

Altered by the Altar
Some Altars are Hard
Genesis 22

Dr. Steve Horn

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Text Introduction: Genesis is the book of beginnings. Genesis shows us the beginning of many things—creation, humanity, sin, family, even nations. Genesis also shows us the beginning of worship. For example, the last verse of chapter 4 tells us, “At that time people began to call on the name of Yahweh.” (4:26)

We ought to be able to learn something about worship from this book of beginnings. A recurring phrase in the book is “built an altar.” We are looking at each of these texts as we examine how worship changes us or how we are “Altered by the Altar.” Over the rest of the weeks of the summer we will look at each of the texts that have this phrase. We considered Noah. We learned from Noah’s building of an altar that “worship is the right response” to salvation. There is no other response, really, when you think about what God has done for us in saving us through Jesus Christ.

Last week, we looked at a series of altars that Abraham built as he moved from place to place in the Land of Promise. We said about this series of altars that these show us worship as a right priority.

Today, there is yet one more altar that Abraham built. It is quite an altar and quite a story.

Text: After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, “Abraham!”

“Here I am,” he answered.

² “Take your son,” He said, “your only son Isaac, whom you love, go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.”

³ So Abraham got up early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took with him two of his young men and his son Isaac. He split wood for a burnt offering and set out to go to the place God had told him about. ⁴ On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. ⁵ Then Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will go over there to worship; then we’ll come back to you.” ⁶ Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac. In his hand he took the fire and the sacrificial knife, and the two of them walked on together.

⁷ Then Isaac spoke to his father Abraham and said, “My father.”

And he replied, “Here I am, my son.”

Isaac said, “The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”

⁸ Abraham answered, “God Himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” Then the two of them walked on together.

⁹When they arrived at the place that God had told him about, Abraham built the altar there and arranged the wood. He bound his son Isaac and placed him on the altar on top of the wood. ¹⁰Then Abraham reached out and took the knife to slaughter his son.

¹¹But the Angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” He replied, “Here I am.”

¹²Then He said, “Do not lay a hand on the boy or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your only son from Me.”¹³ Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught in the thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram and offered it as a burnt offering in place of his son. ¹⁴And Abraham named that place The LORD Will Provide, so today it is said: “It will be provided on the LORD’s mountain.”

¹⁵Then the Angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven¹⁶ and said, “By Myself I have sworn,” this is the LORD’s declaration: “Because you have done this thing and have not withheld your only son, ¹⁷I will indeed bless you and make your offspring as numerous as the stars of the sky and the sand on the seashore. Your offspring will possess the gates of their enemies.¹⁸ And all the nations of the earth will be blessed by your offspring because you have obeyed My command.”

Introduction: We have come to holy ground when we come to this passage. F.B. Meyer, a preacher and Bible commentator of the late 1800s and early 1900s, said of this passage: “So long as men live in this world, they will turn to this story with unwaning interest.” There is only one scene in history by which this scene is surpassed. That scene, of course, is when God the Father offered up His one and only Son, Jesus Christ, on a cross from which there was no deliverance so that He (Jesus) might be the one and only sacrifice offered up for all of time for our sin.

The story of Abraham has to be seen in at least three major movements.

Call to Move (Genesis 12)—When we meet Abraham, his name is actually just Abram. God called Abram to move. That does not seem like much unless you have ever moved. Each time I have moved, I’ve been really excited, because I felt like I was moving at the call of God, but I tell you, “Moving is absolutely terrifying.” There are so many unknowns. For Abram, he didn’t even know where he was going, but the Scripture says, “Abram went, as the Lord had told him.”

Father of Many (Genesis 15)—Chapter 15 tells us that one day God visited Abram and announced to him that he would be the father of many. In fact, the way that God told him was to bring him outside. God told him to count the stars and said, “Your descendants will be just that numerous.” The only problem was that Abram wasn’t getting any younger (in fact old—well beyond he and his wife’s child-bearing years) and they had no children.

