

A NETWORK OF ALTARS

In a very real sense, Abraham planted “churches” wherever he went. Of course, the concept of church that we have today didn’t exist yet. Even synagogues didn’t exist. The schools of the prophets were still in the future. In Abraham’s day “church” was simply patriarchs and matriarchs gathering their families around them to worship, pray, and sacrifice.

So before we consider what “church” was in those days, we need to consider what “family” was. In Abraham’s culture, and all cultures in his time, family included all who were related: parents, grandparents, children, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins and so on. All societies still have this concept, but in many contemporary cultures, if you say “family” the first thought is only of parents and children. We’ve coined the term “extended family” to include our other relatives, but we rarely live together, and certainly don’t think of the head of the family as having responsibility for the whole clan. There are still many societies, though, who think of family in much the same way Abraham did. Which kind of culture do you live in?

Importantly for our story, ancient Bible cultures also considered as family or household all those who worked with and for the family. Read or have read *Genesis 14:14*. How big was Abraham’s family? Maybe as many as a thousand with women and children? More?

As recently as the 19th century, lords of grand houses in Europe would still gather all their servants every day for worship together. The house might even have a chapel for the purpose.

It is interesting to consider the patriarchs doing what we would call evangelism. Perhaps we can learn from their methods. Abraham, in particular, shows a clear progression just like an apostle or missionary of New Testament times or even later history.

First, like any missionary, Abram is called out by God and sent on a mission. Read or have read *Genesis 12:1-3*. Where is Abram called from and to, and what is his mission? Or rather, what is God’s mission through Abram? Perhaps it would help us to think of all human mission in these terms.

Next, Abram obeyed. He began a journey that he probably didn’t expect to last for years and years. He probably thought God was asking him to move from one place to another place, but instead, he spent the rest of his long life

moving from place to place. During these years, Abram, later Abraham, doesn't seem to have particularly preached or proselytized. He just lives his life. He makes some mistakes, too, some big ones! But what do you think the people he passed through or spent time with or near remembered about him? Read and discuss the following texts to find answers to this question. What does each passage tell you about Abraham and his character?

1. Genesis 12:6-9
2. Genesis 13:8-9
3. Genesis 13:18

Genesis 14:14-24 We've seen part of this story above. Scan it and pay particular attention to verse 16, and verses 20-24. What do you learn of Abram here?

1. Genesis 15:6
2. Genesis 18:2-5

Time fails to go through Abraham's whole life, but it is clear that he was a man of faith, principle, and kindness. In the last half of this same chapter, 18, he does his famous bargaining with God for Sodom and Gomorrah. If only God had found even ten righteous in those cities, they would not have been destroyed.

As Abraham built altars to the Lord wherever he went, we can be sure those altars called to the people who lived in the area. Perhaps many turned to God because of Abraham's faithfulness. The fact that he made big mistakes didn't detract from that because he didn't stay in rebellion. He always repented and asked forgiveness. This, too, is a lesson to those around us.

Most important of all, what was the blessing that God kept promising, which would bless the whole earth? Are you blessed by the fulfillment of that promise today?

DEVOTION

As we discuss reformation this year, in our churches, in our societies, in our homes and families, and where it all must begin—in our hearts—it is worth pondering how we live in the eyes of those who see us every day. You may have heard the question, “If being a Christian were illegal, would there be enough evidence to convict you?”

1. Take a moment as a group and think about this.
2. What is the visible evidence that a person is a Christian?
3. What actions would convict someone?
4. What attitudes?
5. Is one more important than the other?
6. Can you have one without the other?
7. Which comes first?

Now, here’s an important question: if it were illegal to be a Christian (as it has been, in different times and societies and still is in some places) what is it the authorities are trying to stamp out? Do they want to imprison and kill people because they are kind and compassionate? What is it they object to?

What if our lives, like Abraham’s, were known for the altars they built? These could be visible things, like works of art, or books, or even something written in sidewalk chalk, but most likely they are invisible. If you were to die suddenly, would people in your home, school, and workplace remember your acts of kindness? Would they remember how patient and forgiving you were?

If you want the Bible’s definition of perfection, compare *Matthew 5:48* and *Luke 6:36*.

If you read the context around these verses you will see they are both records of the Sermon on the Mount. These are two ways that two writers, Matthew and Luke, recorded the same thing Jesus said. So what does perfection equal? And would those around you see that in you?

We can live in such a loving way that our lives will leave altars of love and holiness behind wherever we go. We can repent and ask forgiveness when we sin, showing others that God is a God of mercy, love, and forgiveness. He’s a God of second chances. And third, and fiftieth! If we try to look faultless to those around us, they will only see us as fakers. If we show that God shines even through our brokenness, they will be drawn to take their brokenness to Him, too.

ACTIVITY SUGGESTION

1. **Build an altar.**
 - First, using whatever you like, make an altar in the place where you are having these meetings.
 - Talk together and gather the ideas of all as to what it should look like and how you will make it,
 - Then create it together.
2. **Then, gather ideas together** as to how you might go about creating visible and invisible altars of love this week.
3. **Let each person take at least one idea**, and the next week you can discuss how it went.

SEVEN DAYS OF SOUL FOOD

SEVEN DAYS' WORTH OF DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

You must love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind (Luke 10:27). To put it another way, body + heart + mind = one living soul.

