

“Burnt Offerings to the LORD”

The seventy-ninth in a series: “I Will be Your God and You Will Be My People.”

Texts: Joshua 8:1-35; Hebrews 10:1-18

When Achan took silver, gold and personal property from the ruins of the city of Jericho, his actions brought the entire nation of Israel under the covenant curse. Because YHWH had devoted the city of Jericho for destruction, no Israelite was permitted to take anything from the city once it had fallen and its inhabitants put to death. To do so was a sin against YHWH. Therefore, Achan’s theft was also an act of treason against the nation and its people. Israel was a theocracy—a holy nation unto the Lord. This makes Achan’s sin a capital crime. But when Achan was put to death by the citizens of Israel, and when all his possessions were destroyed—including those items he had taken from the ruins of Jericho—God’s anger was turned aside and the curse was lifted from the nation. Israel would now be victorious over the city of Ai, which had inflicted a surprising and humiliating defeat upon Israel when Joshua attempted to take the city after Jericho fell. After Ai is destroyed, all Israel will stop and renew their covenant with YHWH.

We are continuing our series on the Book of Joshua. After the city of Jericho fallen, the way into the land of Canaan was wide open. Joshua went ahead with plans to take the rest of Canaan, beginning with the capture of Ai, a small city a dozen miles or so from Jericho. But to Joshua’s great surprise, the men of Ai thoroughly defeated the 3,000 soldiers Joshua sent, killing a number of Joshua’s men and chasing away the rest in a panic. Not only was this an embarrassing defeat in its own right, but if news spread throughout Canaan that Israel’s soldiers fled in the face of stiff resistance, Israel would lose its greatest advantage—fear on the part of the Canaanites. The fear which spread throughout Canaan at news of the fall of Jericho would give way to a new-found confidence that Israel could be defeated. Paradoxically, the great confidence that the Israelites felt when Jericho fell, now became fear. When news reached the people of Israel regarding the defeat at Ai, they were greatly dismayed, and it was the people of Israel who lost the will to fight. The defeat at Ai was a national disaster.

When the Lord revealed to Joshua that it was Achan who took gold, silver and a Babylonian robe from the remains of Jericho—knowing full-well that the Lord had forbidden such a thing—Joshua learned why the defeat at Ai had come about. Following the Lord’s instructions to the letter, Joshua led the people of Israel to the Valley of Achor where they carried out the sentence of death upon Achan and his entire family. They burned all his property, including that which he had stolen, and heaped stones upon their remains, creating a huge pile which served as a lasting monument to Achan’s great sin and the severe penalty he paid for taking things devoted unto the Lord. Once Achan had been put to death, the Lord’s anger toward Israel was turned away and God would once again ensure that Israel would be victorious and possess the land of Canaan. This is what unfolds in Joshua chapter 8.

As we turn to the first 29 verses of Joshua 8, we read of the complete reversal of the stunning defeat Israel suffered at Ai. Now that the sin of Achan has been dealt with, God will be with the armies of Israel once again and the city of Ai falls to Israel’s army in the most dramatic of ways.

As we saw last time, when Joshua learned of the defeat at Ai, he went into a period of mourning. Since Joshua knew nothing of Achan’s sin, the news of the defeat at Ai came as a complete shock. Along with the elders of Israel, Joshua tore his clothes and threw dust on his head. But once Achan’s sin was revealed to Joshua, and once Achan had been put to death and the devoted property he had taken

destroyed, Israel's circumstances changed greatly. As we read in verse 1, *"And the LORD said to Joshua, 'Do not fear and do not be dismayed. Take all the fighting men with you, and arise, go up to Ai. See, I have given into your hand the king of Ai, and his people, his city, and his land.'"* No longer does Joshua need to worry about the Canaanites getting wind of Israel's failure at Ai. The complete destruction of Ai would eliminate any false hope among the Canaanites that they were capable of resisting the will of the Lord. Ai will suffer the same fate as Jericho, only this time, the Israelites would be allowed to keep the spoils of war after Ai's defeat. The LORD now told Joshua *"And you shall do to Ai and its king as you did to Jericho and its king. Only its spoil and its livestock you shall take as plunder for yourselves. Lay an ambush against the city, behind it."*

With the LORD giving Joshua instructions as to how to attack Ai—using an ambush—in verses 3-8, we read of the details of Joshua's implementation of this plan for attacking the city. *"So Joshua and all the fighting men arose to go up to Ai. And Joshua chose 30,000 mighty men of valor and sent them out by night."* Israel's army included 40,000 men alone from the tribes of Gad, Reuben and Manasseh. According to the census in Numbers 1-2, there were many thousands of men of age from the other tribes who could fight for Israel as well. But to take the city of Ai, Joshua chose 30,000 of Israel's best fighting men who went at night to engage the city and set a trap for its defenders as Joshua instructed.

