

ROBUST FAITH

II, “Altars of Commitment”

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Genesis 12:1-9

INTRODUCTION

In 1904, William Borden graduated from a Chicago high school. As an heir to the Borden Dairy estate, he was already a millionaire. For his high school graduation present, his parents gave him a trip around the world. As William traveled through Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, he felt a growing burden for the world’s hurting people. In one of his letters home he wrote, “I’m going to give my life to prepare for the mission field.” At that time, he wrote two words of commitment in the back of his Bible, “**No reserves.**”

Indeed, he held nothing back. One friend expressed surprise that he was “throwing himself away as a missionary.” He went to Yale University and was whole-hearted in his commitment to Christ. One entry in his personal journal in particular defined him: “Say ‘no’ to self and ‘yes’ to Jesus every time.” During his first semester at Yale, he started a small prayer group that gave birth to a movement that would transform the campus. He started meeting with one student each morning before breakfast, then a third joined, then a fourth. This finally grew to 150 freshman meeting for prayer by the end of the year. Borden began a strategy to reach every person on campus. In the prayer group, they would list the students who needed to come to know Christ and divide the names up, each one taking names for prayer and outreach. When they came to a student’s name that seemed particularly incorrigible, and no one would take him or her, after a long pause, they’d usually hear Bill’s voice saying, “Put him down for me.” By the time Bill Borden was a senior, 1,000 of Yale’s 1,300 students were in a weekly Bible study and prayer group. But, it wasn’t just students at Yale that Borden was interested in. He reached out to the “down and outers” on the streets of New Haven, rescuing drunks from the streets and founding the Yale Hope Mission. As he graduated, he had several attractive, lucrative job offers. But, he turned them all down, writing two more words of commitment in the back of his Bible, “**No retreats.**”

He went to seminary at Princeton. After graduating, he immediately went to Egypt to learn Arabic because he felt called by God to work with Muslims in China, the Kansu people. While in Egypt, he contracted spinal meningitis and within a month, the 25-year-old William Borden was dead. But, just prior to his death, he wrote two more words in the back of his Bible. Beneath, “No reserves” and “No retreats,” he added, “**No regrets.**”

Was that a life well-lived? Don’t you love the straight-arrow quality, the focus, the purpose with

which his short life was lived? Certainly there is robustness and energy in William Borden's faith. How can we acquire that kind of focus? How can we live that well?

This morning's study from Abraham gives us an essential ingredient in maintaining such a faith commitment. We're looking at Abraham's life as the prototype of the life of faith as Paul treats it in Romans and as the book of Hebrews uses it. Last week, we saw Abraham struggle with leaving Ur and the "no reserves" part of this commitment. Here's a couple of pictures of the ruins of Ur, compliments of Gabe Miller, via Joe. We're talking here of 4000 years ago! But, after a long delay in Haran, he finally makes the break with the past and with the culture in a three-fold renunciation at God's instruction, leaving country, people, and his father's household. Now we see steady movement forward, "no retreats." I believe at the end, Abraham could have joined William Borden in saying, "no regrets"—at least in the overall picture.

Much of our Scripture is the same passage as we used last week— but now, I want to look at two anchor points— altars Abram builds that keep him moving forward in God's call on his life.

SCRIPTURE: Gen. 12:1-9

THE ALTAR AT SHECHEM— "The LORD appeared to Abram."

Typically, wherever Abraham pitched his tent, he built an altar to worship the Lord. He finally left Haran at the age of 75. When he died, he was 175. In the intervening 100 years, he lived the life of a Bedouin, moving from place to place, living in tents. There were nice houses in Ur and in Haran, and likely Abram lived in one of them. Now, he leaves that behind for a tent. While we may find it fun to camp out a few days, doing this for 100 years? Hebrews, in celebrating the robust faith of Abraham says,

By faith he [Abraham] made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. (Heb 11:9-10)

The Canaanites who lived in this land had cities with walls around them. But Abraham knew this was a pilgrim life, based upon the surety of God's promise. During his lifetime, he never owned a square foot of the ground promised him with the exception of the cave of Machpelah which he purchased to bury Sarah when she died. Somehow Abraham knew God's promise was far greater than owning property and taking possession of lands. He lived a life that was detached, free from the entanglement of the things around him— free to go and come at God's command. He lived a life of pilgrimage, moving steadily forward to God's promise.

