

## ***Greetings!***

Have you ever had to start something important over again? I mean go all the way back to the beginning; reevaluate where you ended up; what got you there; and what you need to do to get it right the next time? If so, then join the prestigious group of “re-starters”.

## ***First Altars***

He was keenly aware of hearing God’s voice, a man astute in the life of faith and obedience. He rose quickly to the top and succeeded in gathering a wealth of possessions. Everything about how he started said, “Winner!” Yet, he got it wrong more than once.

If possessions were the criteria for true success in life, then Abraham was successful. But, something dug deeper at his heart. He knew his destiny was larger than what he saw each morning when he stepped outside his tent. The stars at night, and the sand by day, reminded him of the voice he had once heard, and of his first altar. It was located between Bethel (meaning - the house of God), and Ai (a mass heap, ruin), and it was here that Abraham first “called on the name of the Lord”. How appropriate that his first altar lay between Bethel and Ai. It’s as if God is telling us that the most significant places in our lives lay between God’s destiny (Bethel) and a place of ruin (Ai).

The places where we make radical decisions always leave a mark upon our memories. They become anchor points that bring us back to our senses when we go astray, and for Abraham this was the place.

Like many of us, after God spoke to Abraham such powerful promises, he faltered in his spiritual journey. Rather than trust God to stay in Canaan during a famine, he went to Egypt for refuge. It was there that Abraham almost lost everything when he passed off his wife as his sister to Pharaoh. Upon returning to Canaan, the first place Abraham visited was where he had stacked the rocks earlier and offered his heart to God. The Bible reveals, “And he went on his journey from the South as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, to the place of the altar which he had made there at first.”

First altars have a magnetic draw upon our souls. They remind us of the time we surrendered ourselves to someone more capable than ourselves at handling life and represent our moment of separation from what was, to what could be in our lives. First altars leave an impact on us as nothing else can.

It was June 7, 1970. I was fifteen years old as I stood in the small white clapboard structure singing the final song before dismissal. Outside my dad was waiting to take me home for our

Sunday dinner when it started. I felt something calling to me from deep inside as I stood between my Bethel and Ai. Trembling, with tears running down my face, I couldn't sing anymore. After the hymn ended, Pastor Gentry began with the service's dismissal when his wife spoke from the front row. "Jack, God is speaking to someone here today and we need to wait." I knew she hadn't seen my face, as she was on the front row, and I was hiding at the back.

The words came slowly as I stuttered through them. "Pastor Gentry, I've never been baptized before and I'd like to be if the church will have me." Honest to God! I said, "If the church will have me." I think I had some real issues, but that's another topic for another day.

That same day at 3 PM, I was baptized at Lower Bridge in the Wakulla River. Swimmers, canoes and the mullet fishermen on the bridge all came to a pause as Pastor Gentry and I waded into the ice cold water to the singing of *Shall We Gather at the River*.

When visiting my hometown, I can never ride over the bridge without seeing us standing in the water with my church family gathered on the bank singing. I wish that I were there today. I think I would step into the cold river and relive that moment once again. Even now, my eyes fill with tears as I remember my first altar. There were many other altars over the years, but none of them will ever hold the power in my life as that first altar does.

The Bible commentators state that when Abraham left Egypt to return to Canaan, "he had gained nothing while there." Is it any wonder then, when he crossed the boundary line heading back to familiar territory, he headed straight to where he had made his first altar? There he stood by the pile of rocks and remembered how it all started: a voice, a promise and a commitment to follow God.

***And that's just a thought . . .***

### ***My Final Word***

Having a high impact, a person's first altar leaves a memory that isn't easily forgotten. The Sunday I stepped from the pew to meet my pastor in front of the church, I had to squeeze past Gary. Gary was known as a "born again" Christian at school and I had treated him very rudely with both my speech and conduct. A friend of mine once rebuked me for the language that I used around Gary and I said in so many words – I don't care!

On that Sunday morning, only one person stood between me and the church altar, Gary. I sometimes think God has a terrible sense of humor. Nevertheless, the Christian that I had mistreated, I had to pass on the way to my first altar.

I think Jesus probably had the spiritual place of our first altar in mind when he gave the Apostle John these words, “. . . you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works . . .” We know instinctively when, like Abraham, we have made a poor choice and deviated from our God given destiny.

Starting over really isn't all that hard if we know where to start.

A fellow re-starter,

Chris