Joshua's plan was carefully crafted and his natural military genius comes to the fore. *"And he commanded them, 'Behold, you shall lie in ambush against the city, behind it. Do not go very far from the city, but all of you remain ready. And I and all the people who are with me will approach the city. And when they come out against us just as before, we shall flee before them. And they will come out after us, until we have drawn them away from the city. For they will say, 'They are fleeing from us, just as before.' So we will flee before them. Then you shall rise up from the ambush and seize the city, for the LORD your God will give it into your hand. And as soon as you have taken the city, you shall set the city on fire. You shall do according to the word of the Lord. See, I have commanded you.'"* Joshua and his men would draw the defenders away from the city. And then as soon as the defenders of Ai chased after Joshua, the rest of the Israeli army would then seize the undefended city and burn it. That would leave the soldiers who were chasing Joshua thoroughly demoralized with nowhere to go.

Joshua's plan was perfectly executed as we read in verses 9-13. *"So Joshua sent them out. And they went to the place of ambush and lay between Bethel and Ai, to the west of Ai, but Joshua spent that night among the people. Joshua arose early in the morning and mustered the people and went up, he and the elders of Israel, before the people to Ai. And all the fighting men who were with him went up and drew near before the city and encamped on the north side of Ai, with a ravine between them and Ai. He took about 5,000 men and set them in ambush between Bethel and Ai, to the west of the city. So they stationed the forces, the main encampment that was north of the city and its rear guard west of the city. But Joshua spent that night in the valley."* The trap was in place. All that remained was for the soldiers of Ai to take the bait and rush headlong after Joshua and his men.

And that is exactly what happens next, as we read in verses 14-17. *"And as soon as the king of Ai saw this, he and all his people, the men of the city, hurried and went out early to the appointed place toward the Arabah to meet Israel in battle. But he did not know that there was an ambush against him behind the city."* Arabah is known today as the Rift Valley, which is the low-lying area region in which we find Jericho, the Jordan River and the Dead Sea. The location given tells us that the king of Ai expected that

the battle would be fought in the hill country above Jericho which overlooked this entire valley.¹

Everything went according to plan. *“And Joshua and all Israel pretended to be beaten before them and fled in the direction of the wilderness. So all the people who were in the city were called together to pursue them, and as they pursued Joshua they were drawn away from the city. Not a man was left in Ai or Bethel who did not go out after Israel. They left the city open and pursued Israel.”* Not only did the men of Ai chase after the fleeing Israelites, but so did the men of Bethel—Bethel being a larger neighboring city to Ai. Since the site of the ambush was near Bethel, the people of Bethel were no doubt alarmed by the presence of Joshua and his men in the area and they joined with the people of nearby Ai to drive the Israeli’s away. As a result of this pursuit, both cities were left totally undefended.

In verses 18 and 19, YHWH gives Joshua specific instructions to engage the battle. *“Then the LORD said to Joshua, ‘Stretch out the javelin that is in your hand toward Ai, for I will give it into your hand.’ And Joshua stretched out the javelin that was in his hand toward the city. And the men in the ambush rose quickly out of their place, and as soon as he had stretched out his hand, they ran and entered the city and captured it. And they hurried to set the city on fire.”* The ruse worked. Ai had no defenders and the city was quickly captured and then put to the torch. Meanwhile, the Canaanite soldiers from Ai and Bethel who chased after Joshua and the fleeing Israelis, were in for a shock of their own. *“So when the men of Ai looked back, behold, the smoke of the city went up to heaven, and they had no power to flee this way or that, for the people who fled to the wilderness turned back against the pursuers.”* The soldiers could see that their city was under assault and that they must return. But they also knew that if they left the battlefield and turned back to race home, the supposedly “fleeing” men with Joshua whom they were chasing, would simply turn around and hit them from behind. The Canaanites were completely trapped. YHWH had ensured they would be victorious.

Joshua, meanwhile took full advantage of the dilemma of his enemies. *“And when Joshua and all Israel saw that the ambush had captured the city, and that the smoke of the city went up, then they turned back and struck down the men of Ai.”* With Ai fallen, with its soldiers having nowhere to go, all that remained was for the armies of Ai and Bethel to be destroyed—which Joshua now does. *“And the others came out from the city against them, so they were in the midst of Israel, some on this side, and some on that side. And Israel struck them down, until there was left none that survived or escaped. But the king of Ai they took alive, and brought him near to Joshua.”* Israel had its victory. Ai was conquered, its army wiped out. Its king was now the prisoner of Joshua. All of Canaan would fear YHWH and his people, Israel.