Birth of Isaac and Invitation to Offer up Isaac (Genesis 21-22)—The promise in chapter 15 makes the story of chapters 21 and 22 all that more impossible to understand. In chapter 21, we learn that Abraham and Sarai finally have a child. Abraham was 100 years old when Isaac is born. In chapter 22 as was just read, God commanded that Abraham offer up that one and only son to Him as a sacrifice. Since we met Abram in chapter 12 the entire narrative of Genesis has pointed to this son, but now Abraham is being asked to offer us this son back to God. Only at the last moment does God say, “Put down the knife, that’s enough.” (My paraphrase) “For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your only son from Me.” (Genesis 22:12b)

Notice the parallels in this story and Genesis 12. Much of what happens in chapter 12 happens here in Genesis 22.

- There is the command to go to an unknown place.
- There is the response of unrivaled obedience.

This leads us to make this point today. Some altars will be hard. That is, some of what God asks you to do will be hard.

Some altars are hard but...

God will provide.

- In His Time—In the context of the telling of the story, Genesis 22 moves painfully slow. As a reader or hearer, we seem to make every step with Abraham and Isaac. We see them “walk on together.” We hear Isaac say, “The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” At that last moment, God provides.

Some of you have been there. There is a bill to be paid and you have to keep walking toward the deadline. There is that unanswered prayer for healing and you keep walking from one doctor’s appointment to the next. You keep walking from job interview to job interview. There is that question about God or for God, but by faith, you just keep walking. You and I want God to provide, and He will, but in His time.

- On His Terms-And God not only provides in His time, but He provides in His way or on His terms, not ours. The writer of Hebrews gives us an interesting nugget about this part of Abraham’s life.

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac. He received the promises and he was offering his unique son, ¹⁸the one it had been said about, Your seed will be traced through Isaac. ¹⁹He considered God to be able even to raise someone from the dead . . . (Hebrews 11:17-19)

Abraham, remember, said to the young men who journeyed with him, “We will return.” The writer of Hebrews, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, said about Abraham that Abraham was fully expecting to go through with offering his son, and God would bring him back to life.”

God knows when we put all on the altar.

You probably have more questions about this passage than I have answers. I imagine some of you are thinking why God would even take Abraham on this journey. I don’t have complete answers, but I think the text clearly points us to the most important aspect of this command. God asked of Abraham what He asks of all of us. Give Me all. For Abraham, Isaac represented what was most precious. That is what God asks of each of us.

God asks from us all. Contrary to popular opinion, God does not ask from us for 1/10. He asks for all. What are you holding back? As you consider your life today—your attitudes, your habits, your relationships, your decisions—about what would you have to confess, “That doesn’t belong to God.”

At the end of WWII, Germany was surrounded by the Allied Forces. A few days after Hitler's suicide, the Germans surrendered to the Allies. The actual wording of the surrender document contains these words: The German Command agrees for all German forces to lay down their arms and to surrender unconditionally. Furthermore, the Germans agreed to "carry out at once, and without argument or comment, all further orders that will be issued by the Allied Powers on any subject." Are you willing to say that to God?¹

God will continue to meet us in worship.

In verse 15, the Angel of the Lord called to Abraham again. This does not happen unless Abraham is obedient to that point. God continues to meet us in worship as we continue to obey. As Henry Blackaby said in his epic work, *Experiencing God*:

- God's invitation for you to work with Him always leads you to a crisis of belief that requires faith and action. (For Abraham that meant going to Mount Moriah without a lamb to sacrifice.)
- You come to know God by experience as you obey Him. . . (Abraham would have missed the experience of meeting God in worship if he would have disobeyed.)

So What?

The key to worship is obedience.

The key to worship is doing the last thing God told you to do.

What is the last thing God told you to do?

¹ From Sermon by David O. Dykes, "Surrender Your Trust," January 9, 2005. Information verified on web from multiple sources.