

FAITH CHRISTIAN ASSEMBLY

13820 Seal Beach Blvd PO Box 3444 Seal Beach, Ca 90740
Rev. Gwyn & Ginny Vaughn, Senior Pastors
Rev. Sheri Leming, Associate Pastor – Gary Leming, Business Administrator

562-598-9010 revgwynvaughn@gmail.com or www.fcachurch.net Fax 562-598-2116

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"From the Pastor's Desk..."

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THE ALTAR, THE PLACE WHERE GOD MEETS WITH MAN

"As for me, I will call upon God; and the LORD shall save me. Evening, and morning, and at noon, will I pray, and cry aloud: and he shall hear my voice." Psalms 55:16, 17

There are many things said throughout the Holy Scriptures in reference to the altar. In Genesis, one of the first things that Noah did after the flood was build an altar (Gen. 8:20). We know that Abraham built and rebuilt several altars (Gen. 12:7,8; 13:4; 13:18; 22:9) Then Isaac came along and he also built an altar (Gen. 26:25). Jacob built and altar and called it El-El-o-he-Israel meaning: "The God of Israel," (Gen. 33:20).

You see, Jacob viewed God as the God of all grace, and to show honor and respect he had for Him he erects an altar. Then he dedicates what he has built to God, the God of Israel. Israel was the name that God had given to Jacob. He did this so that there would be no doubt as to whom he served. He wanted everyone around to know Him who had bestowed the power of His grace and goodness, who had rescued, defended, blessed, and supported him from his youth up until that present time.

Altars were not designed to take the place of God. One should never make any structure of earth into a god. Aaron's golden calf episode should tell anyone who is tempted to do such a thing the folly and danger of such a deed (Ex. 32). There is nothing in a structure itself that supplies the power to meet people's needs. Paul mentioned in one of his travels when he came to Mars Hill and saw there an altar with the inscription "*To the unknown god*" that he was inspired to say to the philosophers of that day, "Let me declare unto you, whom ye ignorantly worship." (Acts 17:23) It was customary to erect such altars at that time.

Minutius Felix says of the Romans, "*They build altars to unknown divinities.*" This tells us that they were confessing and proclaiming their ignorance. By erecting such an altar, they were admitting they were in need of a teacher and instruction to show them the way to God.

It was a remarkable thing that Paul seized on this opportunity and used it to give witness to the faith and in doing so provoked a response by some who said, "We will hear thee again of this matter." When you read the closing verse of the chapter the writer tells us "*certain men clave unto him, and believed*" (Acts 17:34). You see, Paul knew what a true altar is all about.

Altars should be designed as a place where humanity can focus their attention on Him who has made them as well as the entire universe. The text that I have chosen for this newsletter declares the confession of the Psalmist who said, "As for me, I will call upon God; and the LORD shall save me. Evening, and morning, and at noon, will I pray, and cry aloud: and he shall hear my voice." Ps.55:16,17 John Bunyan once wrote, "He who runs from God in the morning will scarcely find Him the rest of the day." Every man needs an altar, a place where he/she can meet with God on a regular basis.

Because an altar is something sacred, it needs to be placed in an area where that sacredness cannot be disturbed. Having devotions in a café may provide you good coffee, but I doubt it will protect you from distractions. Our Lord chose a garden where He talked with God. I am sure gardens may not always be convenient or even possible. However, I often find the bedroom or a private study (where the phone is ignored) in the early hours of the morning is most often the safest place.

LEARN TO USE THE ALTAR FOR THE RIGHT PURPOSE

It takes real discipline to make an altar the kind of place that God intended it to be. Too often, we use the altar to ask for something we want or even think we need. Remember, Jesus has already told us that the Father already knows what we have need of...therefore, it is important that our altar be a place where God can communicate His will and His pleasure to us. It is alright to have a two-way conversation with God, but I feel we should make sure that it should consist more of our listening than us always doing most of the talking.

When Saul became the first king of Israel he, through God's help, was able to gain victory over the Ammonites. Saul had come from the Tribe of Benjamin, which in the days of the judges had almost been annihilated. But even though you might say he didn't come from a family of war heroes, (at least of late), nevertheless God told Samuel to anoint the young man to be the king. But Samuel admonished Saul as well as all Israel for them not to forget God (1 Sam. 12). Winning the first battle I guess made him overly confident. Because when he led his army into the next battle, about a year later, with the Philistines, he made his first major mistake (1 Sam.13).

Samuel had instructed Saul that he and his men were to tarry until an appointed time before they engaged into a battle with the Philistines. However, when the appointed time came, Samuel failed to arrive on time. This created an anxiety for Saul and his men. The Philistines had gathered 30,000 chariots and six thousand horsemen to war against Israel. The opposition looked like the "*sand of the seashore*" to the multitude. The men with Saul started hiding themselves in caves, thickets, rocks, high places, and in pits. The pressure was on.

Saul convinced himself that he could not wait on Samuel any longer. Therefore, he took upon himself not just the office of a king, but also the office of a priest, and offered a burnt and peace offering (all at the altar). No sooner had he made the offerings to God than Samuel showed up. Sensing what Saul had done asked, "*What hast thou done?*"

Saul immediately begins to make excuses by blaming others for his impatience. Then he lied by saying, "*I forced myself thereof and offered the burnt offering.*" In addition, Samuel said to Saul, "*Thou hast done foolishly: thou hast not kept the commandment of the LORD thy God, which He commanded thee: **for now would the LORD have established thy kingdom upon Israel for ever. But now thy kingdom shall not continue:** the LORD hath sought him a man after His own heart, and the LORD hath commanded him to be captain over his people, because thou hast not kept that which the LORD commanded thee.*" (1 Sam.13:13,14)

How many times have I seen people run ahead of God in a similar manner: the failure to wait on God to speak, to guide, to give counsel, even to give strength to wait a little longer? I have seen couples rush to the altar for marriage, before they rushed to the altar to seek the mind of God on the timing as well as the blessing....only to see their marriage end in shipwreck. Thomas Brooks said it well: "***If you would have God hear you when you pray, you must hear Him when He speaks.***"

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "***Prayer as a means to a private end is meanness and theft.***" There is no room at the altar or in God's Kingdom for selfish prayers and selfish natures. Jesus set the example for us all when He prayed to His Father at His altar, "*Not my will, but thine be done.*"

Altars are built to please God, not ourselves. It would be good to observe that God had men build their own altars. Probably His purpose was so they would take the time to evaluate how they were going to use it. This is good because when we build the altar we are making a place to meet with Him on purpose, not by accident or of some urgent necessity. God told Moses to build the altar; then he explained the purpose when he said, and there "*I will commune with thee.*" This is what the altar is about; building a relationship through prayer, which will knit our souls with God into a place of intimacy and sacredness. Because it is when we enter into His presence that we become changed men and women, fashioned after His Son and made useful for the Master's use. Amen.