

Altered by the Altar
Setting up the Altar is only the Beginning
Genesis 35:1-15

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Text Introduction: We are concluding a series today that we have called “Altered by the Altar.” We have examined the phrase “built an altar” as it has appeared in Genesis. Genesis is the book of beginnings. Genesis shows us the beginning of many things—creation, humanity, sin, family, even nations. Genesis also shows us the beginning of worship. For example, the last verse of chapter 4 tells us, “At that time people began to call on the name of Yahweh.” (4:26)

We ought to be able to learn something about worship from this book of beginnings. In this series, we have endeavored to see what we could learn about worship by examining each of the instances of someone building an altar.

Noah built an altar. When Noah exited the ark after the flood, the [sensible response](#) was to build an altar and worship. Next, we learned that worship is not only a [right response](#), but it is a right priority in our lives. Both Noah and Abraham immediately built an altar. With much work to do (Noah when he exited the ark and Abraham in moving to a new place) immediately built altars and worshipped the Lord. Next, we learned that [some altars are hard](#). Such was the case with Abraham when he offered his son Isaac on the altar of sacrifice. Only at that last possible moment did God say, “That’s enough, now I know that you fear Me.” Then, we moved on to Isaac. He also built an altar. With Isaac, we learn that we [pass down](#) to our children and grandchildren, the next generation, values and priorities about worship. I challenged you to think about what you are passing down to the next generation about worship. With Jacob after his dream, we learned that [any place can become an altar](#). He took his pillow and made it a pillar of worship. Jacob built a second altar. We examined that altar last week. We were reminded that we [cannot be deceived](#) by the altar. That is, we can be in the right place (like a worship service) but that does not mean that our hearts are in the right place. Today, we come to a third altar that Jacob built.

Text: God said to Jacob, “Get up! Go to Bethel and settle there. Build an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau.”

²So Jacob said to his family and all who were with him, “Get rid of the foreign gods that are among you. Purify yourselves and change your clothes.” ³We must get up and go to Bethel. I will build an altar there to the God who answered me in my day of distress. He has been with me everywhere I have gone.”

⁴Then they gave Jacob all their foreign gods and their earrings, and Jacob hid them under the oak near Shechem. ⁵When they set out, a terror from God came over the cities around them, and they did not pursue Jacob’s sons. ⁶So Jacob and all who were with him came to Luz (that is, Bethel) in the land of Canaan. ⁷Jacob built an altar there and called the place God of Bethel because it was there that God had revealed Himself to him when he was fleeing from his brother.

⁸Deborah, the one who had nursed and raised Rebekah, died and was buried under the oak south of Bethel. So Jacob named it Oak of Weeping.

⁹ God appeared to Jacob again after he returned from Paddan-aram, and He blessed him. ¹⁰ God said to him:

Your name is Jacob;
you will no longer be named Jacob,
but your name will be Israel.
So He named him Israel.

¹¹ God also said to him:
I am God Almighty.
Be fruitful and multiply.
A nation, indeed an assembly of nations,
will come from you,
and kings will descend from you.

¹² I will give to you the land
that I gave to Abraham and Isaac.
And I will give the land
to your future descendants.

¹³ Then God withdrew from him at the place where He had spoken to him.

¹⁴ Jacob set up a marker at the place where He had spoken to him—a stone marker. He poured a drink offering on it and anointed it with oil. ¹⁵ Jacob named the place where God had spoken with him Bethel.

Introduction: I want you to remember two things as we set out on our journey here in Genesis 35. First, I want to remind you that we said last week that Jacob stopped short of going back home. He got close, but he did not go all the way. In fact, the application we drew from that observation is simply this: [Partial obedience is full disobedience.](#)

The other detail that I want you to recall this morning is that God has already given Jacob the new name “Israel.”

These seem to be important details in this third account of Jacob building an altar.

What do we learn?

Worship ought to be a place where I remember God's covenant.

In these verses, we see a reminder of God's . . .

- Presence
- Provision
- Plans
- Protection

All of this is based on God's character and shows us God's unbelievable patience with all of us.

Some kind of way, each week, I want to point you to Jesus. I want to point you to the cross. I want to point you to the resurrection. I want to point you to the character behind this—God's love for His creation.

In both the Old and New Testaments there is emphasis on remembering what God has done. In the Old Testament, remembering is done by setting up stones of remembrance. In the New Testament, remembrance is done by the Lord's Supper. I think there is the implication that we gather for purposes of remembering.

Worship ought to be a place where I renew my commitments.

This whole passage is loaded with repeated directives. In verse 1, there are four commands: get up, go to Bethel, settle there, and build an altar. And now, Jacob complies. We don't set out for delayed obedience, but delayed obedience is better than continued disobedience.

Jesus told a story about a man who had two sons.

He went to the first and said, 'My son, go, work in the vineyard today.'

²⁹ "He answered, 'I don't want to!' Yet later he changed his mind and went.³⁰ Then the man went to the other and said the same thing.

"'I will, sir,' he answered. But he didn't go.

³¹ "Which of the two did his father's will?"

"The first," they said.

Today is the day of obedience. Yesterday might have been a day of disobedience, but today can be a day of obedience.

Jacob seemed to know that he must remove the pagan gods from among his people. Renewing commitments is active. He did not just say he was removing the gods, he removed the gods.

Worship ought to be a place where I receive new challenges.

Worship is the place where we hear God's Word and respond to it. Sometimes those directives are new.

God begins to give new instructions to Jacob in verses 9-15. The place to hear new directives is to obey previous commands.

So what?

Have you positioned yourself for authentic worship by obedience?

Have you positioned yourself for new assignments by obeying previous assignments?

Have you positioned yourself for the fulfillment of God's plan for your life by obedience?