

Returning to the Altar - A Call to Encounter God Again

God's love for you is personal and profound. As it's written in **Ro 5:8 (NKJV) — 8 But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.**

We are not just a part of God's creation, but his heart's desire, his treasured possession. He created us to be the ones who would reflect his love back to him.

My purpose in delivering this message is to show you a path to a deeper intimacy with God, a level of closeness you may not have experienced before. I will reveal the method established by God, so that we can richly experience his true presence and glory.

Today, I will be teaching the subject:

Returning to the Altar: A Call to Encounter God Again

Ge 35:1–3 (NKJV) — 1 Then God said to Jacob, “Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there; and make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from the face of Esau your brother.” 2 And Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, “Put away the foreign gods that are among you, purify yourselves, and change your garments. 3 Then let us arise and go up to Bethel; and I will make an altar there to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me in the way which I have gone.”

Ge 35:7 (NKJV) — 7 And he built an altar there and called the place El Bethel, because there God appeared to him when he fled from the face of his brother.

Ge 35:9–15 (NKJV) — 9 Then God appeared to Jacob again, when he came from Padan Aram, and blessed him. 10 And God said to him, “Your name is Jacob; your name shall not be called Jacob anymore, but Israel shall be your name.” So He called his name Israel.

11 Also God said to him: “I am God Almighty. Be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall proceed from you, and kings shall come from your body. 12 The land which I gave Abraham and Isaac I give to you; and to your descendants after you I give this land.” 13 Then God went up from him in the place where He talked with him.

14 So Jacob set up a pillar in the place where He talked with him, a pillar of stone; and he poured a drink offering on it, and he poured oil on it. 15 And Jacob called the name of the place where God spoke with him, Bethel.

In Genesis 35, Jacob is presented with an opportunity for transformation. 20 years have passed (Ge 31:38) since he last encountered God at Bethel, the place he called "the house of God."

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Life has changed, challenges have come, and distractions have drawn his family into compromise. But God calls him back, saying, **"Return to Bethel. Build an altar."**

This command from God was an invitation to Jacob.

It was a call not just to return to a physical place but to **return to a spiritual place.**

It was the place where Jacob had first experienced God's presence and promises.

Today, God is inviting each of us to return to our own "Bethel," to that sacred place in our hearts where we can encounter Him in a fresh, transformative way. God is inviting each of us to have a spiritual renewal.

You see, an altar is not just a physical place; an altar is a place set apart for an encounter with God.

What is an altar? A Place Of Encounter!

An Altar Is A Place Of Encounter With God

An altar is a physical manifestation of a spiritual reality. It is something man creates on earth, setting it apart with reverence and holiness as a place representing God's presence where man and God interact.

An altar was often made of stone and earth and used as a place of

- **Worship** (Genesis 12:7-8) where people surrender, submit and acknowledge God's power and goodness
- **Sacrifice** (Hebrews 9:12-14) symbolizing atonement for sin
- **Covenant** (Genesis 12:7; Exodus 24:4) a reminder of God's promises and human commitment
- **Consecration and Holiness** (Genesis 8:20) how man presents himself
- **Encounter with God** (Genesis 28:18-22; 35:7) where God reveals himself
- **Communion** (Leviticus 3; Deuteronomy 12:5-7) where man and God fellowship

Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, Gideon, and others built altars.

The ultimate altar finds its fulfillment in Christ's perfect sacrifice. As a result we can experience God's presence and his grace at the altar.

The initial building of altars was God's idea!

Rabbinic and Christian theological interpretations suggest that an altar might have been involved in the offerings made by **Cain and Abel** in **Genesis 4:3-4**. Although the text doesn't explicitly mention an altar, both Jewish and Christian traditions have interpreted these verses in ways that imply one may have been used.

God honored altars when they were built with a sincere heart and in obedience. For example, God accepted Elijah's sacrifice on Mount Carmel by sending fire, and He

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stopped a plague when David built an altar in repentance.

The **Tabernacle** in the wilderness and **Solomon's temple** in Jerusalem represent an **entire altar to the Lord**.

Display the Tabernacle

Notice the two altars.

- The **Brazen Altar** - *where sacrifices are offered to God*. Burn offerings, sin offerings, and peace offerings symbolize the atonement for sin, devotion, and reconciliation between God and man.
 - It's where we express our need for forgiveness, purification, and Thanksgiving.
- The **Altar Of Incense** - *where prayers were offered up to God* as a sweet-smelling incense.

