

ALTARS
RITUAL SERIES
PASTOR MARK BATTERSON
NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

Our 1997 Honda Accord with 225,000 miles on it was stolen. Who steals an old Honda Accord? I will give it to you! When we went to the police station to recover our stolen vehicle, they told us they weren't going to release it because it was used in the commission of a crime. Our car was used as a getaway car for a bank robbery. I'm a proud member of the junk heap car club. The ignition was gone. The towing guy says the only way you are going to get this car off the lot, is if I teach you to "hot wire" your car. On Monday, your pastor learned how to "hot wire" a car. I now feel so much more competent and capable to do things I never thought I could do!

This week we are talking about altars, and I believe that altar-making is one of the least-practiced spiritual disciplines of the church. Perhaps talking about altars is as mysterious as "hot-wiring" a car! I can tell you how to do both! Altar-making is a way to "hot-wire" your spiritual life.

If you read the Old Testament, you will see so many types of altars built by so many types of people for so many different reasons. Most of them refer to this one altar in the tabernacle or temple where sacrifices are made, but we are not really talking about that particular altar. I am referring to the altars they would build as a result of a spiritually significant moment in their lives. Let's go back to Genesis and talk about Abraham. Abraham builds four types of altars. Let me show you the altar I built in my office. (Video of his office). An altar is a physical reminder of a spiritual moment. It could be a decision, a revelation, and an experience. I consider them to be spiritual mementos. It is so important for us to surround ourselves with those things as reminders of the faithfulness of God. Otherwise, we wander through life, forgetful of God's goodness and God's faithfulness.

Genesis 12:7 talks about an epiphany altar. When God speaks to you, that's a good time to build an altar. Abram had an epiphany. The Lord appeared to him, and gave him a promise that would literally define his life. It was this moment that Abram responded by building an altar. A few years ago I read "Undaunted Courage" by Stephen Ambrose. It is the story of Meriwether Lewis as in Lewis and Clarke." Lewis was commissioned by Thomas Jefferson to find a waterway to the Pacific. He was given a \$2500 appropriation from Congress. The largest part of the budget was \$696 for Indian presents, the rest for boat, medicine, food and navigational instruments. Ambrose made a special point of noting how much money was spent on a large quantity of ink. Most of the time you think of the tools needed to make the journey. The ink was critical to the journey's success because it recorded his findings. In a sense, Ambrose said that there is a difference in making a trip and marking your trail.

I wonder if some of us, spiritually speaking, are making a trip, and not marking our trail. Altars are the way we mark our spiritual journeys. Jeremiah 31:21 "Mark well the path by which you came." In the tour of my office that I gave you, I showed you the picture of

the cow pasture behind my desk. When I look at my life and the things the Lord has called me to—pastoring, speaking, writing—if I were to trace everything back to its origin, I was nineteen years old, just finishing my freshman year at the University of Chicago, a pre-law major, and I asked God this dangerous question, “What do you want me to do with my life?” The only thing more dangerous than that is not asking that question. For me, I began a summer of seeking the Lord. “All right, Lord, what do you want me to do?” The last day before I returned to school, I was walking across a cow pasture and I knew that God was calling me into ministry. I didn’t know the when and where and how, I just knew I was supposed to do it. That was a marker moment of my call to ministry. The moment was so clear and powerful, I hired a photographer to capture that moment.

A second type of altar is a “Thanksgiving” type of altar. Genesis 13:3. Abram came back to the altar and he worshipped the Lord AGAIN. Altars help us to remember what God does not want us to forget. It’s a physical reminder of the Lord’s intervention in our lives. His goodness, the things He’s done for us and in us. Bottom line, we need a place to go back to. I think we often read the Bible in a non-emotional, non-engaged way. We don’t experience these things that the people in the stories really felt. I had this thought: I wonder if Joseph ever came back to the place where he was imprisoned and said, “I can’t believe this is where God has brought me from.” Did David go back to battlefield where he defeated Goliath and said “this is the place where God intervened on my behalf.” Did Elijah go back to Mount Carmel and go back to the spot where he called down fire from heaven and defeated the prophets of Baal? Did Zacchaeus ever go back to the sycamore tree with his grandkids and tell them “this was the place where I got my first glimpse of Jesus.” Did Peter ever row back to the spot on the Sea of Galilee where he walked on water and say “this is the spot.” Did Paul ever return to the Damascus road where God knocked him off of his high horse and changed his life? Did they ever go back to those places? I don’t know the answer to that question. God has us build altars because he wants us to have some place to go back to.

Communion is a pilgrimage back to the foot of the cross. We are going back to that place where we found the grace of God for the first time. It’s a powerful and universal experience for us. The experiences I am talking about are those experiences that are unique to us, different from anyone else. Is there some place that we need to go back to? I went to Chicago Bible College and spent many hours in the balcony of the chapel pacing back and forth, asking God for specifics of my calling, what, when where and how will You use me? When I return to that school to speak or to visit, the first place I go is to that balcony. It’s a place I can go back to and remember where I met with God.

