

Smoking Altars and Standing Stones

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[0 : 00] When I was living in Mississippi, I came back to Pickens for a few days to help bury a dear friend. I know he was a friend of many of you as well. Oliver Neely was a strong example in this community and changed a lot of people's lives due to his influence for the gospel.

And one day I went on a ride to go to Old Stomping Ground, a little ride of nostalgia, because my grandfather built a cabin a long time ago on the banks of the South Saluda River.

And when I was growing up, we used to go to that cabin in the back of that wagon on the other side of that cabin. Much has changed since that place was sold after his death, but I was pleased to see the cabin was still standing.

That chimney is still there, and the rafters that he put, they've improved the home. Quite a bit has changed now. For one, they have indoor plumbing now.

That's it from another angle now. When I was growing up and we went up there, we were kind of highfalutin. We had a two-seater. And you can always go to the bathroom with a friend, I guess.

[1 : 18] But anyway, and I know what it is to sweep before you go, if you know what I mean. If you don't know what I mean, good for you. But even with all that, if you look behind that, you'll see the devastation that a tornado, I believe, in April 2020 caused in that area.

It was still pretty special. I go back there sometimes and reflect upon what God gave us so many years ago.

Now, whether it's a literal spot or just a spot in your mind, we all need to go back like that spiritually and reflect on the times God did a work in us or when we had a special time with the Lord.

Abraham did that. And I want you to see what we need to do based on his example and some other biblical examples in the midst of our journey.

Genesis chapter 12, beginning in verse 4, it says, So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was 75 years old when he departed from Haran.

[2 : 42] And Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his brother's son and all their possessions they had gathered and the people they had acquired in Haran.

And they set out to go to the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to a place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh.

At that time, the Canaanites were in the land. Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, To your offspring, I'll give this land. So he built there an altar to the Lord who had appeared to him.

From there he moved to the hill country of the east of Bethel and pitched his tent with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east.

And there he built an altar to the Lord and called upon the name of the Lord. And Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negev.

[3 : 46] God told Abram to go. And when he did go, God would show him where he was to go, what he was to do, and would work through him.

And we talked about in detail last week how he took a pit stop for too long in Haran. But then he set out with his family, and verse 5 tells us, the people that they had acquired in Haran.

In other words, those that he had led out of moon god worship and into the worship of the Heavenly Father.

He stopped at the Oak of Moreh. That's a popular spot in that day. It is known particularly for the Canaanite shrines and the lessons of the false religions that were taught in that area.

Abram stopped there, shared some of what God was showing him and where God was taking him, and then after sharing that with them, brought those people along with him.

[5 : 01] along on his journey. God's not only giving him the land, but he is making him a blessing as he goes, just as God promised that he would do. And Abram is changing the land in which he

journeys through.

Due to the promises of God, Abram hung around, but the Canaanites had the good land in that area. Therefore, he moved on and journeyed through the Negev.

The Negev is a barren desert land. It is hard traveling. But I want you to notice what Abram learned in Haran, the land of plenty, at least in worldly thought.

But in reality, just like the meaning of the word, it was a spiritually parched area. He learned there that the promises of this world is not worth the focus.

Don't focus on what this world has. Focus instead upon what God has. And when he realized what God had for him, his obedience went from a partial obedience of staying in some places too long and taking too many people with him to a partial obedience, to a full obedience, or just pure obedience.

[6 : 25] Not only is Abram now on the move, but God was also on the move. And notice what we do, just like he did, when God is on the move.

When God moves in your life, first we need to recognize. We need to recognize the movement of God. Sometimes we miss the movement of God because we just don't recognize it. We're not spiritually alert to know what's going on.

We're not receptive to it. We're not obedient to it. The best way to recognize those things is to get in on it. Take God at his word.

Listen to what the spirit of God speaks to you about the personal application of God's word in your life. Respond to it in obedience. Respond when he speaks.

And we have a lot of hindrances along the way because we sometimes don't recognize when God speaks to us and what he would have for us. We see what others need to have in their life.

