

# Only One Altar

by G.W. North

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*The sermon explores the significance of the altar principle in the Bible, highlighting its connection to God's plan of salvation and the importance of self-devotion and complete self-dedication to God.*

**Scripture:** Genesis 22:14, Genesis 26:25, Genesis 28:18, Exodus 20:24

**Topics:** "Worship and Sacrifice", "The Altar"

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## Description

G.W. North emphasizes the significance of the altar in the relationship between God and humanity, illustrating how God established a singular altar as the official means of access to Him during Moses' time. He recounts the experiences of patriarchs like Isaac and Jacob, who built altars to commemorate their encounters with God, highlighting the importance of personal testimony and acknowledgment of God's presence. North explains that the altar symbolizes devotion and self-offering, serving as a reminder that true worship is rooted in a relationship with God rather than mere ritual sacrifice. He also draws parallels between the altars built by Moses and the spiritual principles they represent, ultimately pointing to the altar as a foundational aspect of faith and salvation. The sermon culminates in the understanding that the altar signifies God's provision and the essence of worship.

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## Transcript

Thus it was that in Moses' day God set about a complete reformation. First He prohibited the random building of altars and men's desultory manner of approach to Him. In addition to this He regulated the offerings, both in kind and procedure, making some obligatory and leaving others to be given at men's freewill. He also had an altar made and placed just within His courts at the entrance to His tent. By this means He finally established the altar as the sole official way of access to and acceptance with God. The altar of men to the Lord was now the altar of the Lord to men; it was the Lord's own altar, specially made by a man filled with wisdom and skill by the Spirit of God for the purpose.

Long before this, beside Abel, Noah and Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses also had built altars to the Lord. These all were built under the most significant circumstances and for very important reasons. Isaac's was built at Beersheba, to him forever a place of poignant memories. From there, years before, he had set out with his illustrious father upon the never-to-be-forgotten expedition to Moriah, where he had watched his father build his last and greatest altar to God; to Beersheba they had returned following the miraculous happenings which took place on the mount.

What experiences they had shared together then! With a submission born of long discipline he had co-operated with his father to make the supreme sacrifice; lying there bound upon that altar waiting for the terminating knife he had heard the voice of God speaking. Never-to-be-forgotten words of acceptance and approval flowed to his father's heart and had brought assurance and consecration to his own. He had seen and heard and experienced it all, but what he had seen and heard he did not quite know: he did, however, know that the altar was as much his as his father's. Abraham had called it Jehovah-jireh. It was the first time he had ever heard Abraham name an altar. Everything about it was new; but then Moriah's altar was the place of the vision and the voice and the vow. In a new and special way Isaac was God's; he, as well as his father and God, knew it.

Whether or not Isaac ever returned to Moriah is a matter for conjecture; what we do know is that he certainly did go back to Beersheba -- congruously enough its name means 'well of the oath'. By this time Isaac was a mighty and prosperous man. Since Moriah and the death of his father he had passed through many troublous times; he had to live in the presence of his enemies, but despite all, God had made room for him and he had become very fruitful in the land of promise. During the whole of this period of passage through Canaan, he had pitched his tent in many familiar places where he had previously lived with his father. At that time he re-opened some of his father's wells; perhaps his father's altars still stood by those wells, but there is no record that Isaac built any altars beside them.

Not until he came to Beersheba is Isaac's name connected with any other altar than that of Moriah. Sowing, reaping, prospering, digging, striving, moving to and fro, all are there in the narrative; but there is no altar-building until he reaches the well of the oath, where God appeared to him. There he built his altar. There is no record that he had built one upon the occasion when God first appeared exclusively to him. Perhaps already an altar had been built at that place by his father and he used it, or perhaps some other person had built one since that time, but he would never have used that. But when the Lord appeared to him with renewed promises, he did not rely upon nor look to anything of the past, he builded his altar, called upon the name of the Lord, pitched his tent and digged a well. In due course Beersheba, the place of the oath, became a city called by that name.

Again we notice that although the altar and the oath and the well and the city are mentioned, sacrifices are not referred to. Weren't Isaac and the lamb the sacrifice and were not identity and substitution combined in one offering? Was there any difference now? Had things changed since his father's day? Had not the offering been given first and then the sacrifice made in that order? If that had been established between God and man by God Himself, what was the point or where was the need for anything less or other? Isaac understood. An altar, yes, but no sacrifice. The altar was an acknowledgement and a testimony; a sacrifice would have been almost a blasphemy, certainly a tragedy, as well as a superfluity; in any case the word sacrifice has not as yet appeared in scripture, only the word offering.

