

Discipleship Training Course

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- Speech marks around entire quotes and at the beginning of new paragraphs have been omitted
- Anglicised spellings have been used
- All quotes begin with a capital letter and end with a full stop
- Some weights, measures and times have been replaced with easier to understand terms given in the footnotes using square brackets
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- Poetry has been indented and only new sentences start with a capital letter

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Chapter 17. Building a family altar

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1. Introduction

1.1 God's purposes for families

Salvation has an emphasis on personal responsibility and faith towards God:

*I have come to cast fire upon the earth; and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is accomplished! Do you suppose that I came to grant peace on earth? I tell you, no, but rather division; for from now on five members in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three. **They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.***

Luke 12:49-53 (NASB1995)

However many other Scriptures point towards God's purposes for families as detailed below. Building a family altar is a practical way these purposes can become established.

1.2 Altars

An altar is a place which is consecrated and prepared for the offering of sacrifices unto the Lord, for calling upon His name and for making proclamations.

An altar is a **vertical gate** (Psalm 24:7-10) into the spiritual realm which assists the movement of spiritual beings. For example, the altar near Bethel built by Abraham in Genesis 12:8 was probably the reason why his grandson Jacob later had a dream of a ladder or staircase with angels ascending and descending upon it (Genesis 28:10-22). Once an altar is established it is important that it is maintained and protected through consecration and regular sacrifices, otherwise it can fall into disrepair or be used by the enemy for evil purposes.

Altars amplify proclamations:

*For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you **proclaim** the Lord's death until He comes.*

1 Corinthians 11:26 (WEBPB)

2. God's covenants with families

2.1 Principles

Parents were instructed under the Old Covenant to teach their children the law:

*Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. **Impress them on your children.** Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the door-frames of your houses and on your gates.*

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 (NIVUK)

*For He established a covenant in Jacob,
and appointed a teaching in Israel,
which He commanded our fathers,
**that they should make them known to their children;
that the generation to come might know, even the children who should be born;
who should arise and tell their children,**
that they might set their hope in God,
and not forget God's deeds,
but keep His commandments,*

Psalms 78:5-7 (WEBPB)

God desires godly offspring through Christian marriage. One believing parent is able to sanctify their spouse and their children:

Another thing you do: you flood the LORD's altar with tears. You weep and wail because He no longer looks with favour on your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. You ask, 'Why?' It is because the LORD is the witness between you and the wife of your youth. You have been unfaithful to her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant.

*Has not the one God made you? You belong to Him in body and spirit. **And what does the one God seek? Godly offspring.** So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful to the wife of your youth.*

Malachi 2:13-15 (NIVUK)

*To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. **For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.***

1 Corinthians 7:12-14 (ESVUK)

2.2 Examples

God's selection of Noah to build an ark (large boat) also involved the salvation of his family:

This is the account of Noah and his family. Noah was a righteous man, the only blameless person living on earth at the time, and he walked in close fellowship with God. Noah was the father of three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

Now God saw that the earth had become corrupt and was filled with violence. God observed all this corruption in the world, for everyone on earth was corrupt. So God said to Noah, "I

have decided to destroy all living creatures, for they have filled the earth with violence. Yes, I will wipe them all out along with the earth!

Build a large boat from cypress wood and waterproof it with tar, inside and out. Then construct decks and stalls throughout its interior.

*Look! I am about to cover the earth with a flood that will destroy every living thing that breathes. Everything on earth will die. **But I will confirm My covenant with you. So enter the boat – you and your wife and your sons and their wives.***

Genesis 6:9-14, 17-18 (NLT)

God's covenant with Abraham involved giving him the ability to direct his children in the way of the LORD:

*“Should I hide My plan from Abraham?” the LORD asked. “For Abraham will certainly become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth will be blessed through him. I have singled him out so that **he will direct his sons and their families to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just.** Then I will do for Abraham all that I have promised.”*

Genesis 18:17-19 (NLT)

When the two angels were sent to rescue Lot they also rescued his immediate family:

Meanwhile, the angels questioned Lot. “Do you have any other relatives here in the city?” they asked. “Get them out of this place – your sons-in-law, sons, daughters, or anyone else. For we are about to destroy this city completely. The outcry against this place is so great it has reached the LORD, and He has sent us to destroy it.”

So Lot rushed out to tell his daughters’ fiancés, “Quick, get out of the city! The LORD is about to destroy it.” But the young men thought he was only joking.

At dawn the next morning the angels became insistent. “Hurry,” they said to Lot. “Take your wife and your two daughters who are here. Get out right now, or you will be swept away in the destruction of the city!”

When Lot still hesitated, the angels seized his hand and the hands of his wife and two daughters and rushed them to safety outside the city, for the LORD was merciful.

