

Altered by the Altar
Any Place An Altar
Genesis 28:10-22

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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.” Today, we look at the altar of Jacob. Now, Jacob did not build his altar. His altar was a stone that he first used as a pillow. Jacob’s story reminds us this morning that any place can become an altar.

Text: ¹⁰ Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹ He reached a certain place and spent the night there because the sun had set. He took one of the stones from the place, put it there at his head, and lay down in that place. ¹² And he dreamed: A stairway was set on the ground with its top reaching heaven, and God’s angels were going up and down on it. ¹³ Yahweh was standing there beside him, saying, “I am Yahweh, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your offspring the land that you are now sleeping on. ¹⁴ Your offspring will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out toward the west, the east, the north, and the south. All the peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. ¹⁵ Look, I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go. I will bring you back to this land, for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

¹⁶ When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he said, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it.” ¹⁷ He was afraid and said, “What an awesome place this is! This is none other than the house of God. This is the gate of heaven.”

¹⁸ Early in the morning Jacob took the stone that was near his head and set it up as a marker. He poured oil on top of it ¹⁹ and named the place Bethel, though previously the city was named Luz. ²⁰ Then Jacob made a vow: “If God will be with me and watch over me on this journey, if He provides me with food to eat and clothing to wear, ²¹ and if I return safely to my father’s house, then the LORD will be my God. ²² This stone that I have set up as a marker will be God’s house, and I will give to You a tenth of all that You give me.”

Introduction: To this point, we might say that Jacob’s life was in serious spiritual conflict. Trickery of his brother dominates his early life. Jacob’s deception as described in Genesis 27:18-24 is a good summation of his character at this point in his life. Jacob lied three specific times to his father, Isaac. At one point, he even uses God’s name in vain to validate his lie. (“God gave me success.”) The result of his trickery is a blessing, but he also has to flee for his life. While he flees, God begins to get a hold of his heart. God pursues, and Jacob commits.

So, here is the message from Jacob’s altar in one sentence.

God's **activity** in our lives **creates** an **awareness** of God in our lives which **calls** for an **answer** from us.

After Jacob's departure, he reached a place to spend the night. That is the word of introduction that we get in verses 10-11. Beginning in verse 12, we get the account of Jacob's dream. You probably learned this story as a child. The dream serves as a theophany—a visitation from God. God appeared to Noah and Abraham in a more real sense, but this visitation from God to Jacob is no less real. We know that because of the response and commitment that Jacob made as recorded in verses 16-22. So, notice the outline—Jacob dreams, God appears, Jacob is aware of God's presence, and he responds.

Let's break down our key sentence this morning.

God's Activity

- He pursues us.

Let me remind you of something that is very fundamental to everything that is true about the Gospel. God is crazy about you! This should not surprise us. He is the Heavenly Father. He created us. He created us for relationship with Him. Regardless of what we have done or not done, He pursues us with a faithful, forever love. How does He do that? He does so in a variety of ways. He pursues us sometimes through provision. He pursues us sometimes through pain. Whatever you are going through today is part of God's passionate pursuit of you. You might be a long way from God this morning, but He is pursuing you.

Remember the prodigal son. He was far away from home, but the father never stopped looking for his return.

- He promises us.

Do you see what is happening in this text? God repeated the promises to Jacob that He had made to Abraham and Isaac.

Today, part of the promise of God is that He loves you, that He gave Himself for you, and that in Him you will find life—both in this life and the one to come.

All of this is His activity in our lives. Now, what should be the result of God's activity? God's activity in our lives creates a thirst for God. God's activity creates an awareness of God.

Jacob wasn't looking for God, but God was looking for him. For some of you today, you did not come looking for God or more of God, but He is looking for you.

Our Awareness of God

Specifically, for Jacob, his awareness of God led him to two conclusions.

- He is always with us.

Again, this is the same awareness for Abraham and Isaac.

- He is awesome.

Our Answer

Scholars are divided on how to understand the “if” in verse 20. Some say it should be taken as “since” and the grammar allows for that. Regardless, we ought to see that Jacob did make a response.

- I will give myself.
- I will give myself to worship.
- I will give my offering.

In 2008, Ravi Zacharias spoke in Washington on the occasion of the National Day of Prayer. He closed his message with quite a moving story. He said...

In 1971, I preached in Vietnam. I was in my mid twenties; my interpreter was seventeen years old. His name was Hien Pham. {At the end of the trip} “Goodbye, Hien. I’ll probably never see you again.”

Seventeen years later, my phone rang. I was in Vancouver speaking and the phone rang at 11:00 p.m. The man said, “Brother Ravi.”

{It was the interpreter}

He said, “After Vietnam fell, I was imprisoned by the Viet Cong because I’d worked with the Americans, worked with people like you. They put me behind bars, they took away all English from me, took away my Bible from me, tried to knock faith out of me. After about a year in there, so worn out, I said, ‘Maybe you don’t exist, God. I’m giving up all hope. I don’t believe in you. Tomorrow when I wake up, I’m not going to pray.’”

That morning, he was assigned to clean the latrines. He said, “Brother Ravi, it’s the dirtiest place on earth you’d want to be. I bound a handkerchief around my mouth cleaning the wet floor, and I saw a little bin with dirty pieces of paper, with human excrement in it. But something told me as I looked there, there was one paper, a piece of paper with English.” He said, “I hadn’t read English for so long. I washed it off, put it in my hip pocket, waited for everybody to go to bed, to sleep. Lights were out.

I took out my flashlight under my mosquito net. I flashed it. On the right hand corner it said, Romans chapter 8.” He said, “I started reading and cried. ‘Oh, my dear Lord, you didn’t leave me one day without you.’ ‘For all things work together for good to them that love God; to those that are called according to his purpose. For who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Neither things present, nor things to come, nor life nor death.’”

Hien said, “Next morning I went back to the commanding officer. I said, ‘Do you mind if I clean the latrines again today?’” He went there every day. He found another page from the New

Testament. The commanding officer had been given a Bible a long time ago. He was tearing out a page every day using it as toilet paper. Hien was washing it and using it for his devotions every day.

I said, "Where are you now?" He said, "I'm at Berkeley doing my business degree." I said, "I can't believe this, Hien." He said, "I'm in America."

I said, "How did that happen?" He said, "I was released and I built a boat with 52 others. Four days before my release, before our escape, four Viet Cong came armed to the teeth and grabbed me and said, 'Are you trying to escape?' I lied and said, 'No.' They said, 'Are you telling us the truth?'" He said, "Yes."

They let him go. He got on his knees, and said, "God, I lied. I'm running my own life. I lied. If you really want me to tell them the truth, let them come back again." He said, "I sincerely hoped that prayer would never be answered. Hours before we left, the four of them came with their machine guns, grabbed me by the collar, rammed me against the wall. 'You're lying, aren't you?'"

Hien said, "Yes, I'm escaping with 52 others. Are you going to imprison me again?" They said, "No. we want to go with you."

Your story might not be that dramatic, but God is pursuing you.

For Jacob, he saw a ladder come down from heaven. For us, Jesus Himself came down from heaven. You might have heard before: "The son of God became the son of man so that the sons of men might become the sons of God." What is your decision?