

# The Altar - a Basic Principle in Man

by G.W. North

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*The sermon explores the significance of altars and sacrifice in the Bible, highlighting the mystery of redemption and substitution.*

**Scripture:** Genesis 12:7, Genesis 13:4, Genesis 22:9, Exodus 20:24, Leviticus 1:1

**Topics:** "Sacrifice", "Communication with God"

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## Description

G.W. North explores the concept of altars and sacrifice, emphasizing that the instinct to offer sacrifices is deeply embedded in human nature, transcending cultures and ages. He highlights Abraham's unique relationship with altars, noting that while he built many, he did not offer sacrifices on them, which distinguished his worship from that of the surrounding cultures. North suggests that Abraham's altars served as testimonies of his communication with God and marked his spiritual journey, despite the absence of blood offerings. The sermon delves into the mystery of sacrifice, questioning how early humans understood the need for atonement and the nature of God's communication regarding sacrifice. Ultimately, North presents the altar as a fundamental principle in man's relationship with the divine, reflecting both obedience and the quest for connection with God.

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## Transcript

In whatever age they have lived, the idea of sacrifice has always pervaded men's minds. So strongly is this rooted in their thinking that even the heathen build altars and offer human, animal or vegetable sacrifices to their deities. These people have no bibliographical reason for doing this; it is natively embedded in their hearts to do so. The power that motivates them is mostly fear, and the purposes behind their sacrifices, though very mixed, are generally associated with appeasement. Sometimes these may be defined as either placation of wrath or atonement for sin, or persuasion to certain kinds of action, or seeking a favour of the spirit or spirits (beings) to whom they sacrifice. The idea of payment to a superior powerful spirit being or force is seldom missing from the ceremony. Whatever is offered is sacrificed only as a token payment and is brought and given as a material substitute for the person who actually makes the offering, or on behalf of some other person for whom the offering is made.

Altars and sacrifice however have not only been associated with the heathen; throughout recorded time they have also been part of the life of the true saints of God. The Old Testament scriptures are replete with records of men and their altars. Long before God's portable altar was made, men of understanding and faith erected and used their own. Wherever they lived, whether in the shape of a mound of earth or a cairn

of stones, the little hill of sacrifice was raised to God and offerings made by fire ascended as sweet savours to Him.

Referring again to ABRAHAM, who is often spoken of as father of the faithful and quite probably was the greatest man of the Old Testament, we find that he built many altars. In fact, as already noted, the most famous story about him turns around the occasion when he erected the altar on Moriah; altars were undoubtedly one of the most outstanding features of this man's life. It is significant that there is no record that his life had been in any way directly connected with sacrifice until he responded to the call of God, yet he was seventy five years old when he entered into the land of Canaan. It seems that as soon as he obeyed God and left the land of his nativity he built an altar to the Lord. Without doubt altars are deeply involved in the call of God to a man, for this became the first of many altars which marked the route and progress of his pilgrimage and the places where he dwelt. Wherever he pitched his tent for any length of time he built an altar; moving on he left it behind as a testimony that he had been there. Anyone who had a mind to do so could have traced Abraham's movements by these altars.

At the beginning these altars bore witness to the reality of communication between God and man; it seems that Abraham built them at the exact spot where it took place between them. The original altar was built in commemoration of the first time God spoke to him in the promised land. The second fixed the place and proclaimed the occasion when he first called on the name of the Lord who appeared unto him. Soon after that occasion, as the record goes, there was a famine in the land and Abraham went down into Egypt. As a consequence of moving out of the land of promise, which was the chosen place for the outworking of God's call, things soon went wrong with him. However, according to His covenant with him, throughout this period God preserved Abraham, but he built no altar to God at that time. Sadly enough Abraham left no testimony in Egypt; he went up out of it very wealthy in goods but sorely reproved in soul. Chastened in spirit, he retraced his steps to the place where he had last built an altar; standing there he again called on the Lord. So the life of Abraham continued, until finally the Lord led him to the highest mountain and greatest altar of all.

