

Small Group Guide: Altars -- Week 1

The Altar of the Heart

Based on Proverbs 4:20-23

Overview

This week's sermon launched a four-week series called Altars, beginning with the most foundational sphere: the heart. Using Proverbs 4:20-23, the message established that an altar is a place of worship, sacrifice, surrender, and encounter with God. The central principle of the series is this: what God wants to do through us begins with what he wants to do within us. Before we can see transformation in our homes, our church, or our region, we must first open our hearts fully to God.

Key Takeaways

- An altar is a place of worship, sacrifice, surrender, and encounter with God. When the altar is neglected, devotion diminishes and God's people wander.
- The progression of this series -- heart, home, church, region -- mirrors the pattern Jesus described in Acts 1:8, moving from the inward to the outward.
- The heart has four functions: it receives, it surrenders, it guards, and it produces life.
- We are always being formed by something. The question is not whether we are being disciplined, but who or what is discipling us.
- Offering our lives to God is not a one-time event. It is a continual, daily surrender.
- Pressure does not create what is in our hearts -- it reveals what is already there.
- God does not primarily want behavior modification. He wants heart transformation, working from the inside out.

Discussion Questions

Opening (Choose one to get the conversation started)

1. When you hear the word "altar," what comes to mind? What associations -- positive or negative -- do you bring to that word?
2. Is there a moment in your life when you felt genuinely close to God? What was happening in your heart during that season?

The Heart Receives

3. The sermon described how our hearts are being formed all day long by the voices, content, and conversations we consume. What voices currently have the most influence in your life -- and are they drawing you closer to God or further away?
4. Solomon urges his son not to let the loudest voice be the deepest voice. What practical steps could you take this week to make God's word and God's voice more prominent in your daily life?

The Heart Surrenders

5. The sermon described "partial surrender" -- giving God some areas of life while quietly saying, "Don't touch this." Without needing to share specifics, can you identify an area where you tend to hold back from full surrender?
6. The story of the Hebrides revival began not with a strategy but with two sisters praying for God to move, starting with their own hearts. What does that challenge or encourage you about how revival -- personal or communal -- actually begins?

The Heart Guards

7. Proverbs 4:23 says to guard the heart above all else because from it flow the springs of life. What does it look like practically to guard your heart in today's cultural environment?
8. The sermon used the image of a polluted spring affecting everything downstream. Where do you see evidence in your own life that what is in your heart is affecting what flows out -- in your words, relationships, or responses under pressure?

The Heart Produces Life

9. The sermon stated that pressure does not create what is in our hearts -- it reveals what is already there. Do you agree? What has a recent moment of pressure or disappointment revealed about the condition of your heart?

10. Jesus said in Luke 6:45 that what we say flows from what is in our hearts. How does that truth change the way you think about the words you speak to the people closest to you?

Bringing It Together

11. The sermon closed with a list of things that might need to go on the altar -- control, fear, unforgiveness, bitterness, unhealthy relationships, habits, finances, plans, reputation. Which of those resonated with you most, and why?
12. The series principle is: what God wants to do through us begins with what he wants to do within us. How does that reorder the way you think about praying for change in your family, your church, or your city?

Practical Applications

Choose one or more of the following to practice individually or as a group before your next meeting.

Receive: Set aside ten to fifteen minutes each morning this week before checking your phone or consuming any media. Read a passage of scripture and ask God to let it penetrate your heart. Consider beginning with Psalm 119 or continuing in Proverbs 4.

Surrender: Write out a prayer of surrender. Be specific. Name the areas of your life you tend to hold back and consciously place them before God in writing. Keep it somewhere you will see it throughout the week.

Guard: Do an honest audit of what you are consuming. Review your screen time, your most-used apps, and the content you return to when you are stressed, bored, or discouraged. Ask God to show you where adjustments need to be made.

Produce Life: Ask someone who knows you well -- a spouse, a close friend, or a family member -- what they see flowing out of you most consistently. Receive their answer with humility and bring it to God in prayer.

Pray Together: The Hebrides revival began with people gathering to pray. As a group, commit to praying together -- not just for needs, but specifically asking God to begin a work of revival in your own hearts first.

Closing Prayer Focus

Close your group time by praying specifically over these four areas. Ask God to:

- Open your hearts to receive his word deeply this week

- Give each person the courage to surrender what they have been holding back
- Provide wisdom and strength to guard against what would contaminate the spring
- Let his life, presence, and fruit flow out of each person and into every relationship and space they occupy

Next Week: The Altar of the Home