

**Altered by the Altar**  
**Worship as a Way of Life**  
**Genesis 26:17-25**

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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.” Thus far, we have examined the altar that Noah built after he exited the ark. Then, we discovered the altars that Abraham built as he moved from place to place. Last time, we examined the altar that Abraham built by God’s command to offer up his son Isaac.

Today, we have come to Genesis 26 and the altar built by Isaac.

**Text:** <sup>17</sup> So Isaac left there, camped in the Valley of Gerar, and lived there. <sup>18</sup> Isaac reopened the water wells that had been dug in the days of his father Abraham and that the Philistines had stopped up after Abraham died. He gave them the same names his father had given them. <sup>19</sup> Then Isaac’s slaves dug in the valley and found a well of spring water there. <sup>20</sup> But the herdsmen of Gerar quarreled with Isaac’s herdsmen and said, “The water is ours!” So he named the well Quarrel because they quarreled with him. <sup>21</sup> Then they dug another well and quarreled over that one also, so he named it Hostility. <sup>22</sup> He moved from there and dug another, and they did not quarrel over it. He named it Open Spaces and said, “For now the LORD has made room for us, and we will be fruitful in the land.”

<sup>23</sup> From there he went up to Beer-sheba, <sup>24</sup> and the LORD appeared to him that night and said, “I am the God of your father Abraham. Do not be afraid, for I am with you. I will bless you and multiply your offspring because of My servant Abraham.”

<sup>25</sup> So he built an altar there, called on the name of Yahweh, and pitched his tent there. Isaac’s slaves also dug a well there.

**Introduction:** Last Tuesday night something happened in our city that has not gotten a lot of attention. Our City-Parish government unveiled a sign at the City-Parish Government building. The placement of this sign was voted on back in May. In both English and French, the sign reads, “In God we Trust.” I know one could argue that those are just words, but amazing the timing in light of what has occurred in our city over the last 10 days or so, right? May it be that those words become as it was in the days of Isaac—a place of altar—a place of commemorating our ultimate trust in God.

For generations, the people of God, when referring to God, would refer to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The story of this family including Jacob’s son, Joseph, dominates the remaining chapters of Genesis. As we have seen in recent weeks, the faith of Abraham is amazing. God said, “Get up and go” and he got up and went. God told him that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky

and sand on the seashore, but at 100 years old, Abraham has no son, let alone descendants as numerous as the stars and sand pebbles. When that son is finally born, God commanded Abraham to offer that son up as a sacrifice to Him. In an amazing display of faith, Abraham walks up Mount Moriah, builds an altar, binds his son, and raises the knife before God says, “That’s enough, now I know that you fear God.”

But, what about Isaac? We actually do not have as much information about Isaac, but again, in the record of the Old Testament, God is consistently referred to as the “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” I have often described Isaac’s faith as quiet faith. As the editors of the Daily Walk Bible point out about him, “He generally did what God told him to do. How would you like your epitaph to read: ‘He generally did what God told him to do?’ There’s not a lot of glamour in quiet faithfulness, but as far as God is concerned, it’s more important than just about anything else. Maybe that’s one reason Isaac gets equal billing with his father and son every time God identifies himself as ‘the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.’” (From the Daily Walk Bible, p. 31.)

Isaac is the bridge between Abraham and Jacob. Isaac’s story is in part important because he passed down what had been passed down to him. When we consider the altar built by Isaac, he is passing down what he learned from Abraham.

I have told you that there would probably be some overlapping lessons that we learn as we study the altars of Genesis. We should not be surprised by this. God is the God who never changes. God wanted Isaac to learn and to know the same lessons that Noah learned and that his father Abraham had learned. When we read that Isaac built an altar, I think we read between the lines that he was doing what he had learned to do. He was doing what had become a “way of life.” That’s what I want to talk to you about today—“Worship as a Way of Life.”

A lot of what happened in Abraham’s life is repeated in Isaac. That is not necessarily good. He did not always trust God as he should. He did not always obey. He took matters in his own hands, even making the same mistake as Abraham and pretending that his wife is his sister. But, what is good, is that it appears that the worship of the one true God is passed down. Here we are reminded once again of our obligation to pass down to the next generation “the faith that was delivered to the saints” as Jude put it.

So, notice these things in Isaac’s story as we think about “worship as a way of life.”

### **The purpose of worship is passed down to the next generation.**

Isaac worshipped, pitched his tent, and dug wells. Why did he do this? Why did he worship? In understanding the reasons he worshipped we learn something about the purpose of our worship. Verse 24 clearly points out two reasons that Isaac worshipped.

- Isaac worshipped because God met him. God’s presence guides us.

Just as He did to Abraham, God appears to Isaac. He makes Isaac the same promise—I am with you. Because of that promise, God can also say, “Don’t be afraid.” Perhaps, there are many who need to hear that same promise today.

- Isaac worshipped because God had met his needs. God’s promises sustain us.

God reiterates the promise of blessing of offspring. In addition, Isaac had just experience the blessing of God in providing a water well.

