



The Deeper Way of Knowing

Why Would You Ever Build an Altar?

I am a big fan of plants. I love having indoor plants and I also enjoy planting outdoor plants wherever I can find a place to have them. Most of my plants have died. I can't say I have a "green thumb"; I have an experimenting mind. I once saw a quote from a plant expert that the key to successful gardening is figuring out which plants you can't keep healthy and focusing your efforts on those you can. There are apps now you can download that use your camera to help you identify plants and what is more, reveal why they aren't healthy and what to do to correct matters. That is a game changer for amateur gardeners like me. What if there was an app for living? Something to tell you how to best live your life and to make the right decisions that will enhance the quality of it. Is there an app to manage your heart? I am not talking about the pumping machine that keeps blood flowing through your body. I mean what the Bible indicates when it speaks of your heart. The heart is who you are, both what others see and what no one else other than God knows of you. Is there a deeper way of knowing how to build the sort of life that will bring you joy throughout eternity?

Recently I took a closer look at Abraham, the renowned man of faith who certainly wasn't perfect but provided for us a blueprint for a better way to live. He is known for a practice he developed that is intriguing to consider. Later in life, Abraham, who at the time had the name Abram, was told by God to leave his father and relatives behind and head somewhere south. **The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.** (Genesis 12:1 NIV) The LORD promised to bless Abram if he went to make him into a great nation and so at the old age of 75, Abram brought his wife and nephew Lot and went. When he reached Shechem, once more the LORD appeared to Abram and told him the land around Shechem would belong to him and his descendants. At that point, Abram built an altar to the LORD. How it looked or what materials were used we don't know but what we have is that Abram did something to mark that place as dedicated to God. Abram moved again and settled for a while in the hill country between Bethel, which means house of God, and Ai, a pagan city that would be one of the first towns Joshua and the Israelites 400 years later would conquer. Once more Abram built an altar to God as a sign of his loyalty to the LORD and a way of marking his faith. **From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord.** (Genesis 12:8 NIV)

This is most interesting. The text tells us that at this place where he once more marked his loyalty to God, Abram deepened his relationship with the Lord. He "called on the name of the Lord". The tense of the verb there indicates that Abram was continually calling on the LORD. It became his lifestyle, his way of putting his days together. But then he moved again, this time without any indication that the LORD was directing him. Abram just left and went to Egypt which was not where God told him "this is your land". Unlike at Bethel where he experienced a Spiritual revival and Shechem where he knew God had him in His plan and will, Abram did not build an altar in Egypt. His entrance into the land of the Pharaohs was not exactly a step of faith. In fact it was the opposite. Spiritually it was disastrous for him. For his family it was a trainwreck. There was no altar in Egypt because Abram lacked passion for God there, a sense of His presence, deep

commitment to Him as LORD. Egypt was Abram on his own, seeking his happiness and success by his own wits and counsel.

Perhaps you have taken your own trip to Egypt. You have gone for it, made a play for something that God has neither inspired nor directed. It seemed to go well for a while and maybe it still seems like everything has worked out and yet God is not in your plan, not in its outcome. The result of Abram bringing his wife Sarai to Egypt was multifaceted. Abram was afraid because Sarai was so beautiful that someone in Egypt would kill him for her so he demanded Sarai claim Abram was her brother...a half-lie granted because she was his half-sister but a lie, nonetheless. There is no telling what effect this had on either Sarai or Lot his nephew spiritually and psychologically. Both learned in their own way that God was not crucial to their happiness or success. Pharaoh eventually brought Sarai to his palace to be one of his wives and although God stopped him from sleeping with her, the damage was done. The bond she had with her husband was weakened, so much so that she decided it was not too bad to let Abram sleep with one of the female slaves he acquired in Egypt so the Egyptian slave could bear a child for them since Sarai so far was childless. It was much more disastrous for Lot. Abram's nephew became a rich man as a result of going to Egypt but the wealth he gained wrecked him. His greed led to him abandoning his uncle Abram who was his mentor and spiritual guide and settling in Sodom where he wound up losing everything.

There are two more times Abram, or Abraham as God called him, built an altar to God. When he left Egypt and returned to the land the Lord gave him, Abram built an altar, perhaps to remind himself and his household that it was the Lord they followed. Maybe it was to remind himself of who was king of his life, maybe to reaffirm the Lord as the one who led him. It was after he erected the altar at Hebron that he courageously led his men in battle to rescue Lot who had been captured by an army led by four kings. Later, God met with Abram in a vision and the Lord promised that Abram would have a son and his descendants would take over the entire land of Canaan where he lived. When the LORD told Abram that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars that he could see, Abram made the declaration that is lauded in the New Testament. **Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.** (Genesis 15 :6 NIV) Did the altar Abram built in Hebron inspire his historic faith in God or was it his faith that led to Abram building the altar. Perhaps the answer is "yes".

The final altar of Abraham that we have recorded is the one he built on Mt. Moriah. He was certain God wanted him to sacrifice his son of promise Isaac on that great mountain and so he led the boy up to face God. Perhaps with more emotion than any of the other altars Abraham constructed, he stone by stone made a monument to the majesty and greatness of God. The book of Hebrews gives us some insight into what exactly Abraham was thinking as he put the altar together. **By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.** (Hebrews 11: 17-19 NIV) If Abraham did not build that altar on Mt. Moriah, he may never have discovered as clearly as he did about the faithfulness of God. God stopped Abraham in the middle of the act of slaying his son and then provided a ram as the sacrifice. In that brief moment permanently etched in Abraham's memory, the Lord showed Abraham and us what God had planned. God would provide the lamb who would be the Savior of the world.

What might you know about God, yourself, the direction you should take, how you should respond to what you face if you had an altar yourself, something to remind you that God is your Savior and the one who gives you life? Perhaps a Bible placed in your house or your office to keep you focused on God. Maybe a plaque, a piece of paper with a verse or a statement that brings you back to God. It could be something taped to your window or your dashboard to remind you to find God here and now. There is an Egypt God could keep you out of or worse a Sodom if you have an altar to keep your mind on Him. And there is a promised land for you that where God can bring you if you give yourself the opportunity to be led by Him.