It is a remarkable feature of Abraham's altars that throughout all this time there is no record of sacrifices being made upon them. His predecessors, Cain and Abel and Noah, each in his day built an altar and sacrificed offerings of one kind or another to God; it seems however that, unlike them, Abraham built his altars but offered nothing thereon. He, as they, knew that the whole purpose of building altars was as a means to an end; they have no other function and are not of any use except as places of sacrifice and offering, yet apparently he never used them for that purpose. He had come from a heathen culture wherein sacrifices were quite commonplace; moreover, in common with all mankind, he knew in his heart that some kind of expiation or expression of desire to approach God was in order and therefore required of him.

Why then an altar without a sacrifice? Every other altar which had been erected throughout the entire length and breadth of Canaan would have been stained with blood and blackened by fire, but not so Abraham's. All those other altars were testimonies to the devil; Abraham's were easily distinguishable from theirs. Everybody knew the difference between Abraham's God and theirs, but none could have given a satisfactory explanation as to what it was or what unused altars signified.

We do not know much about the original revelation from God to man of the mystery of redemption and substitution and expiation of sin. Just how it was that God communicated His wishes and commandments to men in the beginning of time we have no information. After the passage of centuries He brought His

people out of Egypt and informed them, through Moses at Sinai, of His wishes concerning sacrifice. All He said then is plainly set out in scripture, but how people knew in the very beginning we are not told.

It may be assumed that Adam was told after the fall but we do not know that he was. Certainly God would not have told him before then, for there was no sin to expiate, beside which death was not known in Eden. Death, we are told, came by sin and Adam and Eve were sinless, so Adam had no reason to slay any of his fellow-creatures. During communion with God he may have been told of the vital necessity of the principle of sacrifice in the eternal life and being of his Creator, but nowhere is this recorded. It has been thought that God's provision of skins instead of fig-leaves for clothing after the fall of Adam and Eve is an indication of death. It is said that this implies substitutionary sacrifice made necessary by their sin, that in order to provide their coats for Adam and Eve lesser creatures had to be slain by God. It is commendable to some as an indication that substitutionary sacrifice was practised by God immediately sin was manifest by man, but it is an unproven theory and only a remote possibility. It no more follows that in order for God to provide His creatures with animal skins, animals had to be slain than that in order to supply wine for a wedding God had previously to grow and crush grapes.

What preceded light at creation? Or from what matter did God create stars? It could be suggested as a premise that the clothing of the pair in Eden and the turning of water into wine at Cana should be equated as being the first miracles of two different eras. Should this be acceptable, the episode in Genesis is almost certainly a miracle requiring no more naturally related matter of its kind for its basis than did the miracle at Cana of Galilee. Whence came the sight that was given to the man at Siloam? From God the Creator. Natural explanations for Bible mysteries need not be sought; as the hymn says, 'God is His own interpreter and He will make it plain' -- if and when He will.

The offerings of CAIN and ABEL heighten the mystery still more, for reading the Word we do not find any record of Adam and Eve making any similar or comparable move toward God. Those boys were evidently not instructed by their parents concerning sacrifice and offering; the simple if not sure reason for this may well be that no instructions had been given to them by God. It must surely be that Adam and Eve did not know how to regain favour with God, for is it not to be taken for granted that if they had known how to do so they would have done anything within their power to regain it if it were at all possible? We know that upon his fall Adam became a spiritual force in the world. His name has become a patronymic, conferred by God upon the evil sin-potential / fallen nature with which all the sons of men have since been born.

Nevertheless, before He expelled the pair from the garden God made promise to them that the woman's seed should bruise the serpent's head. Therefore, when her first child was born, Eve thought and said she had gotten a man-child from the Lord. Probably they pinned upon him their hopes of restoration, believing that he would know or somehow discover and show them the way back to God. Of expiation and forgiveness of sin they had no knowledge; there was no reinstatement for Adam and no tuition in the ways and order of sacrifice for his sons either; this the boys, becoming men, had to discover for themselves. That they did so is now common knowledge.

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