Exposition

Ge 35:1–3 (NKJV) — 1 Then God said to Jacob, “Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there; and make an *altar* there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from the face of Esau your brother.” 2 And Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, “Put away the foreign gods that are among you, purify yourselves, and change your garments. 3 Then let us arise and go up to Bethel; and I will make an *altar* there to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me in the way which I have gone.”

1. God Calls You To The Altar To Worship Him
2. Purify Yourself For God's Presence
3. The Altar Is a Sacred Place To Return To Again And Again
4. The Altar Is A Place Of Thanks And Commitment To God
5. The Altar is A Place of a Renewed Relationship
6. The Altar Call Is An Invitation To Encounter God Again
7. Going To The Altar Is A Choice

1. God Calls You To The Altar To Worship Him

Ge 35:1–3 (NKJV) — 1 Then God said to Jacob, “Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there; and make an *altar* there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from the face of Esau your brother.”

In Scripture, altars are places of divine encounter. For Jacob, Bethel was where God first appeared, showing him a vision of angels ascending and descending a ladder. In that moment, God promised to bless Jacob and keep him.

Ge 28:10–22 (NKJV) —

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10 Now Jacob went out from Beersheba and went toward Haran. 11 So he came to a certain place and stayed there all night, because the sun had set.

And he took **one of the stones of that place** and put it at his head, and he lay down in that place to sleep.

12 Then he dreamed, and behold, a ladder was set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

13 And behold, the Lord stood above it and said: **"I am the Lord God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants. 14 Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.**

15 Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you."

16 Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it." 17 And he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!"

18 Then Jacob rose early in the morning, and **took the stone that** he had put at his head, set it up as a pillar, and **poured oil on top of it.** 19 And he called the name of that place Bethel; but the name of that city had been Luz previously.

20 Then Jacob made a vow, saying, **"If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going, and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on, 21 so that I come back to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God.**

22 And this stone which I have set as a pillar shall be God's house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You."

Jacob dreams of a ladder stretching from earth to heaven, with angels ascending and descending, symbolizing a connection or bridge between the two realms. This encounter, taking place at Bethel, which Jacob later designates as a sacred site by setting up a stone and pouring oil on it, represents a place where the divine and human intersect.

The altar is a **portal or connecting point** between heaven and earth.

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In Scripture, altars are often places where people encounter God directly. When an altar is built and sacrifices are offered, God's presence frequently manifests in powerful ways, such as fire consuming offerings (e.g., Elijah on Mount Carmel in 1 Kings 18). These encounters reveal that altars serve as sacred spaces where heaven and earth converge.

In Jacob's dream, the ladder connects earth to heaven, ***with angels moving between the two realms, representing communication and interaction between God and humanity***. Although an altar is not specifically mentioned, Jacob sets up a ***stone and anoints it***, symbolizing that this location is sacred and connected to God's presence. The altar is a place where one can access divine presence and favor.

Jacob names the place Bethel, meaning "House of God," and calls it "the gate of heaven" (Genesis 28:17). This indicates that Jacob understood Bethel—and by extension, altars more broadly—as places where God's presence could be encountered, effectively serving as a "portal" between heaven and earth.

New Testament Parallel in Christ: In the New Testament, Jesus refers to Jacob's ladder, saying, "You will see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man" (John 1:51). **Here, Jesus identifies Himself as the ultimate connection between heaven and earth, symbolizing that He is the final "altar" or portal through which humanity can access God's presence.**

Back to Jacob

But as years passed, Jacob drifted from the fulness of that sacred encounter. He faced struggles, made mistakes, and even allowed idols to enter his household. When Jacob drifted from Bethel, he experienced challenges and struggles.

Without his closeness to God, Jacob dealt with **fear, conflict, and uncertainty**. He faced **struggles** not only from *others but within himself*.

Jacob's story reminds us that when we drift from God's presence, life can become more difficult and confusing.

Many of us can relate to Jacob. Think about it: We may have started our journey with a powerful encounter with God, but over time, we have drifted. Life's struggles, distractions, and even sins may have led us away from that place of a close encounter, and we feel weary, burdened, or distant from God.

But here's the good news: God doesn't leave us in dry, distant places. He calls us back! Just as He called Jacob, today, He's calling each of us to return to Him, to come back to that place where He can refresh, restore, and renew us.

He's inviting us to a **fresh start**. But we must be willing to accept it!

