

Altars of Remembrance

[Jacob] built an altar, and he called the place El Bethel, because it was there that God revealed himself to him when he was fleeing from his brother (Genesis 35:7).

Scripture: Genesis 35:1–7

Song: “I Exalt Thee”

After a long season of whirlwind challenges, I was weary and discouraged and had allowed spiritual apathy to creep in. Alone at home one day, as a beautiful worship song played on the stereo, I had a profound awareness of God’s loving presence. When I realized how distant I had become in my relationship with Him, I wept in repentance. A flow of cleansing tears were like a spiritual refreshment. I wanted to remember this time of renewal, and I pinned my tear-laden tissues to my bulletin board, where I would see them daily.

God directed Jacob to build an altar of remembrance to God in El Bethel. Because the altar would be dedicated to a holy God, the people first needed to rid themselves of foreign gods, to purify themselves, and to change their clothes. Their obedience ushered in the presence and power of God, who surrounded them as they went forward.

It’s good for us to remember God’s goodness in our lives. As we build our own altars of remembrance—whether they’re made of stone or tear-soaked tissues—they will help prompt us to cleanse ourselves of anything that dishonors Him.

Father, thank You for Your life-changing presence and for reminding me of Your many blessings. In Jesus’ name, amen.

June 23–29. **Therese Marszalek** lives in Minnesota with her husband. She enjoys birdwatching and bringing people hope in Christ through her writing ministry.

Fruitful in Christ

[Jesus said,] “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful” (John 15:1–2).

Scripture: John 15:1–8

Song: “I Am the Vine”

I never aspired to be a gardener. I had no interest in seeding or weeding, yet my cravings for fresh raspberries compelled me to grow my own. The first year, not a berry could be found on the bushes. In spite of my disappointment as an amateur, I continued watering, fertilizing, and pruning the fruitless plants. The next year, I collected only a tiny handful of less-than-impressive berries. Though tempted to give up on my endeavor, I kept doing what I knew to do. When the following summer brought a bumper crop of plump, juicy raspberries, I thanked God for giving me the perseverance and patience to wait for a fruitful harvest.

Becoming fruitful where God plants us requires perseverance and patience. Since He knows that we’re a work in progress, our Heavenly Father—the vine grower—tenderly prunes, nurtures, waters, and feeds us. He helps us to remain in Jesus, the vine. *If* we remain in Him, an abundant harvest is certain to bring Him glory!

Keep doing what you know to do, and abide in Jesus, the vine. In time, you will reap a bumper crop of spiritual fruitfulness *if* you don’t give up.

Father, I trust You to tend the areas of my life that need pruning so I can bear more fruit for Your glory. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Recognizing Deception

“This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: ‘Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. . . . I have not sent them,’ declares the LORD” (Jeremiah 29:8–9).

Scripture: Jeremiah 29:8–14

Song: “Seek Ye First”

In November 1978, under the leadership of Jim Jones, more than 900 people tragically died in a mass suicide-murder at the Jonestown settlement in Guyana. In 1993, David Koresh, a self-proclaimed prophet and leader of the Branch Davidians—an extremist religious sect—led 76 of his followers to an untimely death during a government siege in Waco, Texas. Both self-appointed leaders were in it for themselves, and they did not align with biblical truth.

Speaking through the prophet Jeremiah, God warned Israel to avoid deception from false prophets and diviners—messengers He had not sent. When Jesus’ disciples asked Him what would be the sign of His coming and end of the age, Jesus’ first words were, “Watch out that no one deceives you” (Matthew 24:4). Jesus was alerting His followers to be on the lookout for deception, for those people who claim God’s authority for themselves. Until Jesus comes back, we need to remain vigilant, carefully examining the messages of those who would pose as spiritual leaders, never compromising the truth of God’s Word.

Thankfully, God has given us His Word and His Spirit to keep us on track. As we prayerfully test everything by the Scriptures, we will remain in the truth and avoid deception as we await Christ’s glorious return.

Father, lead me to discern truth and to reject anything that contradicts Your Word. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Just the Two of Us

[Jesus said,] “If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you” (Matthew 18:15).

Scripture: Matthew 18:15–20

Song: “Bind Us Together”

While recently visiting our young grandchildren, my husband and I witnessed sibling squabbles and rough-and-tumble play, and that sometimes meant someone got hurt. Our son and daughter-in-law had been teaching the kids biblical relational principles. So whenever someone got hurt, the injured child would say to the other sibling how they felt in an attempt to resolve the issue. Most times, the offender apologized, and tears were soon forgotten. If the reconciliation didn't go smoothly, Mom or Dad could help to resolve things.