The idea of sacrifice itself is not introduced into the text until the later activities of Isaac's son JACOB in relationship to God are revealed. Until then the only two thoughts presented directly to us by the use of the word offering in connection with the altar are: (a.) (making) a present or a gift, or (b.) to cause to go up (in flames and smoke); upon consideration this is quite significant.

Along this line it is also of some significance that when Jacob made sacrifice he did so following an oath he had taken to man, swearing upon 'the fear of his father Isaac'. He did not build a special altar, but sacrificed upon 'the mount', which was nothing but a great heap of stones which he and his servants had built in conjunction with Laban and his servants. They all sat down on it, made their covenant upon it, ate

and drank on it and finally Jacob slaughtered his sacrifices upon it; it was a heap of witness' or a watch tower. It was no altar of the Lord but seemed more a symbol of mistrust, for it was raised in the belief and for the desire that the Lord would 'watch between me and thee while we are absent (hidden) one from the other'.

Laban and Jacob, each a party to the oath, swore according to their own beliefs, and it is evident that neither of them had a clear faith in God, for each swore upon the deity that somebody else knew. It may perhaps have been perfectly described in words then unspoken, but which centuries later Paul immortalised -- 'I saw an altar to an unknown God'. But He of whom Jacob was in ignorance and had described in an oath as 'the fear of his father Isaac' was planning to meet and make Himself known to Jacob. Within less than forty eight hours the Lord was wrestling with Jacob at the fords of Jabbok and Penuel. There the change took place -- from darkness to light, from ignorance to knowledge, from Jacob to Israel.

Following this and other closely related incidents, upon arrival at Shalem Jacob bought a piece of ground. It was outside the city and after spreading his tents he 'erected there an altar and called it El-Elohe-Israel -- God the God of Israel'. Right there in full view of the city he raised testimony to his recent discovery of God and showed his intention of making his testimony permanent by calling his altar by that name. God and he were identified with the altar. Of offering and sacrifice there is again no mention. The means not the end is being presented to us. The purpose and use of the altar are not emphasised; Israel set forth the principle, not the practice. The names of God and Israel are linked at the altar, not the names of animals.

Only once more during Jacob's lifetime is the altar mentioned. This time he is commanded by God 'go up to Bethel and dwell there and make there an altar unto God that appeared unto thee'. Without hesitation he went and did as he was told, whereupon God again appeared unto him and renewed with him the covenant He had made with Abraham and Isaac. This time Jacob/Israel named the altar El-Bethel, 'God of the House of God'. To him God and the altar were one. Not that he thought that God and an altar are literally one, he was not an idolater who believed that God could be made by men's hands. Nor was his action merely the result of an association of ideas; it was the recognition and demonstration of an eternal principle, as well as a confession of ignorance of God's wishes. He offered no sacrifice -- instead he raised a pillar there; he was no architect, but it was he who had originally renamed Luz 'Bethel'.

Whether or not the stone he raised for a pillar was the one he had earlier used for his pillow we cannot tell. We do know, however, that Bethel was the place where he had dreamed his famous dream and upon waking had been convinced that he was at the gate of heaven and that the place was the house of God. Now again, upon his return to the very spot under God's orders to erect an altar, he raises a pillar. It was to be his mute testimony to the fact that he believed God wanted a house on earth. On the pillar he poured a drink-offering followed by oil; the house of Israel he erected was offered and anointed to God.

So there they stood together, altar and pillar, one representing the God of the house of God and the other the house of that God. What could be more fitting? Jacob did not worship the altar as God, but in some way he recognised the impossibility of God being God apart from all the altar symbolised. He also dimly pictured, even if he did not fully see, that there could be no house of God apart from the altar. This is probably the most important part of the reason why God ordered him back to Bethel. Jacob had called the place 'God's house'; if this really was to be so, then God could not allow him or anyone else to be under any illusions about it. Everyone must know that He Himself could not be, nor could possibly live anywhere, except by the altar principle.

He was preparing for a future which Jacob could not visualise. If He was going to build securely the foundations must be well laid. He could not allow Israel to think that there was any way of approach to Him or any possibility of entering into the life to which their name referred, apart from self-offering upon the well-understood basis of giving by self-sacrifice. It had all happened in this man. When Jacob stopped wrestling and resisting in fear and yielded and clung to the Lord he became Israel, the prince who had power with God and man. This was the story told by the two pillars. The first was fearful Jacob, the second was powerful Israel. The first had stood on its own without the altar, the second could only stand by it. The first was anointed, unoffered, the second was offered and anointed. What a historical, prophetic place Bethel was. On the day Jacob raised the altar and the pillar he not only made history, he also established eternal principles of truth.