These two provisions—God’s meeting him and meeting his needs seem to be the two primary reasons we worship. Nothing has changed. We worship because God has met us. Now, He has met us through coming down to us and walking among us in Jesus and then assures His presence through the ongoing presence of His spirit. In addition, He has promised to provide for us our daily needs, but He has also promised us our greatest need—the forgiveness of sin—and with that the assurance of peace with God and a place with God forever. That’s why we worship!

I’m sure many of you have heard this story or some form of it. Many of you may have even participated in your own version of this story.

*A typical American family was driving home from church one Sunday. Dad was fussing about the sermon being too long and sort of boring. Mom said she thought we ought to sing more hymns and less of those new songs. Sis said she liked the music and wished we would get rid of the hymns all together. Grandma said it didn’t matter what was sung, because she couldn’t hear very well and besides that, it was way too cold. As they pulled into the driveway, little Willie, who had listened to all of this, finally spoke, “But you gotta admit, it was a pretty good show for a dollar.”<sup>1</sup>*

Ouch! To more people than we would care to admit, church is like going to a show. If the show is good, we feel good about our church, our preacher, our choir, and even ourselves. If the show is bad on any given morning, then we feel negatively about our church. Let the show get really bad, and most folks are going to look for a new show to attend. If there is one thing that I could immediately change about every person it would be that they begin to see the Church not as a show, but as what Christ intended, the living body of Christ in which every member is a vital, active member of that body and the gathering of the church as what it ought to be—an encounter with the living God.

### **The priority of worship is passed down to the next generation.**

Isaac worshipped, pitched his tent, and dug wells. Note the order of these actions. Just as we saw with Noah and Abraham, there seems to be in the telling of the story, an emphasis on the priority of building the altar for the purposes of worshipping God.

In the book of Hebrews, which by the way we will study in some great detail this fall, we read in Hebrews 10:25, the admonition to not forsake the assembling together of ourselves as some do. We are not certain of all of the reasons that the Hebrews were neglecting their assembly. It probably was the persecution alluded to in other places of the letter. There is, however, indication that by the early second century, Christians were forsaking public gatherings of worship because of the simple preoccupation with business affairs. (Apostolic Father, Hermas, in his Similitudes 8.8.1 and 9.20.1 as recorded in the *Word Biblical Commentary on Hebrews*, by William L. Lane) The fear is that neglecting the worship assembly would cause them to be soon absorbed by the world. Let’s face it—we live in the world all week. All of us need to prioritize setting aside time to get out of the pace of the world and worship.

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<sup>1</sup> Story adopted from similar story by Chuck Swindoll in *Growing Deep in the Christian Life*, p. 331.

**Worship through the pain is passed down to the next generation.**

Isaac worshipped, pitched his tent, and dug wells. This is how Isaac was altered by the altar. He was committed to this place. He would in this place trust God. Pitching the tents and digging the wells are signs that he attended to stay. All was not well. He had some pain. The preceding verses tell us of conflict over wells he had built in other areas. The end verse of this chapter tells us that his life was made bitter by the marital choices of his son Esau. Yet, in these things, in these problems, in this pain, Isaac was committed to a life of worship. Worship was a way of life for him not when things were good, but in everything.

I love the song, "Blessed Be Your Name."

Blessed Be Your Name  
In the land that is plentiful  
Where Your streams of abundance flow  
Blessed be Your name

Blessed Be Your name  
When I'm found in the desert place  
Though I walk through the wilderness  
Blessed Be Your name

Every blessing You pour out  
I'll turn back to praise  
When the darkness closes in, Lord  
Still I will say

Blessed be the name of the Lord  
Blessed be Your name  
Blessed be the name of the Lord  
Blessed be Your glorious name

Blessed be Your name  
When the sun's shining down on me  
When the world's 'all as it should be'  
Blessed be Your name

Blessed be Your name  
On the road marked with suffering  
Though there's pain in the offering  
Blessed be Your name

You give and take away  
You give and take away  
My heart will choose to say  
Lord, blessed be Your name!

It's easy to worship when "all is as it should be," but not so easy to worship when "the darkness closes in." Are you able to say "Blessed Be Your Name" all the time? It is what I call this morning the ability to "worship no matter what."

### **What are you passing down about worship?**

- What does your worship say to the next generation about the purpose of worship?

Sometimes I have heard people criticize others for letting worship entertain them. Most of the time that comes from the traditional worship crowd saying to the contemporary worship crowd, "They just want to be entertained." Truthfully, though, this cuts both ways. If you think right worship is according to the style that you prefer, you are just as guilty of being entertained in worship as those whose worship style you do not agree.

- What does your worship say to the next generation about the priority of worship?

There is one conversation that ought to never happen at your home on Saturday night or Sunday morning. There should never be the conversation as to whether your family is coming to worship. That ought to be assumed by everyone in your family.

- What does your worship say about worshipping through the pain of life?

Tony Dungy, former football coach of the Colts, talked about in his autobiography, "Doing what we do." He means by that phrase that some people do this and some people do that, but you have to know what you do. What do you do? What does your family do? Do you worship no matter what? If you do worship no matter what, you will have made a choice to worship no matter what.