

**Altered by the Altar**  
**Don't Let the Altar Deceive**  
**Genesis 33:1-20**

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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 have come to a second altar built by Jacob.

We should not forget about the first altar. We read about that back in Genesis 28. He built that altar after God met him in a dream. Jacob awoke from that dream and knew that he had met with God. In fact, this is what we said about that encounter.

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

Jacob's answer to God was three-fold. He said, then the LORD will be my God. (He gave Himself) <sup>22</sup>This stone that I have set up as a marker will be God's house, (He gave Himself in worship to God) and I will give to You a tenth of all that You give me.” (He gave an offering.)

I think that is important background to the text we read today. Now, in between that account in Genesis 28 of Jacob's building an altar and this account in Genesis 33, much has happened. There has been several more significant spiritual milestones for Jacob. Let me just take you through them for a moment before we get to the text of today.

**Spiritual Milestones for Jacob:**

1. **Called Back to Canaan** (31:1-16)  
Jacob's return to Canaan dominates the story line in Genesis for several chapters. God's call for Jacob to return to Canaan happens in 31:3. Interesting isn't it, that though God forgives and restores, He calls us to go back to those persons that we offended? It is only then that complete restoration happens.
2. **Consecrated to God** (32:24-32) Wrestling with God  
Jacob's all night wrestling match with the unidentified “man of God” is a cause for great question, but at the same time this episode is the highlight in the progression of the faith of Jacob. Now having been fully restored to God, he is ready to make amends with his brother. His constant limp and a new name, Israel, meaning “one who struggles with God,” is a constant reminder that God will forever be with him.

Now, let's put Genesis 33 before us today.

**Text:** Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming toward him with 400 men. So he divided the children among Leah, Rachel, and the two female slaves. <sup>2</sup> He put the female slaves and their children first, Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph last. <sup>3</sup> He himself went on ahead and bowed to the ground seven times until he approached his brother.

<sup>4</sup> But Esau ran to meet him, hugged him, threw his arms around him, and kissed him. Then they wept. <sup>5</sup> When Esau looked up and saw the women and children, he asked, "Who are these with you?"

He answered, "The children God has graciously given your servant." <sup>6</sup> Then the female slaves and their children approached him and bowed down. <sup>7</sup> Leah and her children also approached and bowed down, and then Joseph and Rachel approached and bowed down.

<sup>8</sup> So Esau said, "What do you mean by this whole procession I met?"

"To find favor with you, my lord," he answered.

<sup>9</sup> "I have enough, my brother," Esau replied. "Keep what you have."

<sup>10</sup> But Jacob said, "No, please! If I have found favor with you, take this gift from my hand. For indeed, I have seen your face, and it is like seeing God's face, since you have accepted me. <sup>11</sup> Please take my present that was brought to you, because God has been gracious to me and I have everything I need." So Jacob urged him until he accepted.

<sup>12</sup> Then Esau said, "Let's move on, and I'll go ahead of you."

<sup>13</sup> Jacob replied, "My lord knows that the children are weak, and I have nursing sheep and cattle. If they are driven hard for one day, the whole herd will die. <sup>14</sup> Let my lord go ahead of his servant. I will continue on slowly, at a pace suited to the livestock and the children, until I come to my lord at Seir."

<sup>15</sup> Esau said, "Let me leave some of my people with you."

But he replied, "Why do that? Please indulge me, my lord."

<sup>16</sup> That day Esau started on his way back to Seir, <sup>17</sup> but Jacob went on to Succoth. He built a house for himself and stalls for his livestock; that is why the place was called Succoth.

<sup>18</sup> After Jacob came from Paddan-aram, he arrived safely at Shechem in the land of Canaan and camped in front of the city. <sup>19</sup> He purchased a section of the field where he had pitched his tent from the sons of Hamor, Shechem's father, for 100 *qesitahs*. <sup>20</sup> And he set up an altar there and called it "God, the God of Israel."

**Introduction:** My desire for this series is that we would see some principles about worship. We started out by saying that worship is a right response for all that God has done for us. When Noah exited the ark after the flood, the sensible response was to build an altar and worship. Next, we learned that worship is not only a right response, but it is a right priority in our lives. Both Noah and Abraham immediately built an altar. With much work to do (Noah when he exited the ark and Abraham in moving to a new place)

immediately built altars and worshipped the Lord. Next, we learned that some altars are hard. Such was the case with Abraham when he offered his son Isaac on the altar of sacrifice. Only at that last possible moment did God say, “That’s enough, now I know that you fear Me.” Then, we moved on to Isaac. He also built an altar. With Isaac, we learn that we pass down to our children and grandchildren, the next generation, values and priorities about worship. I challenged you to think about what you are passing down to the next generation about worship. With Jacob after his dream, we learned that any place can become an altar. He took his pillow and made it a pillar of worship.