We can't really divide ourselves into different sections, but it's useful to look at these different aspects of ourselves and be sure we have a well-balanced faith that uses all the avenues of a soul. Each of these starter kits will include a week's worth of food for your soul in each of these four methods of understanding and expression.

Write about each of the following in your prayer journal this week. Strive to use language of emotions, thought, physical health and strength, or spirit on the given days.

DAY ONE: Read *Leviticus 19:1-18*. Verse 2 gives another form of the two statements we considered in our group devotion: Be perfect as God is perfect, and be merciful as God is merciful. In this chapter, God goes on to define what He means by holy (which literally means set apart for God. This week we will take a deeper look at the commandments given here. Many are the same or similar to the Ten Commandments.

DAY TWO: *Heart:* Look through the passage and find the things that you think particularly speak to how we should build altars for God in our hearts, and use our emotions for others. Prayerfully connect with these emotional themes and consider how God wants to work in your heart this week.

DAY THREE: *Mind:* Look through the passage and find the things that make you think deeply. How can you build altars to God in and with your mind this week?

DAY FOUR: *Strength/body:* Which parts of the passage speak to physical health and strength? For example, why is gleaning a good idea? How does it help the poor and also help the community? Is it practiced where you live? Can you help build an altar to God in this way?

DAY FIVE: *Soul/spirit:* As you prayerfully ponder the heart/mind/body insights God has given you in this passage, how can you see that you will be more whole as you practice the altar-building He has called you to do?

DAY SIX: When you build altars, whether visible or invisible, your family, community, and church will grow. Don't confuse this with having them notice or congratulate you. People can be deeply blessed and never recognize why, and that includes you. Your blessings come from God alone. But when we pay attention, we notice more.

DAY SEVEN: Use day 7 to create something beautiful that reflects what you have learned.

- Write a poem or song or story.
- Create a poster.
- Write a letter.
- Paint or draw a picture.
- Make a sign.
- Do some sidewalk chalk art or writings.
- Build something.
- Create a podcast or blog post or Twitter post(s).
- Make food and give it to someone in need.

Use whatever creativity God has given *you*. We all have something.

Share the love!

a short skit

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A SHORT SKIT (ABOUT 10-15 MINUTES)

Let's imagine we're neighbors of Abraham and his family. What might we learn from watching them worship? This is another short, easy skit.

CHARACTERS

1. Abraham
2. Sarah
3. A group to represent their sons and at least one daughter. If your group is large enough, you can have all 12 sons, but if not, a few can represent them.
4. A group to represent servants.
5. The rest of the class can be the neighbors. Designate three to have the speaking parts. They will be neighbor 1, neighbor 2, and neighbor 3.

PROPS

Designate one side of the room as Abraham's camp. You need some kind of desk, table, or box to represent an altar.

ACT 1

Scene: (Scene: Abraham, Sarah, and their household including servants are gathered at one side, around the altar. The neighbors are scattered around the room, apparently busy with different kinds of work. Abraham silently acts out making a sacrifice. When he raises his hands in the air, some nearby neighbors look up.)

Abraham: O Most High God, we call on You today.
We thank You that You have blessed us...

Neighbor 1: Look, there's old Abraham making a sacrifice again.

Neighbor 2: He does that every morning and every evening.

Neighbor 3: Let's go closer and watch. I've always wondered what he does at those altars he builds.

Neighbor 2: Well, he sacrifices sheep, of course. We do the same thing.

Neighbor 3: It's not the same at all.

Neighbor 1: I agree. For one thing, we don't all have our own altars, and for another we don't do it every day!

Neighbor 2: Let alone twice! You're right, I'm curious, too. (They walk closer to the family. Other neighbors look up from their work.)

Abraham: I thank You for my fine, strong sons, and for all of our family. I thank You for the love that exists among us.

(Other neighbors begin to move closer.)

Abraham: Receive this unblemished lamb, Creator of the universe, in the way you taught our ancestors to sacrifice it.

Neighbor 1: (Surprised) Their God taught them how to sacrifice?

Neighbor 2: Our gods never got that close to us.

Neighbor 3: I wouldn't want them to! Our gods are angry, and you never know what they'll do next. That's why I'm so curious about Abraham's God.

Abraham: You promised our parents in Eden that You would send a Redeemer. They taught their children, down to us, that this sacrifice, as perfect as we can make it, represents that Redeemer.

(Most of the neighbors are now gathered near the family. You could have a few shake their heads and turn back to their work. But they can still hear.)

Neighbor 3: See what I mean? Which of our gods ever cared about us?

Neighbor 1: None! And as for coming to redeem us...!
(Shakes head)

Abraham: We trust in Your promise, O Lord. We choose to live by Your ways of love and forgiveness. Please forgive us for the times today that we have not acted in love. Make us strong, faithful, and pure in heart. Amen.

Neighbor 2: And that's it? They're forgiven?

Neighbor 3: And forgiving, too. Last week I got into an argument with some of Abraham's sons over a pasture. We all got angry and shouted, but I hit one of them, I'm ashamed to say.

Neighbor 1: (Shocked) You hit one of Abraham's sons? I heard he can raise hundreds of armed men!

Neighbor 3: I know. I was scared. I went to the sons and apologized, and do you know what happened? Not only did they forgive, they asked *me* to forgive *them*!

Neighbor 1: I want to know more about this God. Let's go ask!