[7 : 27] We see what changes need to take place in other people's lives, but we fail to acknowledge our own spiritual woes. We fail to acknowledge what God wants to say to us and we don't listen when his leading invades our life.

Or we go to Heron and stop. We go halfway. We start on a trek, but we just half obey. Old boy told me not long ago, you know, I believe in God and all that, but I don't think we need to get so wound up about it.

Well, I think we need to get wound up about it. I do. I do. I think he's worthy of us getting a little wound up. He got wound up enough, thank God, to go to the cross for us.

Amen? And so we ought to get wound up for him. It could be because God seems to be speaking sometimes too much to us. What God says sometimes, he digs into the closets of our lives.

He deals with stuff in our lives that we don't want to touch and we don't want to deal with. Abram was in the land of the Canaanites, in a place of the shrines, in the place of pagan worship, and God says, your children and your children's children will inherit this land.

[8 : 44] Abram could have easily said, how in the world is that going to happen? I mean, do you see who's here? And they're pretty mighty. I mean, how's that going to take place?

There's strong people here. Or he could have said, what do you mean my children and my children's children? What about me?

What about me? What's in it for me? Because I want you to notice that God was saying, not saying that Abram would get the land.

He said his offspring would get the land. Recognize that God speaks and pay attention to what he says because when God's on the move, there's something else we need to do.

We need to recognize it, but that's not it. We also need to remember. We need to remember it.

When God speaks truth to us, I'm talking about personalized, customized truth to us by the Holy Spirit of God.

[9 : 50] It is special, and you need to archive it. You need to hold on to it. Notice what happens as Abram is on the way to the Lord's promises, okay?

He's on his way to where God would tell him to go, and the Lord speaks to him, and he recognizes the presence of God, and when he recognizes the presence of God, he builds an altar there as a testimony to what God said when he claimed that land.

Now, he left that land, but he didn't take that altar with him. He left that altar there. He left it behind, and when he moved again, and he called on the Lord again, he had a powerful time with the Lord.

He built another altar. He didn't take that altar with him either. He left it behind. So I want you to think about this, what happens. After Abram's gone from the area, and people come back to that,

when those Canaanites come back to the Oak of Moreh to worship their foreign gods, they just see an altar there to Abraham's God.

They see an altar there, recognizing that he left his testimony there. This is where God spoke to me. He left a witness there. He does the same thing when he goes to Bethel, and Beth in Hebrew is house, and El is short for God.

[11:12] House of God's what it means. Abraham had a good day in the house of God, and he didn't forget it. He left his testimony behind along with that altar. He remembered what God did for him.

That reminds me of a passage in 1 Chronicles 21 when David was tempted to get prideful about all he had.

God had blessed him mightily, and so he started counting. He wanted to see how much he had, so he took a census. Scripture says he was tempted by Satan to take that census, and so he took an inventory. And when he tried to count up all his strength, he got filled up with pride of his accomplishments, and the cost of that sin came upon his people, and his guilt overwhelmed him because of the cost his people had to pay because of his sin, and so he looked for a flat, clear place to build an altar.

There's no better flat, clear place in that day to build an altar than the threshing floor. He found a threshing floor.

The threshing floor is a crucial part of the harvest of wheat. It was a raised area that was floored with rock or a hard surface, hard-packed dirt surface.

[12:37] It was on a threshing floor where they would pound out the wheat, and they would loosen it up and separate the chaff or the holes from the good wheat.

And in the same way, David cleaned out that spot on that threshing floor, and it was on that threshing floor that David built an altar, and he laid it out before the Lord.

It's appropriate that it was on a threshing floor because there he threshed it out. He shook out the worthless in his life, and he let the good in his life shine through right there before the Lord.

It was there that God came to him. It was there that the fire fell upon him, and it was there in that very spot that God told him the promised temple of the Lord was to be built.

And when they went back to build it, he bought the land to put it right where God spoke. He found out that day that he laid it out before the Lord, and he realized how desperate he was and how much he needed God.

[13:43] He recognized that God had spoken, and he remembered that God had moved. After Moses died, Joshua was to be the one to finally bring the people to the promised land.