Genesis 19:12-16 (NLT)

Despite being a Canaanite prostitute, Rahab was saved along with her family when Jericho was destroyed because she swore oath with the Israelite spies:

Now before they lay down, she came up to them on the roof, and said to the men: “I know that the LORD has given you the land, that the terror of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land are fainthearted because of you. For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were on the other side of the Jordan, Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed. And as soon as we heard these things, our hearts melted; neither did there remain any more courage in anyone because of you, for the LORD your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath. Now therefore, I beg you, swear to me by the LORD, since I have shown you kindness, that you also will show kindness to my father’s house, and give me a true token, and spare my father, my mother, my brothers, my sisters, and all that they have, and deliver our lives from death.”

So the men answered her, “Our lives for yours, if none of you tell this business of ours. And it shall be, when the LORD has given us the land, that we will deal kindly and truly with you.”

...

But they burned the city and all that was in it with fire. Only the silver and gold, and the vessels of bronze and iron, they put into the treasury of the house of the LORD. And Joshua

spared Rahab the harlot, her father's household, and all that she had. So she dwells in Israel to this day, because she hid the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho.

Joshua 2:8-14, 6:24-25 (NKJV)

Joshua declared that he and his family would serve the LORD:

*"Now therefore fear the LORD, and serve Him in sincerity and in truth. Put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River, in Egypt; and serve the LORD. If it seems evil to you to serve the LORD, **choose today whom you will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell; but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.**"*

The people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD, to serve other gods; for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our fathers up out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, and who did those great signs in our sight, and preserved us in all the way in which we went, and amongst all the peoples through the middle of whom we passed. The LORD drove out from before us all the peoples, even the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD; for He is our God."

Joshua said to the people, "You can't serve the LORD, for He is a holy God. He is a jealous God. He will not forgive your disobedience nor your sins. If you forsake the LORD, and serve foreign gods, then He will turn and do you evil, and consume you, after He has done you good."

The people said to Joshua, "No, but we will serve the LORD."

Joshua 24:14-21 (WEBPB)

The Gadarene demoniac man was sent back to his own people in order to declare all that God had done for him:

And when He had stepped into the boat, the man who had been controlled by the unclean spirits kept begging Him that he might be with Him.

*But Jesus refused to permit him, but said to him, **Go home to your own [family and relatives and friends] and bring back word to them of how much the Lord has done for you, and [how He has] had sympathy for you and mercy on you.***

And he departed and began to publicly proclaim in Decapolis [the region of the ten cities] how much Jesus had done for him, and all the people were astonished and marvelled.

Mark 5:18-20 (AMPC)

Cornelius was a devout and God-fearing man, along with his family. When Peter came to his home he also invited his relatives and close friends:

*Now at Caesarea [Maritima] there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Regiment, **a devout man and one who, along with all his household, feared God.** He made many charitable donations to the Jewish people, **and prayed to God always.***

...

*The next day Peter got up and left with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa went with him. On the following day he [and the others] entered Caesarea. **Cornelius was waiting for them, and had called together his relatives and close friends.***

Acts 10:1-2, 23b-24 (AMP)

The Philippian jailer was saved along with his household:

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the jail were shaken, and immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's chains

came loose. When the jailer woke up and saw the doors of the prison open, he drew his sword and was going to kill himself, since he thought the prisoners had escaped.

But Paul called out in a loud voice, "Don't harm yourself, because all of us are here!"

Then the jailer called for lights, rushed in, and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas.

Then he escorted them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

*So they said, "**Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household.**" Then they spoke the message of the Lord to him along with everyone in his house. He took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds. Right away he and all his family were baptized. He brought them into his house, set a meal before them, **and rejoiced because he had believed God with his entire household.***

Acts 16:25-34 (HCSB)

3. Examples of family altars

Jacob was instructed to build an altar and to settle in Bethel. This led him to exhort his family to purify themselves:

Then God said to Jacob, "Get ready and move to Bethel and settle there. Build an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother, Esau."

So Jacob told everyone in his household, "Get rid of all your pagan idols, purify yourselves, and put on clean clothing. We are now going to Bethel, where I will build an altar to the God who answered my prayers when I was in distress. He has been with me wherever I have gone."

*So they gave Jacob all their pagan idols and earrings, and he buried them under the great tree near Shechem. **As they set out, a terror from God spread over the people in all the towns of that area, so no one attacked Jacob's family.***

Eventually, Jacob and his household arrived at Luz (also called Bethel) in Canaan. Jacob built an altar there and named the place El-bethel (which means "God of Bethel"), because God had appeared to him there when he was fleeing from his brother, Esau.

Genesis 35:1-7 (NLT)

Samuel built an altar in his home:

*Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. And he went on a circuit year by year to Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah. And he judged Israel in all these places. Then he would return to Ramah, for his home was there, and there also he judged Israel. **And he built there an altar to the LORD.***

1 Samuel 7:15-17 (ESVUK)

When David was unable to bring the ark into Jerusalem, the gatekeeper Obed-Edom received it into his home and the LORD blessed everything that he had:

*David was afraid of God that day, saying, "How can I bring God's ark home to me?" So David didn't move the ark with him into David's city, but carried it aside into Obed-Edom the Gittite's house. **God's ark remained with the family of Obed-Edom in his house three months; and the LORD blessed Obed-Edom's house and all that he had.***

1 Chronicles 13:12-14 (WEBPB)

The effect of Obed-Edom's family altar can be seen in Chapter 26. His sons, grandchildren and other relatives became very capable, strong, able leaders:

As for the divisions of the gatekeepers:...

