

The Purpose of Altars

by David A. Huston

The purpose of this article is to encourage believers to persevere through difficult and painful situations.

*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*

AFTER THIS DIVINE APPEARANCE, Abram moved to the mountain east of Bethel and “there he built an altar to the LORD” (12:9). He then moved his tent to Hebron and “built an altar there to the LORD” (13:18). Finally, after being sent to the mountains of Moriah by the Lord, “Abraham built an altar there and placed the wood in order; and he bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, upon the wood” (22:9). Throughout Abraham’s life he was continually having to deal with altars. And the altars did not get easier as time went by; they got harder. The last altar he faced was the one upon which he offered his most precious possession of all: his beloved son, Isaac.

The Hebrew word translated “altar” is *mizbeach*, which comes from the word *zabach* meaning to slaughter an animal. An altar is therefore nothing more than a slaughter place. It is place where a person slays an animal and offers it up in sacrifice to the Lord. An altar was not a pretty sight. It was a place of blood, of fire and smoke, of burning flesh—a place filled with the stench of death. It was not a place that anyone would be attracted to apart from a deep desire to please God.

For those of us living in the age of the Spirit, the altar represents those places along the pathway of our lives when God calls us to offer ourselves to Him in a special way. It is more than just a particular location in a church building. It is a spiritual place. A place of submission. A place of personal sacrifice.

God Chooses Our Altars

Psalms 37:23 says, “The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD....” This verse should be very encouraging to us whenever we come to an altar. It tells us that if we are living for God in sincerity and truth, every step along our pathway is being ordered by the Lord Himself. This means that when we find ourselves facing an altar, it is because the Lord Himself has determined that we need to be

facing an altar. If we simply submit to it and offer ourselves to God, we will prosper spiritually. But if we start looking for ways to avoid the altar, or to get around it without having to bow the knee, we will not only fail to grow spiritually but we will be placing ourselves in grave spiritual danger.

How do we know when we are facing an altar? A simple way of thinking about it is this: an altar is any situation you find yourself in where you are powerless to change it; that is, you are powerless *if* you are committed to staying within the will of God. This could be a situation where someone is lying about you. It could be a situation where you are being asked to do something you find to be very difficult or unpleasant. It could be a situation where you are not getting what you had set your heart upon. There is always a way of evading the unpleasantness of an altar experience, but you would have to step out of the will of God to do it. This is what makes it an altar, because whatever the situation may be, an altar by its nature is always uncomfortable. It always has a certain amount of emotional pain to it. It is never something we enjoy having to go through.

Mary the mother of Jesus was told through prophecy that a sword would pierce through her own soul (Luke 2:35). This was fulfilled when she stood helplessly watching as her son was despised and rejected of men, arrested and brutally beaten, nailed to a tree and left to writhe in pain. Can you imagine what was going on inside of her? Was she tempted to get angry at God? Was she trying to devise a way to rescue Him from His passion? I doubt it. That experience was a divinely-ordered altar for her which she had been told to expect. I believe she resolutely submitted to it.

This is what an altar experience does for us. It pierces our soul. It cuts deeply into our inner man. It strikes at the thoughts and intents of the heart. It is designed by God to slaughter everything that is of the flesh. This is why it hurts. It can be agonizing. It can be excruciating. Time slows down when you're on the altar. We just want it to be over. But we dare not try to end it too soon. Not until the Lord says, "It is finished."

Who Will Live: the Spirit or the Flesh?

Altar experiences either make us or destroy us. Remember, an altar is a slaughter place. But it is up to each of us to determine what will get slaughtered. Will it be your flesh? Or will it be God's Spirit? We see these two contrasting responses to the altar in the lives of Saul and David. When Saul failed to do the will of God, Samuel the prophet confronted him. Saul's response was, "I have sinned; yet honor me now, please, before the elders of my people and before Israel, and return with me, that I may worship the LORD your God" (1 Samuel 15:30). A while later David sinned in what might seem to some to be a far more serious

offense than Saul's. But when he was confronted by Nathan the prophet, his response was, "For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight" (Psalms 51:3-4).

In Saul's case, the Spirit was slaughtered. This is because he would not humble himself. His desire to avoid being embarrassed in front of the people kept his flesh alive, resulting in the death of his relationship with God. David, on the other hand, humbly admitted his error and immediately began a seven day fast. Not only was he unconcerned about what the people thought, he wrote Psalms 51 which continues to this day as a model expression of humility and submission to God. He even cried out in His prayer, "Do not take Your Holy Spirit from me" (Psalms 51:11). David's flesh was put to death, which allowed His relationship with God to deepen and flourish.

