

THE FOUR ALTARS OF ABRAHAM

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"And the Lord appeared unto Abram, and said, Unto thy seed will I give this land: and there builded he an altar unto the Lord, who appeared unto him" (Gen. 12:7).

This text introduces two men who began a journey together. They had a common goal but unfortunately were separated from the one another. One climbed a mountain to a place where the atmosphere was clean and pure, where vision was unlimited. His companion descended into the plains of Sodom where opportunities for a successful business career appeared to be excellent. The land was productive; cattle were fat, and laughter echoed from the nearby city. Sodom was an attractive place for people who ignored pollution. Even poor folk could become rich if they were willing to destroy their souls. Abram and his nephew looked at the well-watered plains of Sodom, but increasing strife necessitated a separation of the two men. "And Lot lifted up his eyes, and beheld all the plain of Jordan, that it was well watered every where. Then Lot chose him all the plain of Jordan; and Lot journeyed east; and they separated themselves the one from the other. Abram dwelled in the land of Canaan, and Lot dwelled in the cities of the plain, and pitched his tent toward Sodom" (Gen. 13:10-12).

One detail explained the difference between the two men. Abram loved to erect altars; Lot did not. Possibly he had occasionally knelt at his uncle's altar, but he never built one of his own. Abram looked toward heaven; Lot looked toward the cities of the plain. The older man was thrilled by the grace of God; his nephew was influenced by greed and ambition and became the wealthiest pauper of his generation. These men could belong to any family, church, or community and be business associates or intimate friends. Yet they might be very different from each other. The man who kneels daily at an altar cannot be far away from God. Anyone who is too busy to pray walks on a dangerous highway. Abram built four altars which represented stages of spiritual growth.

The Altar of Conversion. . . How Wonderful! The Place of Pardon
Abram erected his first altar in the plain of Moreh, which was the culmination of a long journey from Ur of the Chaldees. As far as is known he never had any inclination earlier to erect any altar. His father Terah worshiped idols, and it is extremely unlikely that

10

any other religion was permitted to interfere with that practice (see Josh. 24:2). Abram would have been a loyal son, subject to the authority of his parent. Then, in some unrevealed way, God spoke to him; everything changed for the son of Terah. "Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee: And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing" (Gen. 12:1-2). There is reason to believe that in the estimation of his neighbors Abram was exceptionally foolish. When he tried to explain the reason for his departure into the desert, his answers were not conclusive. He had heard a voice calling him but had no knowledge of the One who called him. He did not know where he was going or what he would do when he reached his destination. Had he become insane? Nevertheless, Abram obeyed the whisper that troubled his soul and aroused his conscience. Centuries later, wise men followed a star to find the infant Christ. Abram had no such guide; he went in faith, "for he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Heb. 11:10).

Terah accompanied his son on the journey from Ur and was

THE FOUR ALTARS OF ABRAHAM

probably a great hindrance to everybody. When he reached Haran, the center of moon worship, he decided to stay there. Many years later Abram reached Canaan. The long trek through sandy wastes was hazardous and difficult, but ultimately he reached the Promised Land and, arriving in the plains of Manire, erected his first altar. "And the LORD appeared unto Abram." While the patriarch lived in Ur of the Chaldees, he heard a voice calling him; when he knelt before an altar, he met God.

That was one of the earliest glimpses of evangelical truth. When the call of God reaches the soul of a sinner, its message is disturbing, but when a person reaches the place of sacrifice—the Cross of Calvary—God appears to the believing soul, and His presence becomes real. The poet expressed this fact when he wrote:

At the Cross, at the Cross,
Where I first saw the light:
And the burden of my heart rolled away:
It was there by faith,
I received my sight,
And now I am happy all the day.

11

The Altar of Communion... How Wise—The Place of Prayer

"And he removed from thence unto a mountain on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, having Bethel on the west, and Hai on the east; and there he builded an altar unto the LORD, and called upon the name of the LORD" (Gen. 12:8). When Abram knelt at his first altar, God met with him. At his second altar he prayed, and this became a daily custom. He had lived many years without knowing the Lord; now he planned to meet Him every day. Abram enjoyed being with Jehovah. To listen to His voice was to hear the music of another world. The patriarch was always safe when he lingered near the altar of Jehovah. There was never a famine "in the land" when God and His servant were together.

"And Abram journeyed, going on still toward the south. And there was a famine in the land: And Abram went down into Egypt" (Gen. 12:9-10). During his sojourn in Egypt he never had an altar and had no fellowship with God. His faith was shattered; memories haunted his soul, and he was an unhappy man. Eventually, when his life was threatened, he regretted his mistakes and did his utmost to correct the situation. "And Abram went up out of Egypt unto the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Hai; Unto the place of the altar, which he had made there at the first; and there Abram called on the name of the LORD" (Gen. 13:1-4).