All that time in that desert, and Moses was not the one to carry him over. And when they got to the Jordan and they stepped into the river, the water stopped flowing and were cut off from the area, and they all passed on dry land, even though it was flood season, and the river would be swelling. And after they got through that river, Joshua instructed them, as God had told him, to take a stone, one representing each of the 12 tribes, which made up all of the people that came across, and exactly where the Ark of the Covenant, which represented the presence of God, had crossed, they were to set up 12 stones of remembrance on the banks of that river.

And Scripture says that when you bring your children back through here, and tell them about how we crossed over the Jordan, and they see those rough-hewn stones erect out of the ground, and they ask you, what do these stones mean?

You tell them. Tell them how God parted the waters. Tell them how He moved you to the other side. Tell them how He paved the way to claim your promises.

[15:30] Parents, listen to me today. Tell them how He brought you through. I had a memory pop up. It's on my phone. It's in my calendar.

I know when it is. I had a memory pop up this week from eight years ago. And I want you to see a video for just a moment. Just entertain me. I opened it up.

It was addressing me. I opened it up. And it said, I know I'm a sinner. And I know that Jesus died for my sins.

I know that He rose again. I know that He's coming back. And I want Him to save me. Can we pray now? She went to sleep before she could give it to me last night.

So when she woke up, me and her had talked. And then we got the family in the room together. And she prayed that Jesus in her life.

[16:31] Yeah. Thank you. Thank you. I'm going to tell you, can you sleep last night? I'm going to tell you hearing her comments this morning, having given her heart and life to the Lord Jesus Christ, knowing what she did.

As a matter of fact, when I let Abby read the letter, I said, well, you can't put in much wine in her mouth. It's true. She wants to join our church on that profession and my baptism.

If you're happy, she's coming. Say amen. Amen. That is a precious, memorial stone in my life. I've marked it down. When Samuel was leading Israel, the Philistines were bearing down upon him. And the people grew very afraid. They knew the ruthlessness of the Philistines. They were intense battlers.

[17:39] And they called out to the Lord and they fasted and prayed and called out to the Lord. And in 1 Samuel, chapter 7, verse 10, it says, the Lord thundered with a mighty sound that day against the Philistines and threw them into confusion and they were defeated before Israel.

And when they won that battle, Samuel took a stone. He called it an Ebenezer, which is Hebrew for a stone of help.

And he said, till now, the Lord has helped us. In other words, when I look back at how we got where we are, the Lord has guided us.

He's helped us. He recognized that God had done the work and then he remembered it and laid it down.

And I'm telling you, when God moves, mark it down. And then in the days afterwards, after the move of God, we reflect.

[18:50] He said to Abram, to your offspring, I will give this land. Abram was trusting God.

He was following God. He was obeying God for bigger reasons than himself. We're going to talk about the steps of faith along the way as we carve through his life, but this may be why he is remembered in Scripture the most.

because he was not doing this for himself. Abram was not going to get the land.

He was going to start on a road to better influence later generations. And it is my burden, folks, to instill within my children not only a love for the Lord so that I can rest in that, but also that they can share with their children and that they can share with their grandchildren.

Abraham died in a cave and he was buried, Abraham died and with only the cave he was buried in, but what he left was so much more.

[20:08] And it's ironic that some folks work so hard to have so much here to leave to the next generation generation that they get so busy to actually leave what actually counts for all eternity.

Hebrews 11, 9 and 10 says this, by faith he went to live in the land of promise as in a foreign land living in the tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise for thank God he was looking forward to the city that has foundations whose designer and builder is God.

He had a bigger plan. Abraham left a legacy because he wasn't concerned about himself. He was concerned about obeying God, honoring God, preparing the next generation.

And I want to be very clear church, we need to be concerned about the very same thing, preparing the next generation. How do we do that? Not by building cabins on the river. I mean I wish I could have kept it.

When I went back, that day when I went and visited that cabin, that man wasn't there, I knocked on his door. I took some family back at spring break in March of that year and we knocked on the door and he answered.

