

## Abram Builds an Altar at Mamre

Lesson Scripture: Genesis 12-13

Focus Scripture: Genesis 13:8-18

*Key Verse: So Abram moved his tent and came and settled by the oaks of Mamre, which are at Hebron, and there he built an altar to the Lord. Genesis 13:18*

### GENESIS 13:8-18 (NRSV UE)

8 Then Abram said to Lot, "Let there be no strife between you and me and between your herders and my herders, for we are kindred.

9 Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right, or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left."

10 Lot looked about him and saw that the plain of the Jordan was well watered everywhere like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, in the direction of Zoar; this was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.

11 So Lot chose for himself all the plain of the Jordan, and Lot journeyed eastward, and they separated from each other.

12 Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled among the cities of the plain and moved his tent as far as Sodom.

13 Now the people of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord.

14 The Lord said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, "Raise your eyes now, and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward,

15 for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever.

16 I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted.

17 Rise up, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you."

18 So Abram moved his tent and came and settled by the oaks of Mamre, which are at Hebron, and there he built an altar to the Lord.

### GENESIS 13:8-18 (KJV)

8 And Abram said unto Lot, Let there be no strife, I pray thee, between me and thee, and between my herdmen and thy herdmen; for we be brethren.

9 Is not the whole land before thee? separate thyself, I pray thee, from me: if thou wilt take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if thou depart to the right hand, then I will go to the left.

10 And Lot lifted up his eyes, and beheld all the plain of Jordan, that it was well watered every where, before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, even as the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, as thou comest unto Zoar.

11 Then Lot chose him all the plain of Jordan; and Lot journeyed east: and they separated themselves the one from the other.

12 Abram dwelled in the land of Canaan, and Lot dwelled in the cities of the plain, and pitched his tent toward Sodom.

13 But the men of Sodom were wicked and sinners before the Lord exceedingly.

14 And the Lord said unto Abram, after that Lot was separated from him, Lift up now thine eyes, and look from the place where thou art northward, and southward, and eastward, and westward:

15 For all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever.

16 And I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth: so that if a man can number the dust of the earth, then shall thy seed also be numbered.

17 Arise, walk through the land in the length of it and in the breadth of it; for I will give it unto thee.

18 Then Abram removed his tent, and came and dwelt in the plain of Mamre, which is in Hebron, and built there an altar unto the Lord.

**KEY TERMS**

- **Sacred** – Dedicated to God; set aside for worship or service to God.
- **Avarice**–Great greed or covetousness.
- **Sacrament** – A religious ceremony or ritual regarded as imparting spiritual value/grace.
- **Equitable** – Fair and unbiased to the parties.
- **Rituals** – Religious (or solemn) ceremonies made up of a series or set of prescribed actions.

**INTRODUCTION****Unit Overview**

In this first set of lessons (lessons 1-4), we see four core pillars of religion (human recognition and interaction with God). First, we look at the importance of the altar for worship. Second, we see why it is necessary to have clearly defined sacred spaces. Third, Hezekiah highlighted for us why we should prioritize worship and our relations with God. And last, we look at the need for proper spiritual leadership in the worship of God. As you work through the first unit, keep the relationships between the four lessons before you. They build

on one another and give a strong initial overview of worship and its importance in our relationship with God.

**On Lesson 1**

If we look at the structure of modern altars in churches and temples today, and how religious people regard them, we can easily miss the importance that people in Abraham's era attached to the altar. In principle, an altar is a structure on which worshippers lay offerings and perform

rituals of worship. Both the Hebrew and Greek roots for the word *altar* make the altar a place of sacrifice. That is a place where we deny ourselves or submerge our desires and will under the desires and will of God. The altar is a sacred space where recognition, exaltation of, and obedience to God are paramount.

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Note in the text how Abraham built an altar at each location where he dwelt. This underscored the importance Abraham attached to the altar. Wherever he was, he wanted, within easy reach, a sacred place to commune with God.