It is always wise to pray, but it is particularly important to do so when guilt harasses the soul. It is written that on both occasions when Abram visited the altar at Bethel, he called upon the name of the Lord, and his problems were solved. A story has been told of a small child who finished her prayer saying:

"Goodbye, dear Lord. We are moving to New York. It has been nice knowing you. Amen." Had Abram been foolish he might have finished his prayer in a similar fashion when he moved from the plain of Moreh to the mountain on the east of Bethel. Instead, the patriarch could have said with David, "Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me" (Ps. 139:7-10). It is wonderful to meet God at the altar, but it is better to meet Him there every day.

THE FOUR ALTARS OF ABRAHAM

12

The Altar of Covenant... How Worthwhile—The Place of Praise

"Then Lot chose him all the plain of Jordan; and Lot journeyed east; and they separated themselves the one from the other. Abram dwelled in the land of Canaan, and Lot dwelled in the cities of the plain... . And the LORD said unto Abram, after that Lot was separated from him, Lift up now thine eyes, and look from the place where thou art northward, and southward, and eastward, and westward: For all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever.... Then Abram removed his tent, and came and dwelt in the plain of Mamre, which is in Hebron, and built there an altar unto the LORD" (Gen. 13:11–18). It is interesting that at his third altar Abram never asked for anything—he had been given everything!

"And Abram said unto Lot, Let there be no strife, I pray thee, between me and thee, and between my herdmen and thy herdmen; for we be brethren. Is not the whole land before thee? separate thyself, I pray thee, from me: If thou wilt take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if thou depart to the right hand, then I will go to the left" (Gen. 13:8–9). It became increasingly evident that Abram, who lived close to his God, detested strife. To the patriarch it was more desirable to enjoy peace than riches. His fellowship at the altar was spoiled by discord within his camp. Something had to be done quickly, and he never expected God to do what was his own responsibility.

There was no need to seek divine guidance, for the man who knelt at the altar was receptive to suggestions made by the Spirit of God. Tranquility within the soul is impossible when alien forces pollute the human sanctuary. Compromise with evil is never wise when a soul strives to please God. When Lot chose to seek his fortune among the people of the plains, God rewarded Abram by giving to him far more than he could have acquired even had he lived for thousands of years. It was unnecessary to seek the guidance of God when the issue was a choice between good and evil. Abram never forgot how the Lord said to him, "Arise, walk through the land in the length of it, and in the breadth of it; for I will give it unto thee. Then Abram removed his tent and came and dwelt in the plain of Manire, which is in Hebron, and built there an altar unto the LORD" (Gen. 13:17–18). This was an Old Testament expression of a truth taught by the Savior, "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matt. 6:33).

13

The Altar of Consecration. . . How Willing—The Place of Provision

"And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abram built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood" (Gen. 22:9). An interesting progression of thought is found in the four altars erected by Abram. The first was a place of pardon, the second of prayer, the third of praise, and the fourth of provision. The path of complete surrender is never smooth. Sometimes it is difficult to appreciate the wisdom of God, for His ideas are more comprehensive than ours. It was devastating when Abraham was instructed to sacrifice Isaac. What wisdom could be found in such an act? "And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him" (Gen. 22:3). During that journey the anxious father considered the promises of God and reached a thrilling conclusion. It was never safe nor wise to judge by appear-

THE FOUR ALTARS OF ABRAHAM

ances. Jehovah had promised to bless the children of Isaac, and therefore Isaac could not die childless. If the Lord permitted the boy to die, He would have to raise him from the dead or risk being called untruthful. That conclusion enabled Abram to say to his servants, "Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to thee" (Gen. 22:5). That trusting father promised to return with his son, and that would have been impossible if Isaac died.

Many years later, the writer to the Hebrews said, "By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered his only begotten son. Of whom it was said, That in Isaac shall thy seed be called: Accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure" (Heb. 11:17-19). That inspiring belief in the faithfulness of God brought Abraham victoriously through his greatest ordeal. Had he not understood the reliability of the Almighty, it would have been difficult to obey His strange command. He believed Jehovah was too wise to make mistakes and too loving to be unkind. With unwavering faith, "Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. And the angel of the LORD called unto him out of heaven, and said Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I. And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest

14

God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me" (Gen. 22:10-12). When the relieved father turned to see a ram caught by his horns in the nearby thicket, he knew the Lord had again demonstrated His loving kindness. Abraham lived close to his altars, and as the Psalmist said, "He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty" (Ps. 91:1). The patriarch earned the right to be called "The Friend of God" (see James 2:23).

15□

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