And Obed-edom had sons: Shemaiah the firstborn, Jehozabad the second, Joah the third, Sachar the fourth, Nethanel the fifth, Ammiel the sixth, Issachar the seventh, Peullethai the

*eighth, **for God blessed him**. Also to his son Shemaiah were sons born **who were rulers in their fathers' houses, for they were men of great ability**. The sons of Shemaiah: Othni, Rephael, Obed and Elzabad, whose brothers **were able men**, Elihu and Semachiah. All these were of the sons of Obed-edom with their sons and brothers, **able men qualified for the service**; sixty-two of Obed-edom.*

1 Chronicles 26:1a, 4-8 (ESVUK)

Job made sacrifices for his children and encouraged them to purify themselves:

*His sons used to go [in turn] and feast in the house of each one on his day, and they would send word and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. **When the days of their feasting were over, Job would send [for them] and consecrate them, rising early in the morning and offering burnt offerings according to the number of them all**; for Job said, "It may be that my sons have sinned and cursed God in their hearts." Job did this at all [such] times.*

Job 1:4-5 (AMP)

4. Elements of family altars

4.1 Sacrifices

The passages above in Deuteronomy 6 and Psalm 78 encourage us to **read of the word regularly with our families**.

The early church celebrated **communion** in the home:

*And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and **breaking bread in their homes**, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.*

Acts 2:42-47 (ESVUK)

Another New Covenant sacrifice we can make at a family altar is **praise**:

*Through Jesus, therefore, **let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise** – the fruit of lips that openly profess His name.*

Hebrews 13:15 (NIVUK)

In addition we should also **pray** at a family altar as our prayers are like incense before God's throne:

Then I saw a Lamb that looked as if it had been slaughtered, but it was now standing between the throne and the four living beings and among the twenty-four elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which represent the sevenfold Spirit of God that is sent out into every part of the earth. He stepped forward and took the scroll from the right hand of the One sitting on the throne. And when He took the scroll, the four living beings and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp, and they held gold bowls filled with incense, which are the prayers of God's people.

Revelation 5:6-8 (NLT)

Other New Covenant sacrifices mentioned in the Bible are:

- A broken spirit (Psalm 51:17)

- Our bodies (Romans 12:1)
- Love gifts (Philippians 4:17-18, Hebrews 13:15-16)
- Good deeds (Hebrews 13:15-16)
- Obedience (1 Samuel 15:22)
- Mercy, justice and humility (Micah 6:6-8)

4.2 Proclamations

As already noted, altars amplify proclamations. Therefore, building a family altar and offering sacrifices upon it will amplify the power of our praise, prayers, reading of Scripture and taking of communion, especially when they are directed towards our neighbours as well as our selves. We should also make proclamations of blessings over our local communities as part of our family worship.

Where a family member is not born again, the following passages are useful as proclamations to declare the Lordship of Christ over a family. They can be particularly effective if they are spoken over the person's bed as the bedroom is in some sense a symbol of the Most Holy Place when the home is viewed as a temple containing the family altar.

So from now on we regard no one from a human point of view [according to worldly standards and values]. Though we have known Christ from a human point of view, now we no longer know Him in this way. Therefore if anyone is in Christ [that is, grafted in, joined to Him by faith in Him as Saviour], he is a new creature [reborn and renewed by the Holy Spirit]; the old things [the previous moral and spiritual condition] have passed away. Behold, new things have come [because spiritual awakening brings a new life]. But all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ [making us acceptable to Him] and gave us the ministry of reconciliation [so that by our example we might bring others to Him], that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting people's sins against them [but cancelling them]. And He has committed to us the message of reconciliation [that is, restoration to favour with God].

So we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making His appeal through us; we [as Christ's representatives] plead with you on behalf of Christ to be reconciled to God. He made Christ who knew no sin to [judicially] be sin on our behalf, so that in Him we would become the righteousness of God [that is, we would be made acceptable to Him and placed in a right relationship with Him by His gracious lovingkindness].

2 Corinthians 5:16-21 (AMP)

*He is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn over all creation.
For everything was created by Him,
in heaven and on earth,
the visible and the invisible,
whether thrones or dominions
or rulers or authorities –
all things have been created through Him and for Him.
He is before all things,
and by Him all things hold together.
He is also the head of the body, the church;
He is the beginning,
the firstborn from the dead,
so that He might come to have
first place in everything.
For God was pleased to have*

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*all His fullness dwell in Him,
and through Him to reconcile
everything to Himself
by making peace
through the blood of His cross –
whether things on earth or things in heaven.*

Colossians 1:15-20 (HCSB)