My heart feels a warning here. It is easy to get entangled in our possessions, our establishing what we consider our inheritance. It can dull our longing for that *city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God*. Of course we generally need to own things, including house and land. But, can we keep our hearts from getting too attached to these things? Can we keep alive that sense of God's call in our lives, ready at any moment to walk away from it all to say "yes" to God's call?

Abraham's life is not anchored by his possessions. Instead it is anchored by altars he builds. Here we have the first of those altars.

Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him. (Gen 12:6-7)

The LORD appeared to Abram. Certainly we know little about what this involved, but it is obviously a further step in God's revelation to Abraham— an ongoing revelation that will continue throughout his life. Abraham has obeyed the first word from the Lord to leave his homeland. The promise includes making him a great nation. But now, a little more is revealed. It is Abram's offspring that will get the land. And, of course that doesn't happen for another perhaps 500 or so years, after Israel's exodus from Egypt. Abram's response to this additional revelation of God is worship— building an altar.

Abram's journey with God did not take place in a vacuum. *The Canaanites were in the land.* Yes, the Canaanites offered a successful alternative to faith. But Abram knows he is not to accommodate himself to the culture. At each stopping place, he builds an altar to worship the true God— orienting himself afresh to the Word of God. As he moves through the land, with his altars where he worships God, he is claiming the promise, claiming the land for God. He doesn't plant a flag as the early explorers of the new world did. He built an altar.

These altars were likely precursors to the altars God would later establish in the Law regarding worship involving animal sacrifice as a burnt offering. As we see in the earlier story of Cain and Abel (Gen. 4), from the beginning, animal sacrifice was involved in worshiping God. The altar means a giving of our lives in self-surrender to God as symbolized in the animal giving its life.

And, this act of self-surrender to God is still the heart of our worship. Christ is the perfect sacrifice on our behalf. But, as Romans 12:1 tells us,

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, 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.

This involves our whole beings— everything we are and have gathered up and offered to God, as The Message paraphrase puts this same verse:

Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him.

This last week, we remembered the awful tragedy of 9-11 six years ago. Dr. Craig Barnes was pastor of the National Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C. then and says eleven of their members were in the Pentagon when the plane hit, some narrowly escaping with their lives. He writes:

“I did a lot of pastoral counseling in the days following September 11, but I soon discovered that what people wanted most of all was to worship. Their thirst for it was insatiable. In the week immediately following the terrorist attacks, we held a worship

service just about every night, always to a full sanctuary. Prayer vigils, communion services, memorials— they didn't care how we put the service together, they just wanted to be in the house of the Lord. On Sunday we had the largest attendance in worship in the 206-year history of the church.”

While I was much further removed in our little church in Fredericksburg, OH at the time, I noticed the same thing. People's desire to worship God was intensified. Worship took on the priority it ought to always have in our lives.

And, this makes perfect sense when you think about what we're doing in worship. We are re-centering our lives in God. He is LORD. He is the ruler of all things and our rightful Lord. When things spin out of control in our world, we feel the need to come back to the One who is in control. We worship God who comes to us in Jesus. For, as Col 1:15-17 proclaims:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Every week, we come together to rediscover how it is that Jesus Christ *is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*

THE ALTAR AT BETHEL— Abram “Called on the name of the LORD”

This first altar at Shechem was in response to God's revelation to Abram. But now, he moves on another 25 mi. or so to Bethel. Now we see him taking the initiative. Now, Abram is calling on the name of the Lord.

From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and 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 (8).

While worship begins with God's revelation to us, we soon need to also take some initiative in reaching out to the One who has reached down to us. We must, as Abram does here, call *on the name of the LORD.*

Oswald Chambers in one of his classic devotions observes that Bethel is the symbol of fellowship with God and Ai a symbol of the world. And Abram pitched his tent between the two. Bethel literally means “house of God” and Ai means “heap of ruins.” We live out our lives between “the house of God” where life is ordered by God and the ruins of this world's system. Through worship, Abraham keeps himself oriented toward God, a bridge to the world. It is a picture of a daily quiet time of worshiping the Lord. The altar at Bethel is where our lives get ordered in obedience to God.