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The altar symbolizes the place of personal encounter with God. For Jacob, Bethel was where he met God when he fled from Esau. It was there he received God's promise and assurance.

God tells him to get up from where he was and go back to where he first found him.

- This reminds us that sometimes we need to go back to the place where we once deeply experienced God's presence.
- Many of us have had defining moments in our walk with God—moments when we knew He spoke to us, saved us, healed us, or gave us purpose. We could hear him clearly then!
 - Yet, over time, we may have drifted away from him.
 - He has never left us!
 - Returning to the "altar" reminds us of those previous encounters, reigniting the flames of our relationship with God.

2 Ti 1:6 (NKJV) — 6 Therefore I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands.

- When we return to the altar, we rekindle in our hearts the devotion we once had to God.

Ps 51:17 (NKJV) — 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart— These, O God, You will not despise.
- The purpose of an Altar Call is for us to come forward present our bodies and restore our commitment to God. In **Romans 12:1, Paul calls us to present our bodies as "living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God."** This is our spiritual act of worship.
 - The altar is a place where we surrender to God's will and deny ourselves as a living sacrifice. True worship requires us to deny ourselves and lay down our will, emotions, and thoughts.
 - As the sacrifices were offered on Old Testament altars, we are called to offer ourselves fully to God.
 - We are to be willing to sacrifice ourselves for the honor of God!
- **Coming back to the altar is a way of practicing righteousness.**
- Ask,
 - "Are there areas of your life you're holding back from God?"
 - "Are there distractions or sins that need to be laid down?"
 - "Are there spiritual altars in your life that may need restoring?"
 - Again, that is the purpose of an altar.
- Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice, all we have to do is confess our shortcomings.
 - That is the purpose of the brazen altar. We lay down those things that we ought not to have taken up.
- Just as Jacob was invited to return, we too are invited to come to this altar, leaving behind the distractions, burdens, and idols that may have entered our lives. This is a place where God wants to meet us, to remind us of His promises, and to renew us.
- As we come to the altar and offer up as sacrifice our confessions **1 Jn 1:9**

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(NKJV) — 9 If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

2. Purify Yourself For God's Presence

Ge 35:2 (NKJV) — 2 And Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, "Put away the foreign gods that are among you, purify yourselves, and change your garments.

Jacob knew that returning to Bethel wasn't just about going to a physical location—it was about preparing their hearts to encounter God in a deeper way.

He told his family to consecrate themselves and discard anything that hinders their relationship with God. Idols and impurities symbolized distractions that kept them from fully experiencing God's presence.

- **There must be a purification.** Just as Jacob and his household prepared themselves, coming to the altar requires a heart ready to let go of anything that stands between us and God.
 - Today, we can leave our burdens, our doubts, and our sins at this altar.
 - We, too, may carry "idols"—distractions, sins, or habits—that dilute our devotion.
 - Returning to the altar involves surrendering these, purifying our hearts, and renewing our commitment to God.
 - **Ps 66:18 (NKJV) — 18 If I regard iniquity in my heart, The Lord will not hear.**
- We must be willing to consecrate ourselves and put off the old man when we come to the altar. We must confess our sins. We are not perfect, but if we are willing to get back to practicing righteousness and willing to put off the old man, God is willing to help us put on the new man.
- **Change your garments:**
Eph 4:22–24 (NKJV) — 22 that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, 23 and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, 24 and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.

Consider what happened to Jacob when he came back to the altar. There was a **transformation**.

- God blessed him and **changed his name** from Jacob, meaning "deceiver," to Israel, meaning "one who wrestles with God" or "God prevails." This name change symbolized a transformation in Jacob's identity and purpose.
 - Returning to the altar was not only an act of obedience; it was a step into a new identity and destiny in God.
 - When we come to the altar, God meets us where we are, and transforms us moving us closer to what we are to become.

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- Coming before an altar is not just a symbolic act—it's an invitation to experience His love, grace, and power in a fresh way.
 - Like Jacob, we may come burdened, but God will send us away blessed.
 - We may come weary, but we will leave renewed.
Mt 11:28 (NKJV) — 28 Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

With purification comes transformation!

3. The Altar Is a Sacred Place To Return To Again And Again

Jacob's return to Bethel is a reminder that we can—and should—come back to the altar regularly.

An Altar is not a one-time encounter; it's an ongoing relationship with God. Bethel became a place where Jacob could encounter God again and again.