[21:17] And he said, come in, I want to show you. And when I looked up and looked at the ceiling in that house, those rafters that were up there were the same rafters my grandpa had put up there. A lot of other things wasn't recognizable.

Didn't have to prime that pump to get that kitchen sink going anymore. but I saw what he had done and that's special but that's not what I'm talking about.

I'm talking about leaving some smoking altars and leaving some standing stones. I'm talking about speaking of how God moved, laying down a spiritual marker and then going back and reflecting on that.

Not only will that strengthen you in the times of trouble that's coming because we all got more coming but it'll also strengthen those before you. my grandfather, the one that built that cabin often shared with me the stories of the blessings of the Lord.

I remember the exuberance that he shared when he shared Christ with somebody. He sold tools for somebody else at Anderson Jockey Lot. Anytime we went to Anderson Jockey Lot and saw him he'd always be with a hammer in hand or a screwdriver in hand he'd be sharing his faith with somebody who was walking through that area.

[22 : 50] He shared stories of the blessings of God and how the Lord had watched over him and I don't remember those stories. Man, I wish I did. Wish I could hear his voice.

We were in the military and moved around and so some of the communication that family had was reel to reel audio and they'd mail and you could hear each other talk and I asked mom what happened to that?

They're gone. I don't remember those stories. I wish I did but you know what I remember? I remember that man giving God praise.

I remember the times and the places that I saw him praise the Lord. I remember him testifying to God's goodness. I remember him leaving spiritual markers for me to go back to.

What gives me hope for tomorrow? What gives me hope for tomorrow is the same God that brought me through the dilemmas of yesterday.

[23 : 56] The same God that's guiding me through the obstacles of today is the same God that's already in my tomorrows. He's the same God that's already laid my path.

He's the same God that's already straightened my path and leveled my path and lit the path I walked. And I'm going to make a point for the rest of my days to tell the younger generations about the God that came to me and that changed me and that meets me every morning and is already in my tomorrows.

and church I'm just asking you will you make the greatest investment that you could ever make in anything will you just join me because I think there need to be some altars that are left smoking and some stones that are left set for us all to be encouraged and for the next generations to be encouraged by how God has walked before us and taken care of us.

We serve a great God don't we? Let's don't keep it to ourselves. Let's share it with others. With every head bow and every eye closed what are you doing with what God's given you?

For one he's given you an opportunity today to surrender your life to the Lord Jesus Christ and if you've never done that I want you to know the greatest decision you'll ever make in your life is to give your heart and life to the Lord Jesus Christ.

[25 : 40] You just need to confess your need of him the sin that so separates you from him and ask him to cleanse you and to change you and I thank God he'll save you today. Today's the day of salvation.

He's the same yesterday, today and forever. You can rest in that. You come down this aisle and we begin to sing and I promise you we'll lead you in how to have a relationship with Christ. Maybe you have done that but your life your life's not marked by the right stones.

There's things in your life that are missing. First step of obedience after giving your heart and life to the Lord Jesus is to follow him through public confession by baptism. There may be folks here today who've never done that.

There's a hindrance in your life spiritually because you've not followed through with that as God's instructed and I want to encourage you to just be obedient to that. Follow him in that.

Trust him. Maybe God's leading you to be a part of this church. God's blessed us. 2022 was a wonderful year in the life of this church and God's blessed us in many ways and I'm thankful for that and I know that God's speaking and leading others as well and so if God's leading you I encourage you to come just be obedient to follow God.

[26 : 57] We'd love to have you and explain whatever we need to explain to you and help you along the way. First step is just to let us know. But most particularly today Christian what are you doing to mark your path for the Lord Jesus Christ?

How are you doing that? For yourself and for others as well. let's leave some altar smoking because we we made a point to talk about what God did in our presence.

Let's leave some memorial markers in our lives so folks know so we can be reminded because we need that reminder what God's done in our lives.

I don't know how God's speaking to you today but I encourage you to commit your life to him completely wholeheartedly trust him he's worthy of it. Lord Jesus I love you and thank you dear God for the opportunity you give us today.

Lead us right now I pray in Jesus name. Amen.