God's way and the world's way of dealing with relational issues are polar opposites. With the goal to restore relationships, God instructs us to first address matters privately, between the involved parties. That alone can often be enough to deal with difficult matters. In our world of advanced technology, however, relational offenses are often spread on social media platforms for the world to see. God's way seeks restoration; the world's way incites strife and division.

We all experience times when we're hurt by others. If we resist the temptation to spread our stories of frustration and offense to others and, instead, do our best to resolve matters privately, we will often have a better outcome and will please God in the process.

Father, when I encounter relational difficulties with others, I will look to You for the courage I need to approach them privately in a way that honors You. In Jesus' name, amen.

The Final Word

[Jesus said,] “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19–20).

Scripture: Matthew 28:16–20

Song: “Go Tell It on the Mountain”

My dad spent the last year of his life in a lovely hospice facility, where he received excellent care. When he became unresponsive in a coma-like state, I stayed at his side, even throughout the nights. One morning at dawn, he suddenly sat up in his bed and said, “Let’s get this show on the road!” Then he leaned back on his pillow and, soon afterward, passed into eternal glory. My dad’s last words reminded me of the countless times he waited in the car on Sunday mornings while Mom, my siblings, and I scurried around the house getting ready for church. With the engine running, he’d honk and call to us, “Let’s get this show on the road!” Dad’s final words before his passing seemed to announce that he was ready for eternity with Jesus.

Jesus’ last words reminded His disciples of their mission to take the gospel to the whole world. Remembering our mission as His disciples will lead us to opportunities to fulfill the assignment Jesus gave us in our own sphere of influence.

As we enter our mission field today and focus on the Great Commission, Jesus’ last words remind us of our purpose on the earth before He calls us home to be with Him.

Father, prepare my heart for the assignments You have for me today. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Safe in the Storm

Keep me safe, my God, for in you I take refuge. I say to the LORD, “You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing.” . . . LORD, you alone are my portion and my cup; you make my lot secure (Psalm 16:1–2, 5).

Scripture: Psalm 16

Song: “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”

When I was a child, each summer we traveled to southern Minnesota to visit my uncle. Stretches of farmland surrounded the little log cabin where we made our temporary dwelling. When the sky turned black and high winds started whipping one day, fear sent me scampering inside to take cover. Dad quickly led our family to an underground cellar, built to protect people during severe weather. Fighting gale-force winds, Dad lifted the heavy wooden cover. We stepped down the cement stairs, lit candles, and waited for the storm to pass. Suddenly all was still. When Dad pushed the lid open, we found devastated crops, toppled trees, and damaged farm buildings. Evidence of the storm’s destructive force had surrounded us, yet God had kept us safe, nestled in the protective shelter.

During our earthly sojourn, we will find ourselves in the path of storms of many kinds. When life’s storms rage, we can seek refuge in God. Whether sunny skies or stormy weather, we rest secure as His children, hidden and protected in Him. Keeping our eyes on the Lord come what may, we will not be shaken.

Father, thank You for being my refuge and protector in every circumstance, especially in times of trouble. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Learning Surrender

[God said to Jacob,] “I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land” (Genesis 28:15).

Scripture: Genesis 28:10–22

Song: “The Lord’s Prayer”

In 1991, after moving from Minnesota to Washington State to marry and raise a family, I believed my husband and I would return to Minnesota, one day. Though I hoped to move back to the Midwest, nothing indicated it would ever come to pass. Then 28 years later, we had the opportunity to return. During the nearly three decades away, however, I had learned much, as God brought me to a place of surrender to Him.

When God first revealed Himself to Jacob, He identified Himself as “the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac” (Genesis 28:13). Jacob had much to learn before their God would become *his* God too. God promised to bring Jacob back to the land he’d left, yet it would be three decades before God directed him to return. During those years, God continued to be with Jacob, unfolding His divinely-orchestrated plan. Later, God would even identify Himself as “the God of Jacob” (Exodus 4:5).

God has a plan for us and will faithfully direct us to the places He has ordained as He fulfills His intentions. By His goodness and grace, He will continue working in us, as we learn to surrender our hearts to Him.

Father, thank You for continuing to work in me to bring me to a greater place of surrender to You and to Your purposes. In Jesus’ name, amen.