

**THE TENT AND THE ALTAR (THE CONTEXT OF FAITH)  
GENESIS 12:7-8**

Abram is the supreme example of a man of faith. Everything you need to know about living a life of faith can be learned by studying the life of Abraham.

We have already considered how faith began. From the beginning of his faith we can better understand the beginning of our faith. Faith always begins when God speaks and when we respond. The word of the Lord came to Abraham saying, “Leave” and Abraham “left.” He responded to the word of God with trust and obedience.

This trust and obedience brought him finally into the land of Canaan. He entered the land of Canaan by crossing the Jordan River which his descendants would cross many centuries later. His first steps into the land of promise took him to Shechem. It soon became obvious that the land into which the Lord had brought him was full of Canaanites. But in the land of Canaan, God appeared to him in a more meaningful way than ever before. Abraham did two things after God had appeared to him in the land of Canaan – he pitched his tent and built an altar. These two things help us understand the context in which a life of faith is lived. These were the two things that would characterize the life of Abram for all his years – he was always pitching his tent and building an altar.

So that we may better understand the context in which we must be persons of faith, let’s explore together this context in which Abraham demonstrated himself to be a person of faith.

## **I. WE LIVE THE LIFE OF FAITH IN THE WORLD.**

It is true that there was something special about the land of Canaan; it was God's special gift to Abram and his descendents. But we must never forget that the land of Canaan was still very much in this world. There are many special things about the life of faith to which you and I are called, but we must always remember that it is very much in this world.

1. It is among the Canaanites.

In his account of Abraham's pilgrimage Moses drops this line into the context without comment. He simply writes, "And the Canaanites were then in the land." The Canaanites were the descendents of Ham. They are the ones upon which the curse of Ham had fallen. Their lifestyle was contrary to the lifestyle of faith. Instead of worshipping before the God of Abraham, they worshipped before all kinds of grotesque idols. Archeological and historical studies have demonstrated the moral depravity that characterized the Canaanites. Their worship of their deity was almost always accompanied by cruelty and sensuality. Yet, it is in the midst of this kind of people that Abram lives his life of faith.

There are many voices that lament the Canaanites that are in our world. It is increasingly evident that if you and I are to live a life of faith we will have to live it in the "post Christian world."

The implication of that phrase is that there was once a "Christian world" but now we are in the "post-Christian world." It is debatable whether there was ever a Christian world but it is increasingly obvious that this world in which we live is not a Christian world. But the life of faith to which the people of God are called is designed to be lived in a world that is full of

Canaanites. We must not allow the moral corruption, the dishonesty, sensuality, and godlessness of the world about us to discourage us. The Christian faith is very much adequate for a life in the midst of a fallen and condemned world.

## 2. With a family.

Moses includes that little detail that Abram pitched his tents. This reminds us that though he was walking with God he was also living with a family. He had a wife, Sarai, he had servants and handmaidens. He had flocks and herds. He lived a life of faith while managing the earthly responsibilities that goes with being the head of a large household. There were details to be attended to every day. He had to make sure that the needs of his family were met. And yet, in the midst of that kind of life, he walked by faith.

I encounter persons quite frequently who use family responsibilities as an excuse for neglecting the walk of faith. They think you have to make a choice between providing for your family and giving God the proper place in your life. Actually, the well-balanced life always includes a tent and an altar.

Too many of the citizens of our day are content with a tent. They feel no need of an altar. Maybe I should rephrase that and say that they are not content with a tent but are looking for something more permanent. Abraham never built a house – he always lived in a tent. In the New Testament the writer of Hebrews helps us understand this by explaining that he was always looking for a city whose builder and maker is God. He never found any place on earth that felt like home for him. The circumstances of his life compelled him to live there but it did not

compel him to make that his home. He lived the life of a nomad, moving from place to place with his tent.

Does this help you understand the context of your life of faith? You must live out this life of faith in the midst of the demands of life in this world. There will always be the Canaanites and there will always be a tent to be pitched.

## **II. WE LIVE THE LIFE OF FAITH BEFORE THE LORD.**

Moses gives us this word, “Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, “To your descendents I will give this land. And there he built an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him.” Then he moved on to Bethel and there pitched his tent and built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord. While he was among the Canaanites and with his family, he lived his life before the Lord.

### **1. The revelation of the Lord – the confirmation of faith.**

We must understand the significance of the appearance of the Lord to Abram. He has made the long journey from Haran and now finds himself in the land of Canaan. When he arrives in the land of Canaan, then the Lord reveals Himself to Abram in a fresh way. It is then that He says to Abram, “To your descendents I will give this land.”

You will remember that when he left Haran he had not received specific instructions about where he was to go. God had simply said to him, “Go to the land that I will show you.” When he gets

to that land then God gives him a confirmation of his faith. He does not receive the confirmation until he has acted in faith.

This is a general principal that you must keep in mind – confirmation comes only after you have acted in faith. You obey and then God reveals himself.

## 2. The altar – the confession of faith.

The construction of the altar on the part of Abraham is a point of real interest. He probably used stones that he gathered from the site and built them in the form of an altar. On the altar he would offer a sacrifice. The very word translated altar has in it the idea of a place for sacrifice. The altar was the place for Abram as the priest to his family to lead his family in the worship of God.

When he built these two altars and the others that he would build later, they were a confession of faith to the Lord. It was his way of acknowledging to the Lord, “I do believe your promise.”

God had said to him that this land would be the inheritance of his descendents and Abram believed God. He demonstrated that faith in the promise of God by building an altar on the site where God had confirmed the promise. God saw through the altar that Abram built and the sacrifice that he offered that Abram was indeed a man of faith.

It was also a confession of faith to his family. Sarai and the servants of Abraham were allowed to see in a visible act the faith that was in Abram’s heart. They stood around as witnesses as this good man constructed his altar and offered his sacrifice to the unseen God who had spoken to him. They knew that they lived with a man of faith by the altar that he built.

What do you do as a leader in your family to demonstrate to your family your faith? Have you built any altars to the Lord who has spoken to you? Alexander Maclaren, the great British expositor, said that it cost Abram much more to build his altar than it did to pitch his tent. The tent in which he lived would not be a very expensive item, not too costly. The altar that he constructed and the sacrifice that he offered would be something that would be costly to him. Have you demonstrated to your family by some costly deed that you are indeed a person of faith?

It was also a confession of faith to the people around him. Can you not imagine the rumors that must have spread out across Canaan concerning this stranger that has moved into the territory? There would be stories about him involving himself in some strange acts of worship. There would be words about how he had built an altar and offered a sacrifice to an unseen God. They would wonder to one another how a man could offer a sacrifice and not own an idol. Unlike his neighbors Abram had no idol, but he had the knowledge of God in his heart and this knowledge of God in his heart compelled him to build an altar. His worship of the living God was a testimony, a confession, to his pagan neighbors all around him.

The altars that we built to our Lord and our Savior with our families and with the people of God become a confession to this unsaved world about us.

We must understand that if we are to live a life of faith, there will always be a tent and an altar. There will always be Canaanites and family responsibilities. There will always be things to

discourage us. But it is in the midst of a world like this that we acknowledge by building our altars the God of our father Abraham and our Lord Jesus Christ.