**TELLING THE BIBLE STORY**

Start this study with one foot riveted to Romans 4:3 and the other firmly planted

on Genesis 15:6. Please do not repeat the mistake that uninformed people made over the years. Nothing Abraham did earned him God's favor. God sovereignly called Abraham and Abraham recognized God and in faith responded to the Lord. Abraham's building of altars was not a vehicle to gain God's favor or to get God to answer his prayers for material things. Rather, the building and use of the altars were outward reflections of his inward (spiritual) recognition and commitment to the God who called him. Further, Abraham's altars showed his faith in the promises God made to him.

How Abraham dealt with the conflict between his staff and Lot's staff was exemplary and instructive. To grasp the importance of this event, appreciate that the welfare of Abraham, his staff, and his livestock was on the line. Given the scarcity of grazing land and water sources, access to these resources was a life-or-death matter. Keep this in mind when assessing how Abraham dealt with the conflict.

To make peace, Abraham gave Lot the first shot at choosing the land for his staff and herds. Abraham was prepared to take the resources that remained after Lot had taken the best. Note God did

not instruct Abraham on how to settle the dispute. Abraham decided out of his character and desire for peace. He did not waste time trying to determine the best or equitable solution. Moreover, he showed an absence of avarice. Abraham at his discretion allowed Lot to choose the best of the available resources.

Then note that God's intervention and instructions to Abraham came AFTER Abraham had separated from

Lot (verses 13:14-15). Often, we look to God for instructions and favors before we deal with demanding situations. But if this text is any guide, at times God will wait until we have dealt with the situation, using good judgment, before intervening to guide us to the blessings ahead.

**How Abraham dealt with the conflict between his staff and Lot's staff was exemplary and instructive.**

The irony of this situation with Abraham and Lot was profound. Lot chose the best of all available resources. Yet later, he found himself in a situation where he would lose it all. He barely escaped destruction by the skin of his teeth only because of Abraham's good standing with God. Abraham got the worst of the resources: what Lot had refused. But those leftovers formed the basis of a forever-blessing from God.

Because of Abraham's relationship with God, the rejects became the platform for prosperity, materially, socially, and spiritually. There is a lesson here for believers today. The dregs which God blesses bring more prosperity than the bounty offered by people. So, we can say, that avarice is a sign of lack of faith in God. We do not have to start with the best. Our God still does miracles with less. No wonder Jesus taught us to avoid ALL forms of greed.

### SANKOFA

When we think of altars today, a picture of a space or structure defined by rails or bars near or around the central platform (podium) in a church comes to mind. Members paint or varnish the rails or bars to give a pleasant, inviting look. And, at the places for kneeling, designers place cushions for the comfort of persons kneeling at the altar.

Worshippers consider the altar a sacred space; and, they use it as a special place of prayer and rituals like the administering of the Communion sacrament. But this is not the image we should see when thinking of the altars Abraham built. The first Hebrew altars were usually made

of earth or unfinished stone (stone with no shaping or finishing). Traditionally, the Hebrews erected altars in obvious (public) spaces with easy access for everyone.

In location and use, we see significant differences between the Hebrew altars and the Christian altars today. The main activities at the Christian altar are prayer, worship, and sacraments focused on Christ. This is in keeping with

the traditional Hebrew view of the altar as a place of sacrifice and communion with God. Judaism had no such Christ focus at its altar.

### CASE STUDY

Three articles dealing with the subject of reverence (in the church and wider society) inspired the comments in this section. One such article was "How Can

We Cultivate a Spirit of Reverence in Today's World?" by Lisa Loraine Baker, a contributing writer to *Bible Study Tools*, June 9, 2023. This article appealed to us because in both Judaism and Christian church history the central theme around the altar was reverence. The altar was the sacred place where people gathered to meet with and sacrifice to the Lord. Therefore, we display vital aspects of our

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attitudes to worship and God by how we regard and treat the altar and activities at the altar.

In Lisa Loraine Baker's article, she made an apt comparison about reverence using respect for the national flag. The flag is nothing more than a decorated piece of cloth on a stick or pole. Yet it represents the history, values, and national consciousness of a people. Respect for the flag signals respect for the people and their values. The same we can safely say for our reverence surrounding altars.