There are some places in your own spiritual life that you can go back to. That’s what an altar is. It is a place where we return and specifically give thanks. I have a simple parenting philosophy. Parenting is incredibly complex with lots of moving parts. No one ever figures it out. I feel like my responsibility as a parent is to make sure my kids learn three things: please, sorry and thank you. If my children really learn please, thank you, and I’m sorry, relationally, they are going to be okay. If you learn those three things, I think your marriage is going to make it. In your job, if you learn relational skills, God can launch you into bigger arenas and you can be used by Him in a greater way! Spiritually,

please is prayer, sorry is repentance, and thank you is your attitude toward your Heavenly Father. Let me put this in simple terms.

This week, I had six of my favorite shirts in the back of my stolen car. I was almost as sad about losing the shirts as I was about losing the car. When I got the car I said, "Yes! The shirts are there!" I took those shirts to the dry cleaners and Josiah, my little guy was with me. He said "Dad, can I go in with you?" He's pretty smart. He knows they have suckers at the dry cleaners. He's a sucker for suckers. The lady at the cleaners asked him, "Would you like a sucker?" I'm waiting for his response....I gave him the parental prompt, "What do you say?" You say "thank you!" Josiah hasn't quite figured that out yet. We went to dinner Friday night, and the kids loved it. Surprise, surprise! One of my children said, "thank you." It was unprompted. I was so excited I said "what would you like for dessert? It's on the house!" I think often all God wants is "thank You, thank You." God wants us to say "thank you" at that altar, but also "thanks again."

Dream altars are the next kind of altars. Genesis 13:12. God told Abram to look as far as he could see in every direction and God was giving him this land, and so many descendants, they would be like the dust of the earth, they cannot be counted. Go and walk through the land in every direction, for I am giving it to you." There by the oaks of Mamre, Abram built an altar to the Lord. Now I like to call this a "dream altar." God gives him a promise of what He is going to give him. I know you have a dream, but often our dreams begin to gather dust, we often repress them if we aren't accomplishing them. Or even worse, something is conceived in our spirit on a mission trip or retreat and what happens? We forget! Sometimes, years later, God resurrects that dream for us and we say to ourselves, "how could I have forgotten that?" If you don't have a dream, then God wants to give you that dream. I'm not talking about an occupational aspiration, or being a missionary to an unreached people group, but dreams for your kids. What are your dreams for your children? As a parent, how can you grow into that? We need physical reminders of those dreams that we often have not had the courage to even verbalize to another person. We named this building Ebenezer this name because it means "hitherto the Lord has helped us." So far, so God. We named this building because it is an altar to the Lord. We prayed for years for God to give us a piece of property. We didn't have any people or any money-but we kept dreaming and kept believing. One day I felt I needed to take a physical step toward the dream. Laura, my wife, and I were at an auction at our kid's school and they had really cool stuff like tickets to sporting events and lunch with famous people and trips to exotic places. I bid on that three inch three ring binder that had all the zoning codes for Capitol Hill. It was the least desired item at the auction. I bought it and went through every page, knowing the obstacles we'd face if we bought property here and had to have it re-zoned. We need to know what we can and can't do. It's silly, but it was the first physical step of faith. I considered it "dream research" if you will. It hardly fits on my shelves, but it's a dream altar that if you take some of those initial steps you never know how God is going to bless it and honor it and use it. We need those dream altars.

Finally, decision altars. Genesis 22-the story of Abraham taking Isaac to Mount Moriah. Abraham took the ram he found in the bushes and took it to use as a sacrifice to God in

place of his son Isaac. Abraham named the place “Jehovah-Jireh” God provides. On the mountain of the Lord, it will be provided. So many of the names of God come out of experiences like this. I call this a “decision altar.” Abraham was willing to let go of his son, it was the hardest decision he ever made. All of us are going to have tough decisions to make. The truth is, we only make a few major decisions. We spend the rest of our lives managing those decisions. Is there a way for us to remember the decision we made. We need to celebrate those decisions, and we need to hold ourselves accountable for those decisions. Let me give you one example. I have a rock on my shelf. It has the number seven written on it. There are seven promises that the Lord gave me years ago. I need to be held accountable to those promises. If I had not written them down, I would not remember them! We have got to find a way to have those decision altars. If you have a decision to make, are you willing to put everything on the altar and give it back to God?

Let me close with a couple of practical tips. Most of the Old Testament altars were built of stone. Part of the reason, I believe, is because they didn't have the advantage of photography. I have found that many of the altars that I've built are pictorial in nature. I have no use for meaningless pictures. I now have a photo montage of my most recent mission trip to the Galapagos Islands. Pictures have a way of helping us to remember what we shouldn't forget. You can turn anything into an altar. You simply need to redeem it and let it be used to symbolize what is of spiritual significance to you. Where should you place your altar? I put mine in my office because I wanted to be surrounded by those things all of the time. Maybe Thanksgiving week or some other marker day like a birthday or anniversary is a prompt to remember God's faithfulness in your life.

I believe the most important decision you can make is to invite Jesus into your life as your personal Lord and Savior. I wonder if the fishermen took those nets they dropped when they followed Jesus and kept them to remember where their journey began. I want to encourage you to make that decision that those disciples made to follow Christ. Build your altar this week.