Judges 20:18, 26-28: During the time of the Judges, the Israelites went to Bethel to seek God's guidance and direction in their battle against the tribe of Benjamin. The **Ark of the Covenant** was there, and they sought God's will through prayer and sacrifice. Bethel served as a place where the Israelites could encounter God, showing that it retained spiritual importance for them.

1 Samuel 7:16: The prophet Samuel traveled to Bethel as part of his circuit to judge Israel. This indicates that Bethel was one of the central locations for worship and administering justice. Samuel's visits likely involved worship and sacrifices, reminding the Israelites of their need for holiness and dedication to God.

4. The Altar Is The Place Of Thanks And Commitment To God

Ge 35:3 (NKJV) — 3 Then let us arise and go up to Bethel; and I will make an altar there to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me in the way which I have gone."

- Jacob's altar represented his gratitude and commitment. God had been with him through trials and blessings. By returning, he publicly declared his dependence and gratitude to God.
- In our lives, the altar is a place where we remember God's faithfulness and express gratitude. It's a place to lay down self-reliance and recommit our trust to God, acknowledging that every good thing we have is from Him.

5. The Altar is a Place of a Renewed Relationship

Ge 35:3b and has been with me in the way which I have gone."

- God's call to Jacob wasn't just to revisit a location but to renew their relationship. Returning to Bethel meant Jacob was reaffirming God's role in his life journey.

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- The altar is about a relationship, not just a ritual. God calls us back, not merely to remember the past, but to deepen our connection with Him today.
- He desires to be with us in every aspect of our lives, guiding us forward in His purposes.

Today, this altar here at the front of the church will be **anointed with oil** as a reminder that it is a sacred place—a place set apart, where God's presence dwells, a place of prayer and worship, a place for each of us to meet with God whenever we need Him.

We can return to this altar time and time again, knowing that God will meet us here.

6. An Altar Call Is An Invitation To Encounter God Again

Just as God called Jacob back to Bethel, He's calling each of us today. He's saying, "Return to the altar. Come back to the place where I met you before. Come to me with open hands and an open heart, ready for a fresh encounter." He's ready to reveal Himself in new and powerful ways.

- **Invitation:** This altar is open for you. Whether you've drifted from God, feel burdened, or simply desire a fresh touch from Him, come to this place. Allow this altar to be your Bethel, where you lay down your struggles and experience a greater revelation of who God is in your life.
- **Encouragement:** Church, as you come to this altar, expect God to meet you here. Just as Jacob's life was transformed, God wants to transform your life today. He wants to take the old things—the worries, the doubts, the sins—and give you a fresh start. Just as Jacob was given a new name, God wants to renew your sense of identity and purpose in Him.

7. Going To The Altar Is A Choice

It's time to "Return to the Altar"—to recommit, reconnect, and encounter Him afresh. Like Jacob, we may need to cleanse our hearts, lay down our distractions, and refocus on God.

Going to the Altar can renew our lives with the richness of His presence and the strength of His promises.

A blessing is just a step away!

As I close, I invite you to take a step of faith and come to the altar. This is your Bethel.

This is where God is waiting to meet, bless, and renew you. Come and encounter Him here if you need healing, forgiveness, strength, or a fresh touch from God.

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He came all the way from heaven to meet you here!

As you come forward, know that this altar is not just a physical place; it's a place where heaven meets earth, God's presence is real, and your life can be transformed. Allow this to be a sacred place to return to in times of need, where you can lay down your burdens and encounter the love and power of God anew.

Consider what you may need to leave behind to encounter God again. Just as Jacob and his family purified themselves, we, too, are invited to lay down distractions and rededicate ourselves at the altar of God's presence. Come back to Bethel; come back to a fresh encounter with the God who has been with you every step of the way.

Let's pray together as we come to the altar, trusting that God will meet us here just as He met Jacob. May this be a holy moment, a fresh encounter, and a new beginning for each of us.

Closing Prayer:

"Lord, we come to You today with open hearts, ready for a fresh encounter. Just as You called Jacob back to Bethel, we hear Your call to return to the altar. We come to lay down our burdens, our fears, and our distractions, trusting that You will meet us here with your grace and power.

Anoint this altar, Lord, as a sacred place of encounter from this day forward, and meet each one who steps forward today. Transform our lives as we surrender to You.

In Jesus' name, Amen."

A final note:

AN ALTAR DOES NOT HAVE TO BE A PUBLIC PLACE, AN ALTAR CAN BE IN YOUR HOME!

Make yours today!