As noted before, the structure of altars ranged from a heap of earth, or a piece of stone, to polished, expensive marble structures. Yet their values do not rest in the material, shape, or monetary value of the item or structure. It is the value we assign to them in our hearts. To appreciate this point, consider how people approach a meeting with the English monarch at Buckingham Palace, or with the USA president in the Oval Office at the White House. We normally would not rush into those meetings dressed anyhow without the appropriate protocol. If indeed the altar is a sacred space where we meet

and commune with the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, how much more reverence should we show when approaching the altars in our churches?

It is unlikely we will ever return to the days when people were afraid to chat casually at the altar. Gone, too, are the days when people "dressed decently" for church and men showed reverence by removing headgear when entering churches. In those days stealing items from an altar was a disgrace. For all practical purposes, those days are over, never to return.

Yet we must consider how well we show reverence around our altars. People may advance the argument that how we behave is not as important as how we feel in our hearts. But that argument challenges all known research on human behavior. From both scripture

and secular studies, we know that our outward behavior is a good reflection of our heart's values. We cannot honor God in our hearts and dishonor him with our words and behaviors. So, it stands that our behavior toward the altar significantly reflects our understanding of the altar and our respect towards the things of God.

If indeed the altar is a sacred space where we meet and commune with the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, how much more reverence should we show when approaching the altars in our churches?

## LIFE APPLICATION


People have always regarded the altar as a special place or symbol for offering worship or sacrifice to God. Considering this, a personal altar in the home may be a useful representation to help us focus on God and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for the atonement of the world. Personal altars need not be elaborate or fancy. Any space we can designate and use as sacred space is acceptable. Personal altars in or around the home help people to develop stronger attitudes to prayer and meditation.

In the Hebrew culture, people develop altars to commemorate special encounters with God. You can use this historical framework to your advantage. Think about any time you had a special intervention from God. This could have been an event during worship, a solution to a problem, or a special revelation that deepened your understanding or relations with God. Find something, anything appropriate, that reminds you of that special event. This in no way suggests that you should worship the item. But let it be a constant reminder of God's goodness to you.

In the text, we see Abraham settling

a conflict between his staff and flocks, and those of Lot. Abraham's attitude and decision were truly remarkable. Consider Abraham's offer to Lot. How does your attitude to settling conflicts align with Abraham's? Ask yourself what would have to happen for you to make such a selfless, generous offer to a person fighting you for scarce resources. Note that Abraham decided on his own without any prompting from God.

## QUESTIONS



Personal altars in or around the home help people to develop stronger attitudes to prayer and meditation.

1. In your opinion, how healthy are believers' attitudes to the sacredness of the altar?
2. What is the value (if any) of having a personal altar at home?
3. Did the way Abraham dealt with the conflict with Lot teach us anything useful? Would it

not have been a better solution to share the resources (land and water) equally?

## CLOSING DEVOTIONS

**Closing Hymn:** "Is Your All on the Altar?", AMECH #333

**Closing Prayer:** Dear God, help me to

approach you and the symbols of your presence with the reverence that is due to you as the *Creator, Redeemer, Savior,* and *King of Kings*. Remind me that no

person or thing should take the place of priority and worship that is exclusively yours. In Jesus' name. Amen.

### HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

September 2-September 8

<b>Monday</b>	Romans 8:18-28 (Sighs too Deep for Words)
<b>Tuesday</b>	Psalm 34:11-22 (God Hears Our Cry for Help)
<b>Wednesday</b>	Nehemiah 12:27-30, 44-47 (Celebrate With Rejoicing, Thanksgiving, Singing)
<b>Thursday</b>	2 Chronicles 7:12-22 (Bring Your Requests Before God)
<b>Friday</b>	Luke 11:1-13 (Lord, Teach Us to Pray)
<b>Saturday</b>	1 Kings 8:22-24, 27-30, 37-43 (God the Promise Keeper)
<b>Sunday</b>	1 Kings 8:44-53 (Hear Our Plea and Grant Compassion)