MOSES, the man raised up of God to take the place of honour among the great patriarchs of Israel of whom he wrote, was also a man of the altar. He actually built two and supervised the making of a third. At this point we will consider the first and then pass to the third, leaving the second for later consideration. The first was erected at Horeb following a battle between Israel and Amalek at a critical point of Israel's history. The entire nation was then en route for Canaan and had just been miraculously supplied with water by God. From the smitten rock living water was gushing out and down the hill to Rephidim, the waterless land below and Israel was at rest. Just as they were enjoying this, Amalek suddenly appeared to contend with them; they wanted possession of the waters, but God had not provided water from the rock for Amalek to drink.

The name Amalek means 'the people who lick up' and true to their name that was precisely their intention in attacking Israel, but the Lord did not allow them to lick up His people. He had led them to Horeb for the purpose of the miracle. They were as much the people for the water as the water was for the people. Amalek would ever rue the day they sought to interfere with God's plans; for daring to attack His people God said that He would destroy Amalek, blotting out their name from under heaven.

There are many lessons to be learned from this incident though, one of which is that danger lies in Rephidim, which by definition is the land of 'reclining places'. Amalek will always invade and attack those who lie at rest, drinking at the fountain, if they do so supposing that there is no need to watch for and repel the incursions of the flesh. Rejoicing in the abundance of waters bounding down the hill it is easy to forget that continual vigilance and prayer is necessary if enjoyment of the privilege is to be maintained. This truth is strengthened by observing Moses sitting on top of the rock with the rod of God in his hand and his arms supported heavenward in prayer. With Aaron and Hur in support he keeps constant vigil, while Joshua below wages war to the death against Amalek. Conquest gained, Moses is told by God to record in a book that He 'would utterly put out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven'. God had taken Amalek's invasion of Israel as an attack upon Himself and His throne, so the result was a foregone conclusion. Moses built an altar of victory, calling it Jehovah-Nissi, 'the Lord is my banner'.

This whole incident is an analogy of absorbing interest full of spiritual meaning. The rock cannot be other than a representation of CHRIST; the rod first represents the sovereign power of God that smote Him on the cross; the water represents the life-giving Spirit that was poured out as a result. The name Aaron means 'enlightened' or 'illuminated', while Hur means 'noble' or 'free-born' or 'fine white linen'; Moses first standing and then sitting on a stone on the rock, with the rod of God in his hand, represents the enthroned CHRIST. At present He is engaged in ceaseless intercession and the rod is now revealed to be His sceptre, the symbol of majesty and authority by which He rules. Last and greatest of all, the altar once more brings to our notice the basic principle upon which all life depends. In this case it displays utter

devotion and complete self-dedication to God, by which alone life was maintained for Israel.

It is noteworthy that the altar stands on top of the hill, as though crowning all, plainly setting forth the position the altar principle holds above the actual bodily sacrifice that may be offered thereon. Jesus Himself sought to fix our attention upon this truth when He asked His famous question, 'which is greater, the gift or the altar which sanctifies the gift?' There is only one answer to that, 'the altar', for the altar had power over the gift to turn it by fire into a sacrifice and offering in an acceptable form; the sacrifice had no power over the altar. It is surely extraordinary that an absolutely inanimate object such as an altar should be called by Moses 'Jehovah is my banner'. We may ask 'and what is inscribed upon this banner?' With equal certainty the answer would be 'ABSOLUTE LOVE'; fixed self-devotion to the desire and will of another.

Reflection upon the discoveries made so far about these named altars gives rise to the conviction that by them in a special way God has revealed His plan of salvation. Beginning with Abraham and his altar on Moriah we are introduced to 'JEHOVAH-JIREH -- THE LORD WILL PROVIDE'. Upon that occasion Abraham said 'IN THE MOUNT OF THE LORD IT SHALL BE SEEN', and so it was. As we have formerly noted, Jesus said 'Abraham rejoiced to see my day, he saw it and was glad'.

The whole pattern of divine life and eternal love related to salvation was unfolded there before the Lord that day. No human eye saw it; all was enacted in secret; it has only been related to us by God through Moses in order that we may be allowed to enter into some of the most important things of salvation which no-one but God sees and knows. These may be listed as follows:-- utmost union, unquestioning obedience, unresisting submission unwavering determination, uncomplaining trust, unswerving faith. On Moriah the life was offered to God; the seed was preserved; the son rose from the altar; the substitution was made; the blood was shed; Isaac returned from the dead; in a figure Abraham received him and the promise was made sure to all the seed. So perfectly in the type was the foundation laid that we can joyfully proclaim that we have clearly seen it from this mountain-top of truth.

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Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/gw-north/only-one-altar/>

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