The aftermath of the battle is described in some detail in verses 24-29. *“When Israel had finished killing all the inhabitants of Ai in the open wilderness where they pursued them, and all of them to the very last had fallen by the edge of the sword, all Israel returned to Ai and struck it down with the edge of the sword. And all who fell that day, both men and women, were 12,000, all the people of Ai. But Joshua did not draw back his hand with which he stretched out the javelin until he had devoted all the inhabitants of Ai to destruction.”* And as the Lord commanded, *“only the livestock and the spoil of that city Israel took as their plunder, according to the word of the LORD that he commanded Joshua. So Joshua burned Ai and made it forever a heap of ruins, as it is to this day. And he hanged the king of Ai on a tree until evening. And at sunset Joshua commanded, and they took his body down from the tree and threw it at the entrance of the gate of the city and raised over it a great heap of stones, which stands there to this day.”* As was customary during this period, the king of Ai was hung on a tree, but his body

¹ Howard, *Joshua*, 206.

was taken down before sunset in keeping with Jewish law (Deuteronomy 21:22-23). This reminds us that God uses the sword to punish evil doers—in this case the king of Ai, who led his people against YHWH when he knew full well that this was YHWH’s land—and that under the leadership of Joshua, Israel will observe God’s law as closely as possible.²

With Jericho destroyed and given into the hands of Israel by YHWH, with the defeat at Ai turned into a stunning victory, once again Israel renews the covenant with YHWH.

Here again we see the emphasis which falls upon the contrast between this present generation of Israelites and that generation which had left Egypt 40 years before. What follows is probably the highwater mark of Israel’s role in redemptive history. While camped at Gilgal, the priests of Israel built a monument commemorating their crossing through the Jordan River on dry ground. The men of Israel were circumcised and shortly thereafter the people of Israel celebrated their first Passover in the promised land. And now that Jericho and Ai have fallen, the people of Israel once again stop to renew the covenant. The reason is that since the covenant had been violated by Achan, the covenant needs to be renewed.³ Having witnessed the blessing-curse principle with the situation with Achan and the defeat at Ai, Joshua and the people realize that the conquest of the land of promise depends upon the power of YHWH, not the strength of Israel’s armies. Thus the covenant renewal ceremony depicted in Joshua 8:30-35 seems to be the genuine expression on the part of the people of their faith in YHWH to keep his promises. The fruit of this faith is obedience to the terms of the covenant, flowing forth from a profound sense of gratitude because the people have been granted entrance into Canaan and have already defeated two enemies. What follows is truly remarkable.

As this amazing episode unfolds, we need to consider the commandment Moses gave to Israel before he died while the people were still camped at Moab. In Deuteronomy 27:4-5, Moses declared, “*And when you have crossed over the Jordan, you shall set up these stones, concerning which I command you today, on Mount Ebal, and you shall plaster them with plaster. And there you shall build an altar to the LORD your God, an altar of stones.*” The time has now come to fulfill these words of Moses. Israel is about to take all of Canaan. But before doing so, they must obey the law of God and renew the covenant.

It is with this in mind that we read in verses 30-31, “*At that time Joshua built an altar to the LORD, the God of Israel, on Mount Ebal, just as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded the people of Israel.*” At this point, a map would be helpful—and I would urge to look at the maps in the back of your Bible of the Conquest or of the twelve tribes of Israel, next time you get a chance. Mount Ebal is just to the north of the city of Shechem, which is right about smack dab in the middle of Canaan. This means that at some point after the fall of Ai, the people of Israel have marched more than twenty miles to the northeast of Ai through hostile Canaanite territory to renew the covenant.

In fact, in addition to the words of Moses we have already read, we find these words in Deuteronomy 27:12-13. “*When you have crossed over the Jordan, these [Tribes] shall stand on Mount Gerizim to bless the people: Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph, and Benjamin. And these [Tribes] shall stand on Mount Ebal for the curse: Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan, and Naphtali.*” In other words, once in the land, the twelve tribes were to renew the covenant in a ceremony on opposite mountains, representing

² Howard, Joshua, 211.

³ Howard, Joshua, 212.

covenant blessings and covenant curses—the very thing Israel had witnessed with the actions of Achan and the defeat at Ai (curse), now followed by a great victory (blessing). This is that to which Joshua is referring in verse 31 when he speaks of building an altar on Mount Ebal, “*as it is written in the Book of the Law of Moses.*” Joshua will lead the people north through the hill country past the ruins of Ai and the city of Bethel toward Shechem. This made little sense militarily, but this is what the Lord had commanded and Israel will obey the Lord’s commands to the letter despite the risks.