All of these are positive examples of worship. I so much want to see in Genesis 33 another positive example of worship. In part, it is positive in the very fact that he worships, and we will talk about that a bit, but this is not a totally positive example of worship. But, there is the lesson. Just because we set up the altar (come to worship) does not guarantee proper or authentic worship. Let’s talk about that.

### **Worship ought to be a place where I meet God,**

This was the title of a sermon a few years ago. In fact, I wanted it to be the title for today’s message. However, although there are some indications that Jacob met God, there are other indications that the meeting with God did not move him—did not alter him. But, nonetheless, worship ought to be the place where I meet God.

In meeting God, a couple of things can happen.

- We remember.

This is the beautiful thing about gathering. We sing. We read from God’s Word. We fellowship and therefore hear other people’s stories. Especially when we receive communion together, we remember the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. We remember our salvation. We remember His protection. We remember His provision in our lives daily. That certainly is one of the reasons to regularly gather. We need these regular times of remembering what God has done.

- We recommit.

Once we remember, we recommit to Him. Jacob’s name was changed to Israel (Genesis 32:28). I believe then that when Jacob gives this altar the name, *El Elohe Israel*—that is God, the God of Israel—he is saying “He is my God.” That was his commitment back in Genesis 28:21.

Isaiah met God in worship, and that worship changed Him. We read his story in Isaiah 6. It is one of the most important stories of the Old Testament. King Uzziah had died after a long and peaceful reign. So, that account begins, “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord.” That encounter changed Isaiah. He went from fear to faith. He went from seeing the sin of others to seeing his own sin. He went from seeing the needs around him to seeing how God would use him to help make a difference in meeting those needs. That ought to be what happens when we encounter the Lord in worship. That should have been what happened to Jacob. This is not the first time that God miraculously revealed Himself to Jacob.

That is why we say... Worship ought to be the place where I meet God,

**but beware the altar.**

Here I think is the new lesson. All is not well with Jacob. Though God is faithful to Jacob, we cannot say that Jacob is always faithful to God. He is still taking matters into his own hands. He does not make it all the way home as he was commanded. He even sets up residence it appears. So, from that, we see a few lessons.

- Experiencing God does not guarantee obedience.

He was supposed to go back to the land of his fathers. He stopped short. A great worship service or a great worship experience does not guarantee obedience. In fact, sometimes, we can even be deceived by great emotional worship experiences.

- Partial obedience is full disobedience.

He was supposed to go back to the land of his fathers. He stopped short. Why? We don't know. His brother received him. That is what he seemed to dread. That is what kept him away in the first place. What causes our disobedience? Quite frankly, sometimes we don't even know. It is the old man in us saying, "I still want to be in charge."

- Peace does not signal automatically God's favor.

How could this be? He is trusting in himself. In chapter 34, we read some things there that we don't want to know. His daughter is raped by the residents of his new residence, then his sons take matters into their own hands with a continuation of trickery and deception. (I wonder where they learned that?)

## So What?

The greatest worship experiences are not about Sunday.

The greatest worship experiences are not about the altar.

The greatest worship experiences are about meeting God which results in such things as changed lives, changed habits, repentance of all sin, forgiveness in relationships, and fully trusting God.

Joe Ehrmann was a professional football player. After his career was over, he volunteered to coach high school football. He did so not as much to coach football but to coach young men in life. Jeffrey Marx chronicled his story in a great book called, *The Season of Life*. In the book the story is told of how a Mom once asked the coach, "So do you think this season will be a success?" Coach Ehrmann's answer is classic. "I have no idea. . . . I won't really know how successful they're gonna be till they come back to visit in twenty years. . . . Then I'll be able to see what kind of husbands they are. I'll be able to see what kind of fathers they are. I'll see what they're doing in the community."

What kind of day are we having in worship today? We should say, "We won't know until we see if today alters us...if today changes us." If we repent of sin—confessing that sin first and then turning from that sin, then today is a good day. If we become better fathers, husbands, wives, moms, sons, daughters, teachers, students, employers, employees, then we will know that we have truly worshipped.