

Mounting your Altar...

One young man, one old man, the two walking side by side. Neither says much, for they do not need to - their relationship has a closeness that goes beyond mere words. Walking together is a father and a son... a senior man of faith and a junior man of vision. The two have been on their arduous hike for three long days, and both father and son are beginning to feel tired under the hot, dry heat emanating from the Palestinian sun.

It is the last day of their journey. The two set out in the cool of the morning, before the sun brings its heat to the land. Although the morning air is quiet and comfortable, there is a certain heaviness in the atmosphere around them. These mountainous regions were known for sudden shifts in the weather, but this heaviness did not come from outside. Rather, it was the heaviness felt by an inner storm - an inner turmoil that was raging in the father.

The son felt it as well, but did not know why. Confusion raged in his heart, and he could not bring himself to a state of peace. He had been on these sacrificial trips with his father many times, but this time was different. Something was wrong, and he couldn't figure out what it was. His father became ever quieter as they hiked along side by side, watching the beautiful sun as it slowly began to peak across the desert horizon they had journeyed over and rise into the Eastern sky.

The father glanced over at the son he was so proud of - his miracle that God had given him after so many years. He had doubted that God could come through, and now the very flesh of his flesh was a constant reminder of the faithfulness of Yahweh. His eyes filled up with tears as he remembered taking many of these same walks with his son. They had rejoiced together and he had taught his son all of the ways of Jehovah.

How was he going to explain this to his son, his treasure? How was God going to fulfill his promise if this really was what God required? What was he going to tell his wife and family back home? What was he going to do? The questions obliterated any space left in his mind. Maybe he hadn't heard right - God could not possibly want this... could he? The man and the boy continued to walk, and the silent turmoil continued to be carried with them as the heat of the day began to set over the land.

Can you feel the tension? Can you feel the inward struggle that this father and son team faced? I am sure Abraham felt it as he led his son up the mountain and prepared to give to God the one thing he treasured more than his own life. Read the story in Genesis 22 and put yourself there that day - feel the heat of the sun and the heaviness in the air. Allow yourself to experience what both Abraham and Isaac must have been feeling as Isaac poses the question of where the lamb for the sacrifice will come from (vs 7).

Now that we have the picture painted, let's dig a little deeper - let's go underneath the surface. We know that the altars used in biblical days to sacrifice animals before God were often over four feet off the ground (see Exodus 27:1). We also know that, by this time, Abraham was a very old man - well passed the century mark. The old man's strength could not have been what it once was in his youthful days. Isaac, on the other hand, was in the prime of his life, a young boy close to 20 with strength to spare.

Keep that picture fresh in your mind, because knowing this I think changes the scenery (and perhaps the message) of our story a little. I remember growing up with my Picture Bible and seeing the picture of Abraham tying his son's hands behind his back. Today, however, I want to suggest a slightly different slightly different view...

There's no way Abraham could have tied his son up
and placed him on top of that altar unless Isaac willingly allowed it.

Ouch. There's the punch line. Isaac had to have mounted his own altar. He willingly laid down his life in order to please his father. He had all the visions a young boy could ever have, and I personally believe that if he wanted to, he could have defended himself and gotten free. Yet he willingly mounted the altar and prepared to give up his life. As a result, Isaac became the next integral part of the blessing and special plan that God had for the children of Israel.

Both men were tested that day. Abraham was tested to give up what he loved, and Isaac was tested to lay down his life and to mount his own altar. Both men passed the test, and a lamb provided the replacement for the sacrifice that God still required, a foreshadowing of Spotless Lamb taking our own place and making the ultimate sacrifice for the sins of mankind.

There are altars in each of our lives that our Heavenly Father is asking us to mount...altars of pride, altars of sin, altars of selfish desires and impure motives. God has given us free choice and free will. He will not force us to get up on those altars. He would rather that the choice be left in our hands. Are we willing to submit to his plan for our lives, or will we choose our own plan?

Isaac chose his father's plan, and reaped the blessings thereof. We also will reap the blessings if we choose our Father's plan...or we will reap the consequences if we choose our own. It's important to realize, though, that the blessings that come from mounting our altars tend not to be seen in this earthly realm. God requires that we allow ourselves to be sacrificed - that we allow our nature to die. There's no replacement in this sacrifice - each is required to lay down and let go of their own ambitions and desires for the sake of a greater call.

What altar is God asking you to mount today? Perhaps it is that one small thing you have been entertaining in your mind that causes your life to remain with a hint of impurity (see Ephesians 5:3); perhaps it is the ministry that you have poured your heart and soul into; perhaps it is a relationship with someone or the comfortable position you currently find yourself in. Ministries and healthy relationships are not bad in and of themselves, but sometimes God may ask us to lay them down and concentrate on him alone.

Paul encouraged us in Romans 12:1 to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, which is our true spiritual act of worship. Have you presented your body to God? Have you mounted the altar and laid all your desires and your hopes before him?

Do you know what the problem is with *living* sacrifices? We keep crawling off the altar! If we were dead, we would just lie there. But in our human weakness, we

fluctuate between truly wanting to entrust ourselves completely to God and taking back our lives to manage them on our own. When we try to do things in our own strength, we usually fall flat. Then our loving father has to pick us up and put us back on the altar so that we can, by his mercies, be the living sacrifices he has called us to be.

~ Kimberly Hahn

Have you sacrificed your dreams and comforts for him? Have you laid your fears and your concerns on the altar? The act of sacrifice is never a pleasant thing, but the rewards of becoming closer to our Heavenly Father and his ultimate plan for our lives are far worth the cost. That decision, however, has been left up to you. God won't pick you up and put you back on that altar unless your hand is extended for him to do so.

God is asking you to lay down some things
God is asking you to let go of some things
Will you mount your altar?

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