There is nothing mentioned here of an attack upon Shechem. This city stood between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerazim and was the place where Abraham had built an altar to the Lord as recounted in Genesis 12:6-7, after the Lord appeared to him there. Jacob bought land here and likewise erected an altar. This was the place where Jacob and his family lived for some time. Although it is not stated in the text, the inhabitants of the city may have joined with Israel upon their arrival. This would explain the mention of the presence “sojourners” within Israel two times in the rest of the passage. There were four-hundred year old ties to Abraham and Jacob in this city, and the people there may have regarded the arrival of Israel as a home-coming of sorts.⁴

Upon ascending Mount Ebal, Joshua did just as Moses had commanded and built “*an altar of uncut stones, upon which no man has wielded an iron tool.*” This is in keeping with the instructions for the construction of such altars found in Exodus 20:25. As an interesting aside, a large altar has been found on the third highest peak of Mount Ebal. It is constructed of uncut stones, with a stone and earthen ramp up to the altar in the center. Ash and animal bones have been found as well, with all indications that this altar was built sometime in the thirteenth century BC—it is also the only man-made structure on the mountain which dates from this time.⁵ Once the altar had been built, two types of offerings were to be made. “*And they offered on it burnt offerings to the LORD and sacrificed peace offerings.*” Burnt offerings were made over a hot fire which completely consumed the animal. The smoke from its consumption is described as aroma pleasing to the Lord.

The “peace” offerings (or “fellowship” offerings), on the other hand, entailed the cooking of the animal with only part of it being consumed by fire and the remaining portion eaten by the people. The idea here is that this is a fellowship meal with YHWH and with the members of the covenant community. This meal was a visible sign that the people were at peace with YHWH, and with each other—such offerings clearly lie in the background of the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

With the altar constructed, Joshua now calls the people to remember their covenant with YHWH. As we read in verses 32-35, “*And there, in the presence of the people of Israel, he wrote on the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he had written. And all Israel, sojourner as well as native born, with their elders and officers and their judges, stood on opposite sides of the ark before the Levitical priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, half of them in front of Mount Gerizim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, just as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded at the first, to bless the people of Israel. And afterward he read all the words of the law, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the Book of the Law. There was not a word of all that Moses commanded that Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones, and the sojourners who lived among them.*” This must have been a truly remarkable scene given the hundreds of

⁴ Hess, *Joshua*, 173.

⁵ Hess, *Joshua*, 174.

thousands of people packed into the valley between the two mountains.

Joshua followed Moses' instructions carefully, writing the law upon the plaster covering of the altar and then positioning the ark of the covenant in the middle with half the Levitical priests on one side and half on the other. When everyone was in position we read that Joshua then read every word of the law to all of Israel: men, women, children, and sojourners (aliens). The entire nation assembled together to renew the covenant and as a testimony to all those in Canaan. There can be no doubt that YHWH is the Lord of heaven and earth, and that his law is holy, righteousness and good. This was truly a great day in the history of Israel. He has blessed his people who walk in righteousness

IV. What, then, do we say in response to this remarkable passage?

While this is one of the high water marks of Israel's history, as we read in our New Testament lesson, Hebrews 10, *"the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near."* Everything that happened on Mount Ebal and Gerazim, as wonderful as it was, pointed forward to the coming of Christ. Israel will quickly fall into sin and come back under covenant curse—despite the long-suffering patience of God. That's why the author of Hebrews speaks of the limits of these Old Testament sacrifices, *"otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sin? But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sin every year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, 'Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure.'"*

Yes, Israel was obedient to the Lord, but only for a time. That is why it will take the greater Joshua, Jesus Christ, to fulfill all of the covenant obligations and remove from us the covenant curses. As we read in Hebrews, *"Then I said, 'Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.' When he said above, 'You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings' (these are offered according to the law), then he added, 'Behold, I have come to do your will.' He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet."*

It is not until Christ has come that we read these words. *"For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying, 'This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds,' then he adds, 'I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.' Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin."* What we have done this morning in our liturgy, our preaching and in our celebration of the Lord's Supper, is very much like Israel did that day on Mount Gerazim and Mount Ebal—God has renewed his covenant with us. We have heard his law, we have confessed our sins, and we are again reminded that the blessing-curse principle finds its fulfillment in the cross of Jesus, who offers up for us a once and for all sacrifice which forever removes the guilt of our sin and renders us "forgiven" and "perfect." No longer do we offer "burnt offerings" to Lord. Instead, we celebrate a peace offering this very day with the Lord, at this table which is spread before us. Jesus' shed blood is our peace and now we are forever perfect.