We should note that just because our pathway leads us to an altar, this does not necessarily mean we are doing something wrong (though we may be). But whether we are or are not, we must recognize that an altar is not punishment from God. It is instead one of the key ways that God causes us to grow and brings us closer to Himself. It is one of the ways that He brings us to the end of ourselves and teaches us to depend entirely upon Him. It is one of the ways that He purifies our motives and perfects our character.

Altars are therefore extremely important elements in our spiritual growth. Paul wrote of his desire to know the Lord in the "fellowship of His sufferings" (Ephesians 3:10). This is what the altar is all about. It is participation in the sufferings of Jesus Christ. We may not always see it that way, but this is how God sees it.

The Problem of Living Sacrifices

Paul wrote, "And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another" (Galatians 5:24-26). No conceit. No arrogance. No displays of pride. Instead, cooperating with the brethren. Submitting to one another. These are the marks of a man who has remained on the altar until the flesh, with all its passions and desires, has been crucified.

But we don't like altar experiences. We don't like to be put in difficult or stressful or uncomfortable situations. We like to live on easy street. Perhaps this is why Paul pleaded, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable

service.” You see, we are not like those Old Testament animals. They had no choice. They were drug to the altar, killed, and offered up whether they wanted to be or not. But not so with us: we always have a choice. We are “living sacrifices.” And living sacrifices can climb off the altar anytime they want.

Psalms 118:27 says, “Bind the sacrifice with cords to the horns of the altar.” This is what we need to do to ourselves if we are serious about going on with the Lord. We need to, by our own choice, bind ourselves to our altars. This means that when we get in a situation we don’t particularly like, we need to not immediately start looking for a way out of it. We need to set our face like a flint and step into it, trusting the Lord to bring us through. We need to persevere. We need to stay focused on Jesus, who for the that was joy set before Him endured the cross. He didn’t try to get out of Calvary. He faced it. He submitted to it. He humbled Himself and became obedient. This is the pathway to resurrection. This is the pathway to spiritual power.

If there was ever a man of altars it was Paul. In and out of prison. Beatings, lashings, stoning. Rejection, hatred, the hostility of false brethren. Yet he wrote, “Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

When Paul wrote of his infirmities, he was not speaking of physical ailments or diseases. He was talking about being in situations that he was powerless to change without stepping out of the will of God for his life. Sure, he could run. He could hide. He could maneuver his way around the altar. But if he did he would lose out on what God was wanting to do in his life. Even though there is no reason to think that Paul enjoyed suffering, it is clear that over time he began to appreciate the positive benefits of enduring an altar. He took pleasure in his weaknesses, that the power of Christ would rest upon him.

One of My Altars

In 1988 I was serving in our local assembly as a home group leader and a supervisor of four other home group leaders. One of these leaders had come to the Lord a year after me. We were good friends and he was a good home group leader. But he did have a few problems at home that I knew about and which I also knew our pastor knew about. Nevertheless, in a restructuring of our home group ministry, this man was appointed to be my supervision. I remember when I was told this, it felt like I was suddenly punched in the gut. My wife and I looked at each other and just shrugged.

After the meeting we discussed why this was done and decided that we could not figure it out. I had been in church longer, I had more experience, and no one had ever suggested that I had done anything wrong. It did not make sense to us, but we decided that it didn't have to. We made up our minds that night not to concern ourselves with why and to just focus on serving the Lord in the ways we had been asked to serve. The decision as to who does what was not ours to make, so we were content to leave it in the hands of our leaders.

This experience was an important altar in my life. It helped to kill my innate desire for power and position. It reminded me that my faith does not depend on having a particular position in the church, but rather having my heart in a right position toward God and man. Because I submitted myself to my leaders and persevered in my labors, I was later given the responsibility of overseeing our entire home group ministry. I thank God for placing such purifying altars in my life.

I have found that those who continually wiggle off the altar before the knife can pierce their souls remain carnal and spiritually anemic. The flesh rules. But those who submit to the crucifying effects of the altar gain spiritual strength and move forward in the pathway the Lord has set before them. The Spirit rules. Just as it was for Abraham and Paul, there will always be additional altars for each of us to face. But by the grace of God we can persevere to the end of our journey if we will simply stay submitted to the Lord and embrace our altars.

Note to the reader:

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