superior to the Levitical priests' work. He also brings a better promise from God that is based on better guarantees... {10} But this is the promise that I will make to Israel after those days, says the Lord: "I will put my teachings inside them, and **I will write those teachings on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.***

All that we seek is found in Christ. He is LORD. His priesthood is eternal and always accessible through the altar of our hearts. It is an abiding altar for an abiding God.

BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES FOR ALTAR-BUILDING

If we are going to build altars from which to launch out into our new beginnings, we want to be sure they are built properly, so our worship and sacrifice will be acceptable to God. He always accepted worship and sacrifice from altars that were constructed according to His specifications and conditions. We can learn a great deal by revisiting God's requirements for the altar under the Old Covenant. Our hearts (our New Covenant altars) must still meet these conditions. G. Campbell Morgan said this:

Following his receiving the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai (Genesis, Chapter 20), Moses revealed these requirements for altar-building to the children of Israel as God instructed him.

(Exodus 20:22-26 NKJV) "Then the LORD said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the children of Israel: 'You have seen that I have talked with you from heaven. {23} You shall not make anything to be with Me; gods of silver or gods of gold you shall not make for yourselves. {24} An altar of earth you shall make for Me, and you shall sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen. In every place where I record My name I will come to you, and I

will bless you. {25} And if you make Me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stone; for if you use your tool on it, you have profaned it. {26} Nor shall you go up by steps to My altar, that your nakedness may not be exposed on it.”

G. Campbell Morgan said this:

“The instructions here were quite clear and simple, and, indeed, most astonishing for they were for the man who desired to erect an altar for himself. It must be of earth, or if perchance it should be of stone, then it must be of unhewn stone; and further, no steps were to help him in his ascent to the altar.”

Morgan continued:

“The altar was to be of earth... If some man should desire to raise his altar amid rocky fastnesses where perchance no earth could be found, then let him build it of stone; but he must not grave or polish the stone, or set any tool on it; he must erect quite simply a heap of frough stones, and he must not under any circumstances approach it by steps.”

The symbolic significance of these instructions will guide us as we judge the character of the altars we are build in our hearts:

1. The altar was to be built of ordinary dirt where possible.
2. If the people found themselves in rocky places, they could build their altars from stones.
3. The stones were not to be worked with tools. Not the slightest working of a tool was allowed - no human workmanship!
4. They were simply to be piled up.
5. There were to be no man-made steps to assist the altar-builder to climb to the altar.

These instruction clearly point to the conclusion that the altar was to be free of works of our hands. They were to be entirely works. They were to be approached without trying to make any steps. What does all this say to us about the significance of altar-building, as we desire to make an altar in our hearts?

Point 4

The Significant Principles to Altar-Building

Once again, listen to the words of G. Campbell Morgan:

"I never climb to God on the steps that I have carved. I climb to God when I descend to the dignity of my naked humanity on the earth and in the dust; and when, lying there, I find the Son of Man, for there also I find heaven opened, for He is also the Son of God. He will interpret my problem and heal my wounds and illuminate my darkness. There is no approach to God by climbing.

*Heaven comes down our souls to greet,
And glory crowns the mercy seat."*

Our Example

(Philippians 2:5-11 NKJV) "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, {6} who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, {7} but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. {8} And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. {9} Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, {10} that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, {11} and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Verse 8 - "And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross."

There can be nothing connected to altar-building that has anything to do with our pride. Otherwise, God will not meet us at the altar! We must be fully clay in the hands of the Potter. Our cry at the altar must be, *“Lord, have your way in us. We belong to you. Do as you please.”*

A FINAL THOUGHT

In Old Testament times, when altars were whole they were used and times were good. When altars were broken down, they were unused, neglected and forgotten. Times were not good.

In each of us there is an altar. Each of us is responsible to maintain the condition of our own altars.

“We have an altar.”