

# Genesis

Creation, Covenants, All Grace – study 13



## ABRAHAM'S ALTARS

This altar was a token of gratitude. ... The Canaanites had their religion; they had also altars for sacrifices: but Abram, that he might not involve himself in their superstitions, erects a domestic altar, on which he may offer sacrifice; as if he had resolved to place a royal throne for God within his house ... The altar then is the external **form** of divine worship; but **invocation** is its substance and truth.

-- John Calvin, *The Book of Genesis* pp. 353-354 (emphasis added)

### WITNESS and COMPROMISE (12:8-13)

#### 12:8 How is Abraham's testimony in Canaan a model for us?

(1) Again this deliberate mention of calling on the Lord implies more than simple prayer; it suggests that Abram worshiped in a regular formal way. -- Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* p. 281

(2) Moses commends in Abram his unwearied devotedness to piety: for by these words, he intimates, that whatever place he visited, he there exercised



Have we built  
an 'altar to YHWH'  
in our Egypt?

(Left) Roland de Vaux, one of the most renowned among biblical archaeologists, displays multiple fragments of the Dead Sea scrolls

himself in the external worship of God. -- John Calvin, *op. cit.*, p. 356

(3) The altar is an essential element in a sanctuary; and in the stories about the Patriarchs, the phrase 'setting up an altar' means, in effect, founding a sanctuary. ... Since the Temple was the house of God, it had to have a hearth, and the altar was this hearth. ... a fire must always be burning upon the altar, ... just as the lamp must always be kept alight in the Temple ... The altar was the sign of God's presence. In the earliest period of Israel's history, it commemorated a theophany ... the altar was used as an instrument of mediation. The offerings of men were placed upon it and there burnt: by this ceremony, the offerings were taken out of man's domain and given to God, and God replied by bestowing blessings (Ex 20:24). Thus the **Covenant** itself between God and his people was **maintained in force**, or re-established, upon the altar of sacrifice. -- Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel* Vol 2 pp. 406,413,414 (emphasis added)

#### 12:9-13 How does Yahweh prosper his faithful followers? (Isa. 48:1,8,10; Mal. 3:1-4)

(4) One failure leads to another. If we depart from the will of God at even a small angle, the distance between our road and the Lord's will increase. Abram, who had walked by faith all the way from Ur to Canaan, began to walk by the circumstances of famine. Then, without asking counsel of the Lord, he took a second step to avoid further trial. Having forgotten the counsel and care of the Lord, he forgot the promise of God concerning the seed which was to come. -- Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Genesis* p. 82

(5) Had God pledged Himself to give His servants an unbroken run of prosperity, how many more counterfeit Christians would there be! Well is it that he has made no such promise; though it is certainly true that "godliness has the promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come." Do not be surprised if a famine meets you. It is no proof of your Father's anger, but is permitted to come to test you -- or to root you deeper, as the whirlwind makes the tree grapple its roots deeper into the soil. -- F.B. Meyer, *Abraham* p. 36



F.B. MEYER  
Does God wish  
us deep pockets,  
or deep roots?

### COVENANT FAITHFULNESS (12:14 - 13:4)

#### 12:14-17 Are we to understand that deceit pays dividends?

(6) Some have attempted to justify such lies as means to a good end. The moral nature of a lie, then, would be determined by the situation and not by an 'arbitrary, absolute' standard. Such a proposition, however, finds no support in Scripture. It never views a lie in a favourable light. God honors truth. It is

presumptuous for a man ever to assume that circumstances might turn out badly if he does not lie. His faith in the providential care of God is weak. -- **John J. Davis, *Paradise to Prison*** p. 177

(7) It is to be observed, too, that the proposal was clearly actuated by selfishness; there was no regard for Sarai, but only for his own safety. How strange this is! He had journeyed all the way from Ur of the Chaldees, and yet could not trust God with his wife or with his own life. How small great people can be! -- **W.H. Griffith Thomas, *Genesis 1-25*** p. 153

**12:18-20 *The fulfilment of God's promise doesn't necessarily include earthly honour. How is Abraham humiliated? His witness negated? (Titus 2:6-8)***

(8) It is a bad thing to rack our brains for excuses on behalf of the Bible worthies when they fall; if God did not excuse them, we need not stretch our charity into a covering for their sins. A lie was twice a lie in the mouth of a man like Abram. Where there was great grace there should have been great courage. We are not to qualify the disgrace by talking about spots on the sun; we are to call poison "poison," and to learn by the failure of other men that our own life will be called to trials which will need higher strength than merely human power. -- **Joseph Parker, *People's Bible: Genesis*** p. 197

Only 'gospels'  
which diminish  
grace seek to  
excuse the sins  
of saints

(9) Both Sarai and Pharaoh's house suffered through Abraham's sin. Another element in his bitter cup was the plain rebuke from the heathen Pharaoh. We have truly touched the depths of spiritual unfaithfulness when a believer has to be openly rebuked by the ungodly. -- **W.H. Griffith Thomas, *op. cit.***, p. 155

(10) We see many persons zealous for a short time, who afterwards become frozen; whence is this, but because they build without a foundation? Therefore God determined, thoroughly to rouse all the senses of Abram, that he might undertake nothing rashly or inconsiderately; lest, repenting soon afterwards, he should veer with the wind, and return. Wherefore, if we desire to follow God with constancy, it behoves us carefully to meditate on all the inconveniences, all the difficulties, all the dangers which await us; that not only a hasty zeal may produce fading flowers, but that from a deep and well-fixed root of piety, we may bring forth fruit in our whole life. ... For why does not God immediately point out the land, except for the purpose of keeping his servant in suspense, that he may the better try the truth of his attachment to the word of God? -- **John Calvin, *op. cit.***, p. 344

**13:1-4 *Though he's rebuked, count Abraham's gains and losses.***

(11) We read of no such altar or prayer in Egypt. Abraham seems to have been out of communion there. Now, however, he does the only possible thing -- he returns to where he had been at the commencement; he came back to the true surrender and simple worship of his earliest days in Canaan. -- **W.H. Griffith**

**Thomas, *op. cit.***, p. 154

(12) Pitching a tent cheaper than building an altar. Give God the best. We build ourselves ceiled houses and the ark dwells in curtains. Pagans build elaborate temples, but their houses are hovels. Too many Christians do the opposite. --

**Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions: Genesis*** p. 84

(13) Let us also remember that the altar means sacrifice, whole burnt-offering, self-denial, and self-surrender. In this sense the altar and the tent must ever go together. We cannot live the detached tent-life without some amount of pain and suffering, such as the altar bespeaks. But it is out of such a life that there spring the most intense devotion, the deepest fellowship, the happiest communion. --

**F.B. Meyer, *Abraham*** p. 31

(14) It was therefore proper that invocation should be conjoined with the altar; because, by the sacrifices offered, he plainly testified what God he worshipped, in order that the Canaanites might know that he was not addicted to their common idolatries. -- **John Calvin, *op. cit.***, p. 369