Do you have that place where you regularly call on the name of the Lord— a place where every day you kneel in prayer before the God of all creation in surrendering your life to Him for that new day? Do you open God's Word to listen and let it shape your feelings, your thinking, your world view, and your actions according to God's unchanging purpose? Of course, gathering in the House of the Lord on Sunday is also a necessary component of this keeping our lives pointed

in the right direction. And I don't need to tell you, the great enemy of all this is BUSYNESS. Don't let the press, the chaos of this world— of Ai— distract you from living the promises of God.

These altars Abraham builds also serve to keep reminding him of special events in relationship with God— places of surrender, places of commitment. That is important throughout his life. For, while there are several wonderful visits from God through his life— I count about eight— stretched over a 100 year walk with the Lord, that's not a lot. That averages about once every 12½ years. But these enduring stone altars are strong physical reminders of these God-events.

I hope you too have some altars that stir spiritual memories, redirecting your heart to the Lord. It may be a physical place where you wrestled through to an important, decisive surrender to the Lord. Sometimes it is a particular hymn or song through which you *really* heard the Lord, and it is a favorite in your mind. Every time you sing it, your heart goes back to that divine encounter.

CONCLUSION

This week, as I've worked on this sermon, I've had some pleasant times reflecting back on some altars strewn about my spiritual geography. They've been in churches, on retreats, out walking and praying— times when "Heaven came down and glory filled my soul," as the gospel song writer, John W. Peterson, says. At those moments, the spiritual power was there to let go in total surrender to the Lord of something I'd struggled with, and victory was mine— victories over sin, over bitterness, over self, over terrible bondages. They've include glorious times of rich fellowship with the Lord. These memories can help carry us through some dry times.

In closing, there is one that I feel is appropriate to share. This altar is on a county highway in S. Ohio. Since childhood, I struggled with serious allergies— mostly to pollens, but also it included cats and horses. Several weeks in the spring were really miserable, almost incapacitating. When I went to seminary in Kentucky, things were even worse. In desperation I went to an allergist who, after testing me, informed me I was probably in the worst place in the country I could be for what I was allergic to. Yet, I knew God had called me to that place. I went through several years of desensitization shots, which helped, but my allergies were still *very bad* at times of the year. Our first call to a church, again clearly God's call to us, was in the same area, just across the Ohio river from Kentucky, about 35 mi. east of Cincinnati. I left to make a hospital call in Cincinnati. It was one of those times (and those of you with allergies will understand) when things were just barely in balance with the histamines. My nose wasn't running, but I knew the slightest exposure to an allergen would set things off. In such a situation, the pollution of the Cincinnati air inevitably did me in. I was a couple of miles out of town, when I realized I forgotten to bring along my medication for the inevitable allergic reaction Cincinnati would precipitate. And, there's nothing worse than making a hospital call with your nose running, explaining it is just allergies, not a cold, and hoping they believe you. I remember the spot in the road where I pulled off to turn around and go back to get my medication. There, the Lord spoke to me that I didn't need to do that— I could claim His healing. I did that, and drove on without my medications. I was free, no longer crippled for weeks out of the year by the pollen in the air. For most of my life I'd prayed for healing. But that was the moment, the place alongside Rt. 125 in Brown Co., Ohio.

Here's an altar this morning. Perhaps the Lord has shown you something of Himself, so this is Shechem, you need to confirm it, giving Him the worship He deserves. Or perhaps this is Bethel for you in which you want to call on the name of the Lord. We need these specific times and places. Yes, much of the spiritual life is gradual growth. But, there are also those moments where God's Spirit enables us to put everything on the altar for Him.

We can be inspired by the witness of William Borden writing down three altars, decisive moments of surrender, in the back of his Bible:

No Reserves

No Retreats

No Regrets.

But, without the first two altars, giving it all on the altar of "no reserves" and pressing on with the altar of "no retreats," we'